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# **The Impersonal Modes of Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens**

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Submitted for a Phd  
Department of English Literature  
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# The Impersonal Modes of Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens

## Abstract

This thesis examines the impersonal modes refined by Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens. It argues that these major poets, commonly placed at opposite ends of the spectrum of modernism, share important formal and thematic preoccupations. Each evolves an impersonal sensibility designed to free the poet from the limitations of his merely private associations and social circumstances, and to licence extraordinary ambitions: Pound's *paradiso terrestre* and Stevens' supreme fiction constitute unifying artistic responses to a shaken, fragmenting and sceptical culture. Supreme fictions are not in vogue, and both poets have been chastised for the didacticism, elitism, or even pretension latent in their poetic theories: it is argued that their reach exceeds their grasp. But this thesis is not a critique of theory; it is a study of praxis. It explores the techniques of both poets' greatest poems, and proposes the impersonal mode as one reason for their uncanny power. Chapter I explores poetic impersonality under three headings: "Inheritance"; "Sensibility"; and "Technique". Chapter II contrasts the irregular progression of Pound's early verse with the eerie precision of Stevens' *Harmonium*. Chapter III traces the expansion of Pound's impersonal voice through *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, and argues that "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is of crucial importance to the development of Stevens' later style. Chapter IV argues that, in the plangent and elemental forms of *Cantos XLVII* and *XLIX*, and in the rôle of the "possible poet" explored in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", Pound and Stevens come closest to fulfilling their early desires for a transcendent and autonomous rhetoric. Chapter V finds each poet plunged into crisis, toppling the fleeting consolations of *Canto XLVII* and "Notes", and requiring new, more urgent and more expansive poetic modes. Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, in their search for an idiom newly resistant to severe external pressures, are comparable to "The Auroras of Autumn" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven", which reveal Stevens' own bout of intense creative uncertainty. Chapter VI shows how the enduringly impersonal techniques of Pound's and Stevens' final poems – which preserve, on their surface, a grammatical and lexical detachment – increasingly come to register deeper emotions. The effect of subduing personal experience to an impersonal aesthetic is to enhance the poignancy of the very emotions and frailties that are all but veiled.

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The thesis is dedicated to my parents, Helen and Steve, without whose love and support it would not have been possible.

## A Note on Texts

Except where otherwise noted, I use the following texts for Pound's and Stevens' poetry:

Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions, [1996].

---. *Poems and Translations*. Ed. Richard Sieburth. New York: Lib. of Amer., 2003.

Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Lib. of Amer., 1997.

Parenthetical references are used for works by Pound and Stevens. Secondary sources are footnoted. References to Pound's *Cantos* are given as canto number/page number, e.g. (XVII/77). Italics distinguish Stevens' volumes – *The Man with the Blue Guitar* – from the title poems: "The Man with the Blue Guitar".

## Abbreviations

Pound:

*ABC* *ABC of Reading*. London: Faber, 1968.

*GK* *Guide to Kulchur*. London: Peter Owen, 1952.

*L* *The Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941*. Ed. D. D. Paige. London: Faber, 1982.

*LE* *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot. London: Faber, 1954.

*PT* *Poems and Translations*. Ed. Richard Sieburth. New York: Lib. of Amer., 2003.

*SP* *Selected Prose 1909-1965*. Notes and introd. William Cookson. London: Faber, 1978.

*SR* *The Spirit of Romance*. Introd. Richard Sieburth. New York: New Directions, 2005.

Stevens:

*CPP* *Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York: Lib. of Amer., 1997.

*L* *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.

*OP* *Opus Posthumous*. New York: Knopf, 1957.

## Preface

Pound and Stevens have long been estranged in reputation, their first major critics having offered accounts of each poet that are difficult to reconcile. Hugh Kenner's Pound is the quintessential modernist, radical, restless and experimental; Harold Bloom's Stevens is a direct inheritor of Romanticism, pursuing a belated version of the sublime. These designations were cemented by Marjorie Perloff's influential essay "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" (1982). In Perloff's reading, Pound is in tune with the energies of language and the challenges of modernity, whereas Stevens is an etiolated philosopher, whose abstract speculations lack consequence and vitality. This is, of course, a partisan view. But the assumptions underlying Perloff's partiality – that Stevens' poetry of ideas is wholly at odds with Pound's tactile, experimental verse – still enjoy critical currency.

Pound's political aberrancies have received ample scrutiny, but discussions of his verse technique are still dominated by loyal exegetes, who are skilled in pattern-seeking and reference-hunting, but who habitually decline to place his poetry under genuine evaluative pressure. Meanwhile, critics of Stevens too often preoccupy themselves with matters of theory and epistemology, reading him as a philosopher-poet, whose technical achievements are of only incidental significance to the ideas explored in his work. I hope to challenge these reductive expositions by focusing on the techniques common to the impersonal modes that each poet evolved. Both adopt personae; find meaning in borrowed attitudes and voices; toy with perspective and narrative structure; and substitute the linear accumulation of sense in a poem for irregular leaps and vivid juxtapositions. And both subvert the expectations of the lyric "I", deploying discontinuous arguments and perceptions even when the grammar and syntax imply a single, unified speaker. In Pound's and Stevens' finest poems, where these techniques are most strongly felt, effects are achieved which challenge conventional attitudes to the two poets. The lyric sections of *The Cantos* outstrip mere bricolage, achieving a conceptual subtlety vital to Pound's paradisaical vision. And Stevens' mature verse deliberately deals with truths beyond philosophical inquiry, as the quiddities of poetic expression become the only possible response to an elusive and irreducible reality.

The dominant theory of impersonal poetry is T.S. Eliot's. His principles, become canonical, have been adopted as the yardstick with which to measure other poets – even poets radically unlike him. I do not wish to challenge Eliot's place in the modernist matrix by subordinating his theories to those advanced by Pound and Stevens. But I do intend to show how Pound's and Stevens' particular concepts of impersonality shape the distinctive

qualities of their verse: how the impersonal mode not only functions as principle, but also informs praxis.

This ambition is at odds with earlier studies of literary impersonality. Daniel Albright's *Personality and Impersonality: Lawrence, Woolf and Mann* (1978) finds in each of these three novelists an irrepressible drive towards the expression of personality. The impersonal frameworks of a text, in Albright's thesis, owe more to artifice than authenticity. Maud Ellmann's influential book *The Poetics of Impersonality: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (1987) emphasises the reactionary and anti-democratic tendencies of impersonal poetry, arguing in particular that "the question of the self in Pound opens up the whole psychopathology of fascism".<sup>1</sup> More recent studies, including Sharon Cameron's *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (2007) and Rochelle Rives' *Modernist Impersonalities* (2012) point out the socio-political and phenomenological implications of impersonal voices. Cameron highlights the paradox that "impersonality . . . since it is undertaken by persons, could only be contradictory by definition", while Rives argues that "impersonality . . . is a theory of engagement, enabling forms of connection that both radically challenge authority and simultaneously sustain it".<sup>2</sup> These and other recent studies of modernism have found impersonality a politically and ethically embattled concept, often disguising reactionary prejudices intrinsic to particular works, or else claiming for these works a universal import that is artificial and unearned.

It is not my intention to dismiss the political implications of impersonality, or to rescue Stevens and Pound from the ethical censure that the latter in particular sadly deserves. But there remains much more to say about the impersonal mode, not just as a limiting artifice, but as an important poetic resource. Hence my focus on the techniques that form and frame the impersonal sensibility of Pound's and Stevens' major poems, from "Sunday Morning" to "The Auroras of Autumn", and from *Cathay* to the *Pisan Cantos*. In these rich and complex works, impersonality is more than a convenient affectation, more than a means of disguising prejudice or asserting membership of an august tradition. The impersonal mode becomes, for Pound and Stevens, a powerful idiom, abstracted from the quotidian, but vitally engaged with landscape and the rhythms of history. The two poets are finally and compellingly allied by a sensibility that transcends dogma, and that illuminates the rôle of the poet in the modern age.

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<sup>1</sup> Maud Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1987, 198.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007) 7; Rochelle Rives, *Modernist Impersonalities: Affect, Authority and the Subject* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012) 3.



## Chapter 1

### Inheritance

*All ages are contemporaneous.*

Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*

*Then the theatre was changed  
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.*

Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry"

Pound venerates Odysseus: Stevens lauds his "central man". Should we distinguish valedictions from projections? Perhaps: Odysseus, an augural figure, sets Pound's endeavours in accord with the very origins of literature, myth and history; Stevens' "central man", abstract and unprecedented, claims no heredity. Certainly the two poets' approaches to the past – as general history, as cultural "Tradition", and as personal literary inheritance – are often dissimilar. Pound's work is crammed with historical and literary allusions. Stevens' poems are not copiously referential, and his literary enthusiasms are registered more obliquely. But this contrast cannot be reduced to differences of tense – Pound looking backwards, Stevens casting forwards – for each pursues an impersonal voice calculated to escape temporal fixities, blending memory with prophecy, and freeing the poet from quotidian intrusions. The essential differences between Pound and Stevens are, rather, epistemic. Pound's elliptical references seek to apprehend and preserve the insights gleaned from his eclectic sources, and to assimilate these insights to the conceptual pattern of *The Cantos*. He is less anxious to explore "unpathed waters, undreamed shores" than to reclaim and revivify the foundational knowledge already latent in histories and myths.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Stevens' poems do not present the reader with shards of originary wisdom, but distil perceptions from his reading and experience into abstract and imagined settings. The literary and historical implications with which the poems are charged often remain tenebrous and indefinite. The most crucial poetic insights are not always those touched by "the far light of original meaning", but those won by the poet's creative

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<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* (London: Arden, 2010) IV, iv, 642.

intelligence, which sublimates learning, vision and experience.<sup>4</sup> Though the presiding sensibility of his poems is as elusive and impersonal as that of Pound's, Stevens seems to be less like Pound in his creativity than like the Wordsworth of whom Shelley acutely wrote "Yet his was individual mind, / And new created all he saw".<sup>5</sup>

*The Cantos* begin with an act of necromancy, Tiresias being momentarily restored by Odysseus' sacrificial offering: "Stand from the fosse, leave me my bloody beaver / for soothsay" (I/4). In Pound's hands, this macabre and primal image invests his own poetic quest with seditious undertones. The poet's - and by extension the reader's - sublimation in the mythic foretime of Canto I defies the bland insipidity of the modern world. It is a feature of *The Cantos*, sometimes engaging, sometimes infuriating, that they enlist the reader as co-conspirator rather than as independent witness. Indeed, unless we grant Pound's avowal that "the arts provide data for ethics", and share at least some of his enthusiasms, *The Cantos* are likely to be a struggle (LE 46). Even the early poetry can often be dense with allusion. And Pound's faith that *The Cantos* could amass the essential truths necessary to "build light" sees him tender particular details of myth and history as nodes of irreducible meaning. As he writes, in "The Tradition", "A return to origins invigorates because it is a return to nature and reason" (LE 92).

Stevens seems more ambivalent about a "return to origins" than Pound. This can, in part, be traced to a fundamental difference in sensibility. Pound, a tireless instructor, will happily proffer borrowed axioms, invoke ancient figures, or cite particular events as exempla of some definite, incontrovertible value. But Stevens, chary of unearned certainties, prefers to explore abstractions, erasures and indirections: "A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (CPP 342). Stevens' first masterpiece, "Sunday Morning", transports a dreaming woman from a vivid but languid present to an indistinct yet evocative past, "Dominion of the blood and sepulchre" (CPP 53). Such ancient and historical settings in Stevens' work are often dreamlike and unfocused, a matter not of people and actions but of echoes and shadows. Accordingly, in "Sunday Morning", the allusions to the crucifixion, to classical gods, and even, in the sixth stanza, to paradise, though still alluring and resonant, finally lack the clarity and urgency to redeem a restless modernity. Time and again, in *The Cantos*, Pound associates his quest for spiritual and imaginative renewal with a descent into the past. But for Stevens, it

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<sup>4</sup> George Steiner's phrase, from *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford UP, 1976) 68.

<sup>5</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Peter Bell the Third," *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002) 351.

sometimes seems that the imagination must break free from the constraints of past and present alike, discarding time-worn myths for fresh beauties and intuitions.

These are generalisations, but we must begin somewhere. Pound, of course, for all his eclectic reverences, was no pedlar of nostalgia. And Stevens, for all his abstractions, was not insensible to the past as a rich resource for poetry. Still, incongruities remain. Though Pound might, for obvious reasons, be conventionally adjudged more radical and experimental, it is Stevens who often seems more anxious and self-conscious about the unique pressures of modernity. Pound's confident insistence, in the epigraph above, that "All ages are contemporaneous" clashes with Stevens' more pessimistic sense that the past can become a mere "souvenir". Indeed, the essential *otherness* of many fables and forbears interposed in Stevens' work chimes with L.P. Hartley's famous observation that "the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there".<sup>6</sup> And Stevens' attitude to poetic influence is similarly revealing. In "Credences of Summer", for example, the Keatsian allusions register a strange combination of aesthetic homage and intellectual estrangement:

And the secondary senses of the ear  
 Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs,  
 Not evocations, but last choirs, last sounds  
 With nothing else compounded, carried full,  
 Pure rhetoric of a language without words.                    (CPP 323-4)

The "choirs" recall "To Autumn", in which "in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn / Among the river-sallows". Keats's haunting diminutions – "barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day" – find lasting consolation in the beauty of transient images, recognising that beauty and transience are ineluctably intertwined.<sup>7</sup> However, in the lines above, the ostensible fulfilment offered by Stevens' "last choirs, last sounds" is vitiated by their very stasis, "with nothing else compounded". If Keats draws eternal consolation from ephemeral visions, Stevens is only temporarily comforted by misleading intimations of permanence. The "pure rhetoric" of the natural order, intractable and inarticulate, will ultimately prove inadequate to sustain his imagination. For Stevens, we sense, can never be wholly at ease in "A land too ripe for enigmas", where "the distant fails the clairvoyant eye" (CPP 323). Stevens' handling of Keats reminds us that his impersonal mode serves

<sup>6</sup> L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953) 9.

<sup>7</sup> John Keats, "Ode To Autumn", *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allot (New York: Longman, 1970) 653.

not only to disguise (as Pound's does) the expression of personal emotion but also (as Pound's does not) to protect him from the daunting weight of his literary inheritance. Pound can confidently place himself in a Homeric lineage: Stevens shrinks from such overt associations. For the faiths, the hopes, and even the direct modes of self-expression available to Keats are implicitly unavailable in a disordered modern world.

Pound has greater hopes for the renewal of old certitudes. Though civilisations may ebb and flow, the truths that underpin them are imperishable. But Pound is not insensible to contemporary exigency. His conception of history is subtle, recognising that we often read the past as a version of the present:

We do NOT know the past in chronological sequence. It may be convenient to lay it out anesthetized on the table with dates pasted on here and there, but what we know we know by ripples and spirals eddying out from us and from our own time. (*GK* 60)

This sense of a malleable, contingent tradition, shaped by contemporary concerns, is borne out in Pound's translations. His early Provençal poems, for instance, reveal a conscious identification with the troubadour poets: "I have walked over these roads; / I have thought of them living" (*PT* 299). And, as Pound's own poetic preoccupations mature, his increasingly subtle translations from Cavalcanti and Arnaut Daniel illumine the importance of the Provençal tradition for the themes and techniques of *The Cantos*. In Cavalcanti's love poems, the speaker's initially sexual ambitions, focused upon a particular paramour, habitually deliquesce into mystical and intellectual compulsions. Personal passions are translated into impersonal virtues. Pound's essay on Cavalcanti, which appeared in *The Dial* in 1928, further clarifies the qualities that draw him to the Troubadours, which in *The Cantos* he was trying to resurrect: "We appear to have lost the radiant world where one thought cuts through another with a clean edge, a world of moving energies" (*LE* 154). Later, in Canto XXXVI, these moving energies provoke Pound to his final, and finest, translation of Cavalcanti's "Donna mi Pregħa":<sup>8</sup>

Where memory liveth  
                   it takes its state  
 Formed like a diafan from light on shade  
 Which shadow cometh of Mars and remaineth

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<sup>8</sup> Pound's previous translation of this poem can be found in *The Translations of Ezra Pound*, 132-41.

Created, having a name sensate,  
 Custom of the soul,  
 will from the heart (XXXVI /177)

Here a Neoplatonic schema, which Pound amplifies in his “Cavalcanti” essay, unites the physical and intellectual realms, so that remembered majesties are revived: “shadow cometh of Mars and remaineth”. Canto XXXVI emerges as a mainstay of order against the disorder of surrounding cantos. It is less a translation in the conventional sense than a creative dialogue with Cavalcanti, from whom Pound wrings an insight of crucial importance to his epic:

Cometh from a seen form which being understood  
 Taketh locus and remaining in the intellect possible (XXXVI/177)

These lines function on two levels, both as a testament to the lasting impression of female beauty, and as an account of artistic inheritance, in which the great insights of the past are preserved by those new artists with the talent to recognise and renew them.

It is not the case that Stevens is more pessimistic than Pound. “Modernism”, that vague and unwieldy term, is often associated, albeit reductively, with cultural pessimism. In truth, Pound and Stevens both occasionally fall prey to cynicism, as if they were somehow living *after* history. “The great structure has become a minor house”, Stevens observes, in “The Plain Sense of Things”, while Pound, in the later *Cantos*, courts dejection: “The Gods have not returned. “They have never left us.” / They have not returned” (*CPP* 428; CXIII/806). But the two poets are compellingly allied in that both formalize an aesthetic resolution to external, material pressures: Stevens through his supreme fiction; Pound through his paradiso terrestre. Each of these edifices is impersonal, substituting visions of a timeless and boundless realm for private experience and personal perspectives. They differ in that Pound and Stevens turn to different sources for elemental and eternal knowledge - for the images and insights that might sustain the towering ambition of their constructs. The landscapes of Pound’s terrestrial paradise draw upon places either real or previously imagined, from Lake Garda to Elysium. In contrast, the ethereal abstractions that decorate Stevens’ supreme fiction have a remote and intangible

quality, recalling Plato's ideal forms.<sup>9</sup> Of course, Stevens' reading and experiences do shape and sustain his abstractions. Yet objects often appear in his poems as if cleansed of earlier associations. They derive their resonance primarily from the fresh intersections of their new context, and from Stevens' uncanny facility for sonic and visual patterning.

Stevens' symbolic landscapes and Pound's re-imagined paradise may be differently conceived, but they are not aesthetically estranged. Donald Davie has argued that "Pound's repeated assertion that the paradisaical is *real*, out there in the real world, is a conscious challenge to the whole symbolist aesthetic".<sup>10</sup> But Pound's commitment to a treatment of the "real" does not preclude the attribution of symbolic or figurative qualities to worldly objects. Lake Garda, for instance, is certainly associable in Pound's mind with particular, personal experiences, but it is arguable that his poetic re-rendering of those experiences constitutes an imaginative transfiguration of reality that Stevens might readily approve:

and the water was still on the west side  
 flowing toward the Villa Catullo  
 where with sound ever moving  
   in diminutive poluphosboios  
 in the stillness outlasting all wars   (LXXIV/447)

These plangent phrases recall a particular occasion, "the water *was* still", and they are spatially precise: "*on* the west side", "*toward* the Villa Catullo". But this singular experience is finally validated by a general measure, "outlasting all wars", so that the particularities of the occasion become aesthetic tokens of a timeless moral order. Though Pound and Stevens certainly differ in their approach to the past and to the "real", both ultimately establish a private symbolism that enfolds their personal images and tropes into broader metaphorical patterns.

\* \* \*

The differences between Pound's and Stevens' handling of mythic allusion and historical detail in their verse are relatively clear. But to trace the intellectual origins of each poet's impersonal theories, and in particular their debts to proximate, nineteenth-century thinkers,

<sup>9</sup> The implications of this connection are explored further in Chapter 4.

<sup>10</sup> Donald Davie, *Studies in Ezra Pound* (Manchester: Carcanet P, 1991) 494.

is a more uncertain task. Pound could be wildly dismissive of earlier poets, dubbing Wordsworth “a stupid man, with a decided gift for portraying nature in vignettes” (*SP* 384). Such inflated disdain for major figures necessitates an unlikely cast of alternative colossi, such as George Crabbe, who was “never absolute slush, nonsense or bombast . . . If the nineteenth century had built itself on Crabbe? Ah, if! But no; they wanted confections” (*LE* 277). Elsewhere, however, Pound’s judgements are incisive and generous. Early essays on Henry James and the poetry of Thomas Hardy recognise greatness long before that recognition became a critical commonplace. And even second-rate writers can be honoured for their humane spirit, most memorably in Pound’s tribute to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt at the close of Canto LXXXI.

Stevens is typically less forthcoming. He writes warmly of his immediate contemporaries in essays on Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams, but commentaries on earlier authors are scarce. The *Letters* abound with asides and *aperçus*, but these are rarely amplified. Indeed, Stevens is often at pains to interdict any attempt to chart his influences. Of Mallarmé, Samain and Verlaine, Stevens claims “I was never a student of any of these poets; they were simply poets and I was the youthful general reader”. And as for philosophy: “I could never possibly have any serious contact with philosophy because I have not the memory” (*L* 636). Though several critics, including Bloom and Lucy Beckett, have charted Stevens’ debt to Romanticism, he could be outwardly dismissive of even this legacy: “Nothing could be more inappropriate to American literature than its English source since the Americans are not British in sensibility” (*OP* 201).

A great deal of guesswork about Pound’s and Stevens’ intellectual preoccupations is removed, of course, by the connections revealed in individual poems, as later chapters will show. Pound’s Ur-Cantos, for instance, draw heavily upon Browning and the dramatic monologue form, while Stevens touchingly expounds his lifelong debt to Santayana in “To An Old Philosopher in Rome”. But even Pound’s and Stevens’ more gnomic statements about the nature of their craft suggest that, in some respects, far from breaking with the intellectual climate of nineteenth-century England, they are extending it by other means. Though “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” laments John Ruskin’s staid contribution to an age in which “Gladstone was still respected . . . Swinburne / And Rossetti still abused”, Ruskin’s *The Political Economy of Art*, which argues that the processes of industrial capitalism are inimical to the work of true craftsmen, anticipates a preoccupation central to Pound’s work (*PT* 552). Strains of Walter Pater’s neo-aestheticism, not least his famous dictum that “all

art aspires to the condition of music”, are equally appropriate to Stevens’ drive toward abstract harmonies: “That music is intensest which proclaims / The near, the clear, and vaunts the clearest bloom” (*CPP* 71). And, in *Culture and Anarchy*, Mathew Arnold describes a “best self”, that which connects individuals in their deepest integrity, as essentially impersonal:

By our everyday selves . . . we are separate, personal, at war; we are only safe from one another’s tyranny when no one has any power; and this safety, in its turn, cannot save us from anarchy. And when, therefore, anarchy presents itself as a danger to us, we know not where to turn.

But by our best self we are united, impersonal, at harmony. We are in no peril from giving authority to this, because it is the truest friend we all of us can have; and when anarchy is a danger to us, to this authority we may turn with sure trust.<sup>11</sup>

When Pound and Stevens pursue an impersonal mode, in which universal intuitions might be enshrined, they evince a faith in a collective “best self” comparable to Arnold’s. Furthermore, this “best self” commands an authority upon which a more just society, in Arnold’s view, might be based. Of course, “authority” also has more ominous associations, foreshadowing Pound’s infatuation with the social order promised by Fascism. Stevens’ politics are more temperate, but he too insists upon the poet’s freedom from democratic expectations:

Time and time again it has been said that he [the poet] may not address himself to an elite. I think he may. There is not a poet whom we prize living today that does not address himself to an elite. (*SPP* 661)

The great Victorian critics anticipated the recrudescence of classicism of the modernists, a classicism associated in turn with a thirst for order and hierarchy at odds with liberal democracy.<sup>12</sup> Hence many of Pound’s and Stevens’ statements about the position of the artist in society seem a logical extension of certain nineteenth-century ideas. And there are further parallels. Matthew Arnold’s emphasis on the aesthetic function of religion – “The

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*. Ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969) 95.

<sup>12</sup> Ford Madox Ford’s 1909 essay “The Passing of the Great Figure” offers interesting perspectives on Ruskin, Arnold and Carlyle, casting them, along with Mill, Newman, Tennyson and George Eliot, as “the last of the priests”. Reprinted in Heuffer, *The Critical Attitude* (London: Duckworth, 1911) 118.



strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry” – foreshadows Stevens’ assertion that “After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption” (*OP* 158). And Tennyson’s famous observation, of “In Memoriam”, that “I is not always the author speaking of himself, but the voice of the human race speaking through him”, parallels Pound’s insistence that “There is no mystery about *The Cantos*, they are the tale of the tribe” (*GK* 194).<sup>13</sup> It is telling that each of these statements is knowingly portentous, as if hyperbole were the best cure for insecurity. As Michael Levenson has commented, “between the false stability of the Victorians and the true instability of the moderns there may be little to choose”.<sup>14</sup> Pound and Stevens were both wary, albeit to varying degrees, of the “false stability” inherent in certain nineteenth-century ideas. They sensed that the consolations of earlier generations were either too innocent or too contrived. Walt Whitman, for instance, in amplifying his theories of “Personalism”, envisions a natural accord between the person and society:

Underneath the fluctuations of the expressions of society, as well as the movements of the politics of the leading nations of the world, we see steadily pressing ahead and strengthening itself, even in the midst of immense tendencies toward aggregation, this image of completeness in separatism, of personal dignity, of a single person, characterized in the main, not from extrinsic acquirements or position, but in the pride of himself or herself alone; and, as an eventual conclusion and summing up, (or else the entire scheme of things is aimless, a cheat, a crash,) the simple idea that the last, best dependence is to be upon humanity itself, and its own inherent, normal, full-grown qualities, without any superstitious support whatever.<sup>15</sup>

Here Whitman’s ornate syntax enacts the determined progress, despite qualifications and opposition, towards an ideal that will fuse his own steadfast humanism with the optimistic spirit of the age, when hopes for personal liberty and democratic renewal surged in the aftermath of the American Civil War. But, by the beginning of the twentieth century, “the immense tendencies toward aggregation” that Whitman describes had forcefully reasserted themselves in America and in Europe. The decline of faith, the parallel rise of science and industry, urban expansion, political uncertainty and the development of mass culture

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<sup>13</sup> Lord Hallam Tennyson, *Tennyson: A Memoir* (London: Macmillan, 1897) 305.

<sup>14</sup> Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 27.

<sup>15</sup> Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas. Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall. Vol. 2 (New York: New York UP, 1963–1964) 374.

militated against personal autonomy and self-expression. These social upheavals, and their broad implications for modernist literature, have been exhaustively explored. But the idealism of pre-modernists such as Whitman, a writer of unavoidable weight and influence, represents a particular challenge to later American poets. For this idealism forms part of the Tradition that Pound and Stevens inherit, even if Whitman's hopeful visions of social harmony cannot be assimilated to a disordered twentieth-century reality. Hence Pound, whose poetry and politics seem irreconcilable with Whitman's, could, nonetheless, be generous:

I am (in common with every educated man) an heir of the ages and I demand my birth-right. Yet if Whitman represented his time in language acceptable to one accustomed to my standard of intellectual-artistic living he would belie his time and nation. And yet I am but one of his "ages and ages' encrustations" or to be exact an encrustation of the next age. The vital part of my message, taken from the sap and fibre of America, is the same as his.

Mentally I am a Walt Whitman who has learned to wear a collar and a dress shirt (although at times inimical to both). Personally I might be very glad to conceal my relationship to my spiritual father and brag about my more congenial ancestry—Dante, Shakespeare, Theocritus, Villon, but the descent is a bit difficult to establish.<sup>16</sup>

This early essay, written in 1909, is strikingly consistent with the concepts of tradition and inheritance that shape Pound's later work. The "educated man" is already an "heir of the ages", and the poet's precociously assured sense of his "congenial ancestry – Dante, Shakespeare, Theocritus, Villon" – omits only Confucius (Homer being taken for granted) from the major influences on *The Cantos*. There are calculated barbs: earlier in the essay Pound has described Whitman as "Entirely free from the renaissance humanist ideal of the complete man or from the Greek idealism, he is content to be what he is" – a backhanded compliment which reminds us that the young Pound was anything but content to be himself. Indeed, the admission that he "has learned to wear a collar or a dress shirt" reflects Pound's conscious self-fashioning, a trait that C.B. Willard argues he actually shared with Whitman: "they both 'posed' for an endless number of photographs and portraits, which they published with their poems to give the reader a sense of the personality of the poet".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ezra Pound "What I Feel About Walt Whitman" (1909), reprinted in Herbert Bergman, "Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound," *American Literature* 27 (March 1955) 58-61.

<sup>17</sup> Charles B. Willard, "Ezra Pound's Debt to Walt Whitman," *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Oct. 1957) 573.

We can forgive Pound, as we can any burgeoning talent, for cutting such a dash. The concern to convey “a sense of the personality of the poet” he certainly outgrew. But Pound’s obsession with tradition, deepening as his career progressed, led him to develop odd and eclectic canons, and to make immodest claims about their bearing on his own work. Even here, along with a debt to Whitman, Pound can confidently lay claim to the “the sap and fibre of America”, when little sap or fibre vivifies, say, the effete and porcelain lyrics of *A Quinzaine for this Yule* (1909).

We might expect a poet of Stevens’ disposition to feel a more natural affiliation than Pound with Whitman’s Transcendentalism; yet Stevens remains more ambivalent: “It seems to me, then, that Whitman is disintegrating as the world, of which he made himself a part, disintegrates” (*L* 871). This contrast reminds us that Stevens finds “Tradition” a more ephemeral concept than Pound (or indeed Eliot) does, as evidenced by a 1939 piece in the *Partisan Review*, which presents Stevens’ answers to seven questions. Here is the first:

Are you conscious, in your own writing, of the existence of a “usable past”? Is this mostly American? What figures would you designate as elements in it? Would you say, for example, that Henry James’s work is more relevant to the present and future of American writing than Walt Whitman’s? (*CPP* 803)

Stevens replied:

The material of the imagination is reality and reality can be nothing except the usable past. However, it does not follow that this or that particular figure of the past is relevant to the future. It is just as easy to be diffident about James as it is to be diffident about Whitman. I suppose you have chosen these two figures as symbols; neither of them means anything to me. The projections of the past are as incalculable as the stock market; otherwise it would be nothing but a bore. (*CPP* 804)

Stevens’ rejection not only of a specific debt to James and Whitman, but of the very concept of direct influence – “the projections of the past are . . . incalculable” – dissents radically from the cultural theories of the canonising Eliot and the self-mythologizing Pound. Elsewhere, Stevens approaches the theme of influence in more general and metaphorical terms, drawing on Virgil:

This younger figure is the intelligence that endures. It is the imagination of the son still bearing the antique imagination of the father. It is the clear intelligence of the young man still bearing the obscurities of the intelligence of the old. It is the spirit out of its own self, not out of some surrounding myth, delineating with accurate speech the complications of which it is composed. For this is Aeneas, it is the past that is Anchises. (CPP 675)

These are subtle formulations, for which the metaphor is carefully chosen: after the fall of Troy, Anchises becomes, quite literally, a burden for Aeneas, albeit one dutifully borne. Discussions of poetic influence have long been dominated by the competing theories of Eliot and Harold Bloom, but here Stevens outlines a more organic sense of his inheritance. He substitutes for Eliot's passive presentation of the poetic consciousness – “a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings” – a more compelling figuration: “the intelligence that endures”. And the invocation of Anchises acknowledges a sense of responsibility to the past without courting the “anxiety” central to Bloom's thesis.

Eliot endorsed, and in so doing helped to define, Pound's conception of history in his introduction to Pound's *Selected Poems* (1928): “If one can really penetrate the life of another age, one is penetrating the life of one's own”.<sup>18</sup> Pound's densely referential style might initially seem more impersonal in its effects than Stevens' lyric patterns, as the latter place greater emphasis on the transformative power of the poet's individual imagination. But the hieratic sensibility that composes Stevens' supreme fiction achieves a different pitch of detachment, recalling Yeats's counsel that “[the poet] is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete”.<sup>19</sup> In his later work, Stevens outgrows the need to project redemptive powers onto an imagined “central man”, and instead refines an abstract yet emotionally charged idiom, which places a renewed emphasis on memory and retrospection. In “The World as Meditation”, Penelope's longing for Ulysses mirrors the poet's thirst for sublimation in the currents of history:

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,  
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,  
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near. (CPP 442)

<sup>18</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Introduction” to *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1968) 11.

<sup>19</sup> W.B. Yeats, “A General Introduction for My Work”, *The Major Works*, Ed. and introd. Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) 379.

By invoking Odysseus at the outset of *The Cantos*, the young Pound framed his own poetic quest as a voyage after knowledge. Here Stevens' ends meet Pound's beginnings.

### **Sensibility**

An “impersonal sensibility” verges on oxymoron. Both Pound and Stevens wrote poems in which it were more fitting to speak of an anti-sensibility, a calculated absence, a blend of intellectual stringency and emotional restraint. But this is not the whole truth. Ever since Eliot defined the artist's progress as a “continual self-sacrifice”, literary impersonality has too often been defined as a series of negations.<sup>20</sup> Pound and Stevens evolve poetic modes in which self-sacrifice undoubtedly plays a part, but they do not make a virtue of inert aestheticism: much as Mauberley and Crispin express a truth about their creators, they are, finally, caricatures. Impersonality as practised by Pound and Stevens does not shrink from the intensities of personal experience – what Henry James called the “felt life” – but rather reframes them in a poetry that turns its gaze outward, projecting personal intuitions onto historical and mythic events, or sublimating direct experience in imagined settings. The impersonal is not simply an inversion of the personal. After all, even Eliot's aversions to personality are qualified:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.<sup>21</sup>

For Pound and Stevens, the escape from personality was a gradual and uneven process. The particularities and capacities of each poet's evolving sensibility are bodied forth in works of immense complexity, making any synoptic account of their impersonal voices partial and necessarily provisional. Nevertheless, an overview of the early innovations through which Pound and Stevens refined an impersonal sensibility may serve to clarify later discussions.

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<sup>20</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, Ed. and introd. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975) 40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

The early phases of Pound's development are more sharply delineated than Stevens'. *Personae* (1911) and *Ripostes* (1912) include stylised dramatic monologues easily distinguished from the Imagist experiments that followed them. Different approaches to translation separate the embroidered narratives of the Provençal poems from the economies of *Cathay*. And the two poems at the summit of Pound's early achievement, *Homage to Sextus Propertius* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, each anticipate and refine distinct elements of his mature style.

The dramatic monologue freed Pound from the impulse to paint complete pictures: "I catch the character I happen to be interested in at the moment he interests me, usually a moment of song, self-analysis, or sudden understanding or revelation" (L 4).<sup>22</sup> And the act of imagination required to inhabit another's perspective deepens and enlivens Pound's finest poems: a process that reaches its zenith in Canto XLVII, which authentically realises the insights of different speakers and gradually draws them into accord.

Pound's involvements in the Imagist and Vorticist movements shape another impersonal characteristic of his verse. The imperatives laid out in "A Retrospect", particularly the emphasis on "Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective", effectively minimise the rôle of the poet as thinker (LE 3). His chief aim is faithfully to replicate the distinctive qualities of an image or natural object that "is always the *adequate* symbol" (LE 5, Pound's italics). This principle points to important technical differences between Pound and Stevens, discussed below. And it also underlies one of the more remarkable qualities of Pound's poetic sensibility: that his avoidance of a personal voice is rarely permitted to inhibit the tactile immediacy of his verse. In valuing Arnaut Daniel and Cavalcanti more highly than "the Victorians", Pound notes, approvingly, that "Their testimony is of the eyewitness, their symptoms are first hand" (LE 11).

*Cathay* prompts an awkward acknowledgement: Pound produced his most unified and fully achieved work in 1915. The dramatized narratives of this volume, of which "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter" is the most haunting, refine Pound's mastery of voice and tone. But Pound's study of the work of Ernest Fenollosa, which culminated in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1920), has implications for his impersonal mode beyond the poise and limpidity of *Cathay* itself. The densely allusive style of *The Cantos* rests in part on the insight, derived from Fenollosa, that an abstract idea, or even a process of thought, can be illustrated through an arrangement of concrete

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<sup>22</sup> Letter to William Carlos Williams, 21 October 1908.

objects and images. As I shall argue, Pound sometimes pushes this technique to deleterious extremes. But the ideogrammic method is central to Pound's impersonal mode, as it creates meaning through vivid juxtaposition rather than through linear accumulation. The most successful passages of *The Cantos* often rely on the reader to supply the thematic connections between objects, images or historical vignettes. This creates the impression that the poem offers not so much an individual's account of reality as a revelation of the truths somehow immanent in landscapes and histories.<sup>23</sup>

*Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919) and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) confirm Pound's progress from apprentice to master. The *Homage* has long been a controversial work, occupying an uncertain realm between literal translation and pastiche. But the liberties that Pound takes as translator, merging Latinate tropes with modern idioms, contribute to the strength of the *Homage* as an independent work. The resultant, composite voice, embellishing Propertian conceits with Poundian pith and irreverence, elides past and present, making the ancient world tangible and immediate. This remarkable achievement paves the way for Pound's approach to history in *The Cantos*, and in particular his gift subtly to project personal sentiments onto his dense tapestries of history and myth. Pound's conflation of his poetic progress with the voyage of Odysseus, a trope that serves to intensify the poet's private emotions even as it masks and decentres them, would not have been possible without Propertius, whose elegies inspired Pound to refashion a borrowed sensibility as wholly his own. Thus the *Homage* anticipates more closely than *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* the dominant poetic procedures of Pound's mature verse. But the latter poem remains essential to an understanding of the poet's impersonal voice, as it shows him bidding *adieu* both to literary London and to his place within it. The twin speakers of *Mauberley* amplify and parody two contrasting approaches to the modern world. Mauberley himself, like Stevens' Crispin, presents a defeated figure, an etiolated connoisseur of chaos, his effete, remorseful lyrics patently inadequate to the febrile energies of the age. No such inhibitions daunt the semi-autobiographical "E.P.", whose bitter sincerities offset Mauberley's resignation. But E.P.'s convictions are exaggerated and ironized in turn: "Better mendacities / Than the classics in paraphrase!" (PT 550). If Mauberley's inertia damns the fustian style of Pound's earliest lyrics, E.P. demonstrates that the monologue form has, in the interim, been taken as far as it will go (even though, or perhaps because, E.P. is a version of the poet's self). Though several passages in

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<sup>23</sup> It is often objected that Pound's technique offers his readers only the illusion of interpretive freedom, and is, in fact, extremely didactic. I deal with these criticisms in later chapters.

*Mauberley* seek, sincerely, to re-establish the art of poetry as socially and politically important, this desire is coterminous with the recognition that no single, isolated voice can long lay any justified claim to public significance: “Accept opinion. The “Nineties” tried your game / And died, there’s nothing in it” (*PT* 555). The unified and often transparent voices of E.P. and Mauberley, through which the poet’s own attitudes can easily be divined, represent the final flourishing of a latently personal sensibility that Pound felt finally compelled to shed.

So short a summary of Pound’s early career risks the misleading suggestion that his development of an impersonal sensibility was straightforward and somehow inevitable. His frenetic energy and productivity in the London years led to false starts and chastening setbacks for every luminous success: Ford Madox Hueffer laughed helplessly at the stilted diction of *Canzoni*, while Wyndham Lewis ridiculed the disjunction between the conventional formulations of Pound’s early verse and the radical, hectoring pronouncements of his early prose.<sup>24</sup> Ostensibly, Stevens’ progress was altogether more serene. Though *Harmonium* collects poems written between 1912 and 1923, a period in which Pound’s verse underwent radical reinvention, the volume is, stylistically, remarkably composed and uniform. But whereas Pound had, by the 1920s, refined most of the elements of his mature sensibility, Stevens, as the later poems of *Harmonium* attest, had descended into epistemic uncertainty.

Many of the shorter lyrics in *Harmonium*, such as “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock”, showcase the felicities of Stevens’ early, symbolist style – the vivid colours, eccentric metaphors and fantastical settings that supply what he called “the essential gaudiness of poetry” (*SPP* 768). But this style also has limitations. It creates an artificial distance between the poet and what he perceives. This licenses wonderful local effects – images and metaphors that capture the disorienting strangeness of reality – but it also inhibits the development of ideas. The individual poems rarely come to terms with the eccentricities they represent. Yvor Winters complains that Stevens, like Edgar Allan Poe, is engaged “on a quest for the new, which, in the realm of emotion divorced from understanding or any principle of propriety, can be found only in new degrees of intensity and of strangeness”. Stevens would no doubt have dismissed “principles of propriety” as immaterial to poetry, but Winters’ related contention, that

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<sup>24</sup> For an account of Hueffer’s amusement see A.D. Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet – A Portrait of the Man and his Work. Vol. 1: The young genius 1885-1920* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) 112. Percy Wyndham Lewis makes his criticisms in *Time and Western Man* (Boston: Beacon P, 1957) 85-6.



Stevens “is unable to think himself out of the situation into which he has wandered” is more telling.<sup>25</sup> Two of the finest poems in *Harmonium*, “Domination of Black” and “The Snow Man”, are so affecting precisely because they dramatize the intractability of the physical world, and the anxiety of the artist who feels himself unable fully to reconcile his emotions to his surroundings.

“The Snow Man”, in particular, anticipates the nuances of Stevens’ later poetic sensibility, in that its treatment of personal emotion is oblique yet poignantly realised. But the troubling uncertainties that the poem explores, so affecting in condensed and elliptical formulations, at times prove more unwieldy in the longer poems of *Harmonium*. After the certain achievement of “Sunday Morning” (1915), two later pieces, “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” (1918) and “The Comedian as the Letter C” (1923), reflect a changing focus in Stevens’ work from the imagination to reality, or, more precisely, from confidence in the power of the imagination to an awareness of the intimidating “weight of the world”.<sup>26</sup> These shifting preoccupations have significant consequences for Stevens’ nascent impersonal sensibility.

“Sunday Morning” does not employ a conventional persona, but aligns its perceptions with an unnamed woman’s reverie. This structure does not limit the poem. Rather, in five of its eight sections, the woman’s initial intuitions spark reflections of increasing weight and complexity, which make little attempt to disguise the poet’s shaping spirit. The impression is almost of a dialogue between conventional attitudes and the poet’s more nuanced responses to them, which re-invigorates age-old questions: the ontological problems do not assume an embarrassed portentousness. In the final, wonderfully affirmative section of “Sunday Morning”, Stevens effectively speaks *in propria persona*, crafting a lyric meditation on the enduring value of human experience, even in the shadow of death. “Sunday Morning”, like Pound’s *Cathay*, is an early masterpiece, wholly assured and self-contained, and marked by a metaphysical confidence, a clear sense of the poet’s rôle and purpose, at odds with Stevens’ later work. But the direct and personal mode of expression achieved at the close of the poem is one that Stevens evidently felt he could no longer sustain. Hence, in “Le Monocle”, an extended meditation on the predations of age and decay, the speaking voice is less certain; the sentiments explored are often exposed to doubt or irony; and the poet’s sensibility is increasingly difficult to apprehend. The

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<sup>25</sup> Yvor Winters, *In Defense of Reason* (Chicago: Swallow P, 1947) 439.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Hill’s phrase, from *Scenes from Comus*: “weight of the world, weight of the word, is”. Hill, *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013) 430.

intuitions explored in successive sections of the poem are often immiscible and discontinuous; they do not resolve into the redemptive coherences that “Sunday Morning” finally achieves.

“The Comedian” makes Stevens’ concerns about the value and purpose of poetry even more explicit. He subdues his own sensibility to an unedifying avatar, the hapless Crispin, whose voyage becomes an extended metaphor for Stevens’ creative anxieties. Initially, “The Comedian” develops as a narrative of expanding consciousness and understanding – the growth of a persona’s mind – but, over the course of the poem, Crispin moves gradually from idealism to fatalism. He learns enough to recognise the limitations of selfhood, “Glozing his life with after-shining flicks”, but not enough to subdue that self to the exigencies of his art (*SPP* 37). As William Burney observes, “Crispin refused to lay by the personal and make his fate an instance of all fate, which he would have to do in order to be a hero”.<sup>27</sup> In presenting the travails of a minor poet, Stevens raises a number of problems for which he himself has no immediate answer, leaving him, like Crispin, “proving what he proves / Is nothing” (*SPP* 37).

In fact, the shift from a personal to an impersonal sensibility was, in the short term, a damaging development for Stevens’ poetry. This requires explanation. “Sunday Morning” expresses almost perfectly a Romantic ideal – the power of aesthetic experience to redeem and console – in which Stevens nevertheless began to lose confidence. The pressures of reality resisted the poet’s most personal gift, his imagination. Redemptive visions of the kind approached in “Sunday Morning” seem, in later poems, increasingly inadequate to the urgencies of the modern world. This left Stevens effectively searching for an idiom through which to approach private emotions and intuitions that he felt no longer able directly to articulate. The poet’s personality was not, on its own terms, publicly communicable. Despite the anxieties that inhibit “Le Monocle” and “The Comedian”, several elements of the two poems – extended metaphors, mood-experiments, shifting perspectives and challenging abstractions – anticipate the impersonal sensibility of Stevens’ later poems. Both the patrimonial figures of Stevens’ middle phase – his guitarist or “central man” – and the challenging abstractions of his later poems owe a good deal to the impersonal sensibility that *Harmonium* had begun to explore.

The poetic sensibilities that Pound and Stevens evolve in their early works reflect a shared ambition to minimise the rôle of the poet as an actor in his verse. Of course, the

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<sup>27</sup> William A. Burney, *Wallace Stevens* (New York: Twayne P, 1968) 27.

reasons for, and extent of, each poet's ambition in this regard are subtly different. These differences are reflected in the principles outlined in Pound's and Stevens' critical prose. It should be remembered that Pound, like Eliot, produced many of his most influential essays in the first decade of his career, with the result that these works are infused with the stridency of a manifesto. A tendency to hyperbole, of which both Pound and Eliot have been accused, is understandable, since the two were in the vanguard of poetic modernism, and helped shape the atmosphere of literary London in the 1910s. Both men felt they had to stake a claim in their essays for the validity of their obviously radical forms. In contrast, Stevens habitually declined to proselytize on his own behalf, let alone on behalf of a wider modernist movement. Indeed, the bulk of Stevens' critical prose appeared later in his career, and is the work of a poet who had already approached in verse the concerns central to his essays. Nevertheless, though the reflective, temperate style of Stevens' essays is far removed from Pound's polemics, both return continually to the rôle and responsibilities of the poet.

Pound, writing in 1912, predicts that twentieth-century poetry "will be as much like granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth, its interpretive power . . . At least for myself, I want it so, austere, direct, free from emotional slither" (*LE* 12). Even as Pound trumpets the importance of poetry, he minimises the importance of the poet as an individual: "It is tremendously important that great poetry be written, it makes not a jot of difference who writes it" (*LE* 10). But it is arguable that Pound's poetry does not always observe the admonishments of his prose. It is a longstanding critique of *The Cantos* that they invoke, elliptically, shards of history and myth that strike particular and private chords for Pound, but remain unintelligible to all but the most trusting and diligent disciples. In this regard, Pound's impersonal poetic project depends upon the reader's tolerance for the poet's distinctly personal whim.

Stevens also faces claims that the impersonality of his verse is essentially superficial. Helen Vendler offers "four simple recommendations for a neophyte deciphering Stevens", of which "the first is to substitute 'I' whenever Stevens says 'he' or 'she': for 'Divinity must live within herself,' read 'Divinity must live within myself,' and so on".<sup>28</sup> Stevens is certainly far more open than Pound about the importance of the poet's personality, even within an impersonal mode:

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<sup>28</sup> Helen Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1984) 44.

To say that it [poetry] is a process of the personality of the poet does not mean that it involves the poet as subject. Aristotle said: “The poet should say very little *in propria persona*.” Without stopping to discuss what might be discussed for so long, note that the principle so stated by Aristotle is cited in relation to the point that poetry is a process of the personality of the poet. This is the element, the force, that keeps poetry a living thing, the modernizing and ever-modern influence. The statement that the process does not involve the poet as subject, to the extent to which that is true, precludes direct egotism. On the other hand, without indirect egotism there can be no poetry. (*SPP* 670)

The phrase “indirect egotism” is not only illuminating in relation to Stevens’ own persona: it is equally felicitous as a descriptor of *The Cantos*, in which the arrangements of subjects and themes reflect the gamut of Pound’s idiosyncrasies. But Stevens’ distinction between “the personality of the poet” and the “poet as subject” is also highly significant, and begins to clarify a difference in emphasis between Pound’s and Stevens’ theories of poetry. When Stevens characterises personality as “the element, the force, that keeps poetry a living thing” he claims a primacy for the poet’s shaping intelligence. Pound is more ambivalent about the poet as thinker:

There are two opposed ways of thinking of a man: firstly, you may think of him as that toward which perception moves, as the toy of circumstance, as the plastic substance *receiving* impressions; secondly, you may think of him as directing a certain fluid force against circumstance, as *conceiving* instead of merely reflecting and observing. One does not claim that one way is better than the other, one notes a diversity of temperament. (*GB* 89-90, Pound’s italics)

It is intriguing that Pound, in his first “way of thinking of a man”, anticipates subsequent criticisms of his own work: that it is an indiscriminate jumble of impressions, and that its enthusiasms seem arbitrary as a result.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, the second way of thinking, “directing a certain fluid force against circumstance”, is surely more apposite for Stevens, who was constantly on guard against the pressures of reality. But when Pound describes “*conceiving* instead of merely reflecting and observing” he does not intend the same

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<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Noel Stock’s criticism that “It does not occur to [Pound] that his own views of his own encounters . . . are not available to the world unless he re-creates them”: Noel Stock, *Reading The Cantos: A Study of Meaning in Ezra Pound* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967) 4-5.

transformative process that Stevens associates with the poetic imagination. Rather, the power to “conceive” consists in producing meaning by setting accurately perceived objects in a revealing sequence: “Great artists have often . . . possessed a faculty for synthesis” (*GB* 25).

Despite Stevens’ greater conviction that the poet should transfigure, not merely apprehend, reality, his mature poems continue to eschew “the poet as subject”, and so match the impersonality, if not the alleged objectivity, of Pound’s *Cantos*. But the differences between Pound’s and Stevens’ depictions of the creative process are undoubtedly reflected in the formal innovations through which each poet’s impersonal sensibility is sustained.

## Technique

*Dichten = condensare.*

(Pound, *ABC* 36)

*These are the edgings and inchings of final form*

(Stevens, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”)

There are obvious and striking parallels between the impersonal sensibilities that Pound and Stevens evolved. But the techniques that each pursued to achieve an impersonal mode are not so easily compared. It is difficult to generalise about technique when the poets’ respective styles are continually evolving, and when many of the greatest poems also have their own technical idiosyncrasies, such as the subtle modulation of rhymes in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, or the recrudescence of syntax of Canto LXXXIII. What follows, then, is a preliminary account of the technical principles that Pound and Stevens pursued; principles that each was quite content to suspend, to subvert or to modify.

Marjorie Perloff’s “Pound / Stevens: Whose Era?” offers a useful, albeit partisan, summary of the contrasts between the two poets. Perloff juxtaposes Pound’s innovative poetics, his faith in “not thoughts but ‘WORDS’”, with Stevens’ preference for poetry that “is modern in respect to what it says” (491-2).<sup>30</sup> The most obvious stylistic contrasts

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<sup>30</sup> Marjorie Perloff, “Pound / Stevens: Whose Era?”, *New Literary History*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Spring, 1982) 485-514. 491-2.

between Pound and Stevens certainly appear to support Perloff's contention that the two poets represent opposed traditions: one a "First Modern", the other a "Last Romantic".<sup>31</sup> Whereas Pound's *Cantos*, often invoked to exemplify literary modernism, largely eschew traditional poetic forms, many of Stevens' finest poems are composed in tightly controlled blank verse. Pound prizes "art that bears true witness, I mean the art that is most precise", and makes a virtue of the poet's fidelity to the essence of that which he describes (*LE* 44). But Stevens is happy to acknowledge, and often to celebrate, the subjugation of reality to the imagination: "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar" (*SPP* 135). Stevens' syntax, often elaborate, modifies meaning by accumulating clauses, contributing to an elusive and indeterminate voice in many of his poems. Pound, meanwhile, is not known for his love of periodic sentences. Indeed, it is a critical commonplace that Ernest Fenollosa's "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry", which equates linguistic structures with the patterns of natural processes, inspired Pound to an ideogrammic method superseding syntax.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Pound urges his contemporaries to "Go in fear of abstractions", an injunction that Stevens comprehensively ignores (*LE* 5). And, far from being intimidated by the radical formulations of many of his peers, Stevens has little scruple in dismissing verse that he deems experimental merely for the sake of experimentalism:

One sees a good deal of poetry, thanks, perhaps, to Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*, in which the exploitation of form involves nothing more than the use of small letters for capitals, eccentric line-endings, too little or too much punctuation and similar aberrations. These have nothing to do with being alive. They have nothing to do with the conflict between the poet and that of which his poems are made. (*SPP* 746)

The conspicuous contrasts between Pound's and Stevens' approaches to matters of technique may seem a chastening impediment to any comparative study. But, as I shall argue, the two poets are more firmly estranged in their theories than in their practice. The scrutiny of individual poems reveals technical affinities between Pound and Stevens to which Perloff and other critics have been insufficiently attentive. They include a suppression of the lyric "I", deliberate discontinuities of mood and theme, knotted symbolism, a shared weakness for internal allusions, and the disruption of unitary

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 506.

<sup>32</sup> Though on occasion syntax becomes an important resource for Pound, as I shall argue.

perspective that each poet adapted from Cubist and Vorticist precepts. These shared, impersonal mechanisms correspond to Eliot's injunctions in "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921): "The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning".<sup>33</sup>

The "dislocation of language", the escape from stale meanings and fustian thoughts, was central to the impersonal modes that Pound and Stevens gradually refined. In *Gaudier-Brzeska*, Pound writes that "[a]ny mind that is worth calling a mind must have needs beyond the existing categories of language, just as a painter must have pigments or shades more numerous than the existing names of the colours" (*GB* 88). Pound was searching for a form elastic enough to combine the precise apprehension of local particularities with the expansive themes necessary for the "repeat in history" that he famously described to his father (*L* 210). Similarly, in "The Irrational Element in Poetry", Stevens divines "an un-written rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning" (*SPP* 790).<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, in his mature verse, Stevens becomes increasingly wary of formal devices or conventional tropes that might invest his work with coherences that are premature, superficial or unearned.

I have already argued that Pound and Stevens produced first-rate poems long before they had settled upon the impersonal sensibility that shapes their mature work. Neither pursued impersonal techniques in order to redeem verse that was technically or aesthetically moribund; rather, each forged fresh poetic idioms in order to accommodate hugely expansive themes. Pound's struggles, in particular, to extend the boundaries of an already assured and competent technique are reflected in the fitful composition of his early *Cantos*.<sup>35</sup> *Three Cantos* were composed in late 1915. Canto IV was published by Ovid Press in October 1919. And, in a letter to his father of 13 December 1919, Pound revealed that he had "done cantos 5, 6, 7, each more incomprehensible than the one preceding it; don't know what's to be done about it".<sup>36</sup> The uncharacteristic note of self-deprecation is telling: Pound had yet to find a poetic mode adequate to his ambitions. Not until May 1922 did "Canto VIII" (later to become Canto II), appear in *The Dial*, and its completion marked the beginning of a period of intensive work on *The Cantos*. By January 1925, Pound had

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<sup>33</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1951) 248.

<sup>34</sup> "The Irrational Element" was delivered as a lecture at Harvard in 1936.

<sup>35</sup> For a guide to the publication history of *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, see Ronald Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976) xiii-xv.

<sup>36</sup> Ezra Pound, *Ezra Pound to His Parents: Letters 1895-1929*, eds. Mary de Rachewiltz, A.D. Moody and Joanna Moody (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011) 455.

completed *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, in which, for the first time, the central themes of his epic begin to crystallise.

No discussion of Pound's poetic trajectory at the turn of the decade from the 1910s to the 1920s is complete without *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919) and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920). I shall discuss both poems in the following chapter. But the provisional Cantos V, VI and VII were separated from "Canto VIII" by another episode of some importance to the development of Pound's poetic technique: his editing of *The Waste Land*.

Many commentaries on *The Waste Land* manuscripts praise Pound's intuitive sympathy for the internal consistency of Eliot's poem. Though some of Pound's alterations seem drastic, such as his reduction of "Death by Water" from 92 lines to 10, he left the focus of Eliot's vision largely unclouded: "shaking out ashes from amid the glowing coals", as Kenner has it.<sup>37</sup> Eliot himself remarks upon Pound's editorial gifts:

I have sometimes tried to perform the same sort of maieutic task; and I know that one of the temptations against which I have to be on guard, is trying to re-write somebody's poem in the way I should have written it myself if I had wanted to write that poem. Pound never did that: he tried first to understand what one was attempting to do, and then tried to help one do it in one's own way.<sup>38</sup>

This should not be a surprise. Pound's early translations, from "The Seafarer" to "Dompna Pois de Me No'us Cal", reflect his fine feeling for authenticity, for the most essential and enduring qualities of a particular work. But, in one crucial respect, Pound's alterations did substantially modify the character of Eliot's poem. They suppress the autobiographical hints, the vulnerable, Prufrockian sensibility, that infuses certain original passages:

The next I know the old cab was hauled up on the avenue,  
And the cabman and little Ben Levin the tailor,  
The one who read George Meredith,  
Were running an hundred yards on a bet,  
And Mr. Donavan holding the watch.

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<sup>37</sup> Hugh Kenner, "The Urban Apocalypse," *Literary Criticism: Idea and Act*. Ed. and introd. W. K. Wimsatt (Berkeley: U of California P, 1974) 634.

<sup>38</sup> "Ezra Pound", *Poetry* 68 (September 1946), reprinted in Walter Sutton ed., *Ezra Pound: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963) 22-23.



So I got out to see the sunrise, and walked home.<sup>39</sup>

The original “Pub Scene” moves from shared experience, “we had dinner in good form”, to reported speech, “I’ve kept a clean house for twenty years, she says”, to the resigned, first-person sentiments of the lines above. Eliot crossed out this section himself, in line with Pound’s suggestions, just as he deleted other instances of personal and narrative detail, including two of the most confessional fragments of the original manuscript, “The Death of a Saint Narcissus” and “Elegy”. Removing passages of linear narrative from the poem also meant obliterating the singular perspective upon which the impression of ordered and linear narrative often rests. Tellingly, Pound censures four lines of the original “Fire Sermon” with a one-word objection: “Personal”.<sup>40</sup>

Pound was an able critic. But he also learned from the impersonal elements of *The Waste Land*. His marginalia reveal an initial impatience with the function of Tiresias in “The Fire Sermon”: “make up / yr. mind / you Tiresias / if you know / know damn well / or / else you / dont [sic]”.<sup>41</sup> But here Eliot, unusually, would not budge, and the reasons for his intransigence are reflected in his notes for the finished poem:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not, indeed, a ‘character’, is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest . . . What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem.<sup>42</sup>

Traces remain, in this description of a “mere spectator”, of Eliot’s sense of himself as “metoikos” (“exile”). But Tiresias’ estrangement from his surroundings is wholly different in effect from Prufrock’s, and indeed from Mauberley’s. The blind seer, who “sat by Thebes below the wall / and walked among the lowest of the dead”, is not complicit, as Prufrock and Mauberley are, in the fallen modern world that he observes. Instead, Tiresias affords Eliot a vatic, impersonal voice, employed intermittently in *The Waste Land* to invest the insights of the mortal poet with a timeless authority. It is no accident that Pound, after editing *The Waste Land*, re-orders *The Cantos* so that they begin with the Tiresias

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<sup>39</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber, 1971) 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>42</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber, 1969) 78.

myth. Canto I is less a descent into hell than an assertion of Pound's grand ambitions for his poem, to which an impersonal mode, blending history with prophecy, will be key.

Few critics have remarked on Pound's editing of *The Waste Land* as a vital moment in his own poetic development. Ronald Bush suggests that "It would not have been like Pound to imitate *The Waste Land*. He had too often expressed the opinion that a genuine masterpiece cannot be copied without dilution, and besides, he would have been sensitive about being called Eliot's follower".<sup>43</sup> Pound, it is true, makes little attempt in his early *Cantos* to replicate Eliot's style and tone. But, crucially, Eliot's Tiresias had revealed to Pound the capacities of an impersonal voice, which could be adequate to Pound's central preoccupation with "heaping together the necessary components of thought".<sup>44</sup> The importance of this lesson is reflected in the stark contrasts between the Ur-Cantos and "Canto VIII". The earlier poems are compromised by the emotionally involved persona inherent to the dramatic monologue form:

You had your business:  
To set out so much thought, so much emotion;  
To paint more real than any dead Sordello,  
The half or third of your intensest life  
And call that third *Sordello*<sup>45</sup>

There is a recognition here that *Sordello* is not Browning; rather, the poem *Sordello* involves the sublimation of the poet's "intensest life". But even this staggered and occluded form of personal revelation was too limiting for Pound, who had initially been drawn to Browning's monologue form in search of a structure adequate to a modern epic: "the modern world / Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in". The Ur-Cantos, in their narrative diffuseness, lose much of the clarity and precision that characterise Pound's early Imagist lyrics. The problem was how to accommodate to the requirements of a long poem the processes Pound describes in *Gaudier-Brzeska*, when discussing the genesis of "In a Station of the Metro":

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<sup>43</sup> Ronald Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976) 239-40.

<sup>44</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Economics* (London: Faber, 1933) 37.

<sup>45</sup> These lines originally appeared in *Poetry* 10 (June 1917).

I saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and . . . I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening . . . I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation ... not in speech, but in little spots of colour. (*GB* 86-7)

Pound's terminology, "equation", is important. It suggests the replacement of the poet's ordering but subjective intelligence with an objective formula. Pound records that he initially wrote a poem of 30 lines to capture his experience, before destroying it. Six months later, he wrote another of 14 lines, and gradually whittled this down to the 14 words of the finished poem. The two lines of "In a Station" are not syntactically related, they are paratactically juxtaposed. And if we return to Fenollosa's three-phase model of dramatic action, we find that the middle phase, "the stroke of the act", has been suppressed. We are, in effect, left waiting for a verb that never arrives. Instead, the verbal element of the poem inheres *in* the flash of apprehension that it enacts. Hugh Kenner has called this poem "a simile with 'like' suppressed".<sup>46</sup> But, in omitting the syntax that would make the simile clear, the poet forces his readers to replicate his own original moment of apprehension. As Pound put it, "In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective" (*GB* 89).

In "Canto VIII", written in the months following Pound's scrutiny of *The Waste Land*, Imagist techniques are successfully combined with mythic and historical vignettes:

Ship stock fast in sea-swirl,  
 Ivy upon the oars, King Pentheus,  
           grapes with no seed but sea-foam,  
 Ivy in scupper-hole.  
 Aye, I, Acœtes, stood there,  
           and the god stood by me,  
 Water cutting under the keel (II/7)

These lines condense an episode from Book III of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The child Dionysus has been captured by sailors, and Acœtes, the pilot, alone recognises the boy's

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<sup>46</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (London: Faber, 1972) 185.

divinity. Clipped, monosyllabic and initially verbless phrases create an impression of vital, irreducible experience, while the final participial phrase forms a matrix of verbal action, forged by alliteration and internal rhyme: “Water . . . under”, “cutting . . . keel”. Pound is able simultaneously to inhabit the perspective of Acœtes and to re-imagine the pilot’s perceptions in an immediate, living language. This expansive, flexible technique, in which historical details, elliptically invoked, can yet be charged by acute imagery and tactile lyricism, anticipates the finest passages of the later *Cantos*. In Canto XLIX, for instance, the marriage of an abstract, impersonal perspective with local, lyric energies contributes to a bewitching subtlety:

Autumn moon; hills rise about lakes  
 against sunset  
 Evening is like a curtain of cloud,  
 a blurr above ripples; and through it  
 sharp long spikes of the cinnamon,  
 a cold tune amid reeds.  
 Behind hill the monk’s bell  
 borne on the wind.

(XLIX/244)

In these lines, prepositions are more crucial than verbs to the disposition of images: “about lakes”, “against sunset”, “above ripples”, “amid reeds”, “Behind hill”. Such spatial precision integrates successive images as part of a unified frieze or tapestry, and makes the ephemeral seem somehow inevitable. This effect is compounded by unusually exacting punctuation, including semi-colons in the middle of the first and fourth lines of the verse paragraph, which disrupt the flow of images, forcing us to consider more closely the connections between them. Only the “monk’s bell” disrupts the profound stillness of this scene, and even here the construction is passive, “borne on the wind”, which subdues human action to the rhythms of natural processes. Over the course of Canto XLIX, an irreducible landscape becomes the literal and conceptual foundation of an idealised social order, one that proceeds from a deep reverence for time and the movement of the seasons. So, a few lines later, a nexus of organic and manmade imagery is animated by verbal action, which moves the canto from a timeless realm into a vivid present:

Where wine flag catches the sunset

Sparse chimneys smoke in the cross light

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.

(XLIX/244)

Now the human implications of Pound's vision, gaining form and frame, begin to crystallise. The syntax of this passage is almost invisible, in the sense that the clear and open grammatical structures do little to impede interpretation. But subtle complications keep the reader on his toes. The curious "wine flag", faithfully translated from one of Pound's Chinese source poems, forms part of a disconnected adverbial phrase, the delicacy and eccentricity of which provide a template for the images to follow.<sup>47</sup> Active, present-tense verbs and successive enjambments displace the ethereal stillness of the preceding verse paragraph with an anticipatory energy. And the line-gap after the second line effects a pause by typographical, not syntactical, means, before the arresting phrase "Comes then snow scur on the river" (in which the verbal action precedes both its subject and prepositional object) refocuses our attention on Pound's deliberate word-order. Eventually, the surge of visual detail is halted by the period following "clots as with cold". This belated pause gives the next sentence a clinching emphasis, casting leisured lives at San Yin as a direct consequence of the accord between man and his environment. Pound's ideal social order cannot merely be perceived, it must be intellectually willed into being. Hence the evocations of this enlightened society are syntactically integrated more closely than are the apprehensions of purely natural beauty that preceded them. In the final lines of Canto XLIX, latent precepts for harmonious living are condensed into direct imperatives – "dig well and drink of the water / dig field; eat of the grain" – before the canto concludes with abstract and verbless images, Pound's habitual idiom for the ineffable:

The fourth; the dimension of stillness.

And the power over wild beasts.

(XLIX/245)

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<sup>47</sup> For a comprehensive account of the Chinese sources for Canto XLIX, see Zhaoming Qian, "Painting in Poetry: Pound's Seven Lakes Canto", in *Ezra Pound & China*, ed. Zhaoming Qian (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003) 72-95.

Canto XLIX forms one half of a diptych – the other half is Canto XLVII – in which Pound arguably comes closest to fulfilling his original ambitions for *The Cantos*, in particular the effect he described as “The ‘magic moment’ or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidian into ‘divine or permanent world’” (L 210). Here the impersonal voice, which frees the poet from his own quotidian cares, provides an idiom in which divine visions and metamorphoses can fleetingly be realised.

If the most important developments in Pound’s impersonal technique derive from his struggle to master epic form, the technical innovations most crucial to Stevens’ impersonality are a response to the pressures of reality. Stevens’ mature voice was calculated not only to escape the limitations of personal expression, but also to resist the encroachments of an increasingly sceptical and materialist age. Simon Critchley reiterates a longstanding critical conundrum when he asks “What is it about the particular meditative poetic form that [Stevens] developed that is able to carry genuine philosophical weight and yet which is impossible to translate into prose?”<sup>48</sup> Though Critchley’s question is sensitive to the irreducibility of poetic expression, his subsequent argument insinuates a form of noble failure in Stevens’ verse: it is finally beyond the poet’s power to resolve the great ontological questions, and so the poetry registers a kind of beautiful defeat. This is a misreading. As “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” and “The Irrational Element in Poetry” make clear, Stevens believed that the poet could legitimately strive for forms of subjective insight that lie beyond the purview of the philosopher. “The poetic process”, Stevens writes, “is psychologically an escapist process” (CPP 662). The very particularity of poetry – its conjunction of semantic and aesthetic energies, its curious resonances, its unpredictable felicities – stands opposed to rationalism. Stevens embraces the essential strangeness of the imagination – “the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility . . . that nobility which is our spiritual height and depth” – and this emphasis upon the uniqueness, the idiosyncrasy, of poetic insight parallels Pound’s quest for the “magic moment” that licences a move from the quotidian to the divine (CPP 664). Neither Stevens nor Pound seeks to provide logical solutions to philosophical questions; at their best, they capture the disorienting intensities of visions and experiences that cannot be codified. Stevens’ impersonal mode, which licenses dramatic shifts of perspective, mood and theme, was in part a response to his desire for irrational and subjective insights. But the evolution of this

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<sup>48</sup> Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (London: Routledge, 2005) 31.

mode was gradual. Like Pound, Stevens achieves in his early verse an almost incidental impersonality, in that his focus on the quiddity of objects and images leaves little room for subjective explication. Take “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”:

Among twenty snowy mountains,  
 The only moving thing  
 Was the eye of the black bird.                   (*CPP* 74)

The blackbird – initially broken into elemental halves, “black bird” – combines the Blakean potentialities of the firecat, from “Earthy Anecdote”, with the ominous symbolism of the immovable urn in “Anecdote of the Jar”. Stevens’ usually ornate diction is almost entirely subdued to an objective, aphoristic style, so that the rhymed and rhythmically balanced description of “twenty snowy mountains” seems almost indulgent, contradicting the majesty of the image with the glibness of the sounds. Even the verbal component of the title, “looking at”, is a strikingly prosaic formulation for a poet so richly attuned to the different connotations of seeing, perceiving, regarding and beholding.<sup>49</sup> Each stanza of “Thirteen Ways” is epigrammatic, as if seeking to circumscribe the import of the scene it describes. Yet the arrangement of these contrasting instances of perception in sequence acts against their separate closures. The poem anticipates, in its staccato statements, the radical perspectivism of Stevens’ later work, for none of the individual attitudes it delineates is adequate to the poet’s experience:

I do not know which to prefer,  
 The beauty of inflections  
 Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
 The blackbird whistling  
 Or just after.   (*CPP* 75)

Elements of this stanza might be approved by Pound. Each line, for instance, is an obvious unit of sense. But Stevens’ focus has shifted from imagery, what is seen, to a consideration of sound (“inflections”) and sense (“innuendoes”). The question is whether poetry should aspire, as Pound believed, to capture the immediacy of an experience, or whether, as in the

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<sup>49</sup> See my discussion of “The Snow Man” in Chapter 2.

case of the blackbird's whistling, the sense unfolds in the lingering silence that follows the sound, just as the sense of these deceptively simple lines emerges from an understated close: "Or just after". In any case, the twin modes of experience described in the stanza cannot be reconciled by the "I" of the poem, who searches in vain for a mechanism of perception adequate to a multiplicity of experience. There is, finally, an intractable and threatening quality in the blackbird, which supplies the covert menace of the final stanza:

It was evening all afternoon,  
 It was snowing  
 And it was going to snow.  
 The blackbird sat  
 In the cedar-limbs – (CPP 76)

"Thirteen Ways" anticipates the techniques and themes of Stevens' late poetry. It raises a host of ontological and metaphysical questions – what is it to feel, to perceive, to be – from which the poet himself seems strangely aloof; an impersonal effect for which Stevens is often criticised. Even fellow poets are sometimes out of sympathy with Stevens' unworldliness. Charles Tomlinson, whose own work discloses a pronounced debt to Stevens, complains:

[W]as there ever a poetry which stood so explicitly by a physical universe and against transcendence, but which gives so little account of that universe, its spaces, patterns, textures, 'a world of canon and fugue', such as Hopkins spoke of seeing before him.<sup>50</sup>

The development of Stevens' verse in the 30s is in part a response to criticism of this kind. Tomlinson is quite right to say that Stevens is "against transcendence", for the vitality of the imagination depends upon a connection to the real: "The world is the only thing fit to think about" (CPP 906). But Stevens is also, increasingly and explicitly, for the aesthetic autonomy of the work of art. The poet may make of reality what he will:

Poet, be seated at the piano.

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Tomlinson, "Preface" to *The Necklace* (Swinford, Leicestershire: Fantasy P, 1955) 5. For a detailed account of Stevens' influence on Tomlinson, see Gareth Reeves, "A Ghost Never Exorcised: Stevens in the Poetry of Charles Tomlinson," in *Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic*, eds. Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg (London: Palgrave, 2008) 186-203.



Play the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo,  
 Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic,  
 Its envious cachinnation. (CPP 107)

These lines, from “Mozart, 1935”, are difficult to scan. “Rhythm”, Pound asserts, in *The Spirit of Romance*, “is the hardest quality of a man’s style to counterfeit”, but here Stevens apes the fractured cadences and nonsensical hubbub of contemporary speech (SR 103). The “hoo-hoo-hoo” and “shoo-shoo-shoo” compose an “envious cachinnation”, bawdy and unstructured, which is wholly at odds with Mozart’s subtle music, and, implicitly, with the poet’s own ambitions. Contrasts of this kind, between high art and low culture, invite charges of elitism, which Stevens dispatched as follows:

The ivory tower was offensive if the man who lived in it wrote, there, of himself for himself. It was not offensive if he used it because he could do nothing without concentration, as no one can, and because, there, he could most effectively struggle to get at his subject, even if his subject happened to be the community and other people, and nothing else (NA 123).

It is a paradox of Stevens’ mature voice – which courts general rather than personal import – that he achieves it by at first turning inward and away from public expectations. In “Mozart, 1935”, the rejection of society seems almost callous. Of the crowd that “throw stones upon the roof / While you practice arpeggios”, the speaker observes, cryptically, “It is because they carry down the stairs / A body in rags”. The identity of this body intrigues. Is it the pianist’s corporeal self, an image suggesting a Cartesian split between the physical and intellectual realms? Or is it merely a member of the resentful populace, some wretch to whom the musicians and poets are, or must be, wilfully indifferent (“Be seated at the piano”)? In any case, the life of the mind goes on:

That lucid souvenir of the past,  
 The divertimento;  
 That airy dream of the future,  
 The unclouded concerto . . . (CPP 107)

These descriptions compose a knowingly affected reverie, but their indulgence is swiftly curtailed by a fear of oblivion that concentrates the mind: “The snow is falling. / Strike the piercing chord.” Snow is almost always associated, in Stevens, with truths too terrifying to be confronted. The poet, struggling against twin enemies in the shape of a philistine society and an indifferent cosmos, must reach for a voice beyond himself, which outstrips the limitations of language, and aspires to the conditions of music:

Be thou the voice,  
 Not you. Be thou, be thou  
 The voice of angry fear,  
 The voice of this besieging pain.                    (*CPP* 107)

In dismissing the familiar “you” for the ancient, mysterious “thou”, Stevens follows Pound’s example of allowing archaisms to function as a shorthand for enduring wisdom as against ephemeral, contemporary concerns. The settled iambic patterns of these lines provide a musical sheen at odds with the stilted diction of the opening stanza, which suggests the poet/pianist growing in confidence, and finding an idiom adequate to his creative task. Accordingly, the final stanza observes a contrast between the eternal freshness of great art and the sullen desiccation of the modern world.

We may return to Mozart.  
 He was young, and we, we are old.  
 The snow is falling  
 And the streets are full of cries.  
 Be seated, thou.    (*CPP* 108)

Though this final stanza comes close to registering a defeat, particularly in the weary and deliberate pause of “we, we are old”, “Mozart, 1935” ends on a note of resilience and resolution: “Be seated, thou”. In a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, Stevens describes this poem, along with “A Fading of the Sun”, as being about “the status of a poet in a disturbed society, or, for that matter in any society” (*L* 292). The aesthetic and autonomous resolutions for the embattled status of the poet that Stevens evokes in the poem recall his gentle admonishment of a Yale undergraduate, who had sent him a thematic exegesis of “Sea Surface Full of Clouds”:

You appear to regard this, or some substitute for it, as giving the poem a validity that it would not possess as pure poetry. As a matter of fact, from my point of view, the quality called poetry is quite as precious as meaning. (*L* 389)

Stevens' willingness to separate "meaning" from "the quality called poetry" is at odds with the New Critical position that meaning and form are inseparable, and it helps to clarify the poetics of his later verse. Like Pound, Stevens is often at his most revealing about matters of technique when discussing other poets. In "Effects of Analogy" (1948), Stevens quotes a passage from Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (l.56-68), and offers the following:

It is like the voice of an actor reciting or declaiming or of some other figure concealed, so that we cannot identify him, who speaks with a measured voice which is often disturbed by the feeling for what he says . . . Instead of a musician we have an orator whose speech sometimes resembles music. We have an eloquence and it is that we call music every day, without having much cause to think about it. (*CPP* 720)

So much of this, the "figure concealed", the "measured voice", is equally appropriate to *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*. And Stevens' own speech increasingly resembles music in its drive toward abstraction, structural symmetries and pursuit of aesthetic effects over propositional coherence. Nietzsche famously remarked that philosophy is a form of autobiography, and Stevens' conscious avoidance of the autobiographical accords with his sense of poetry as a kind of anti-philosophy.<sup>51</sup> The impersonal mode, with its feints, its disguises and its discontinuous intuitions, makes possible Stevens' approach to subjective insights that are at odds with philosophical rationalism. As I shall argue in Chapters 5 and 6, Stevens' late, great poems, in exchanging the autobiographical for the impersonal, also exchange certainty for suggestion, and reason for the imagination.

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<sup>51</sup> In Nietzsche's terms: "Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage P, 1966) §6.

The “impersonal” in Pound and Stevens might be defined most simply as “that which transcends the self.” This definition provokes further questions. “Transcend” is not a fashionable critical term. It has a whiff of the censor, and it appears to cede too much to the creative agency of the poet, placing him beyond reproach. Indeed, a number of influential critics have found the quest for literary impersonality morally dubious. Daniel Albright associates impersonality with the erosion of humanistic values. Maud Ellmann connects Eliot’s and Pound’s pursuit of an elevated, vatic idiom with their authoritarian politics. And Michael Levenson stresses the emotional detachment of impersonal poetry, reflecting the major modernists’ desire to suppress individual subjectivity.<sup>52</sup> These broad criticisms have a good deal to support them: both Pound and Stevens produce work marred by its excessively detached or authoritarian voice, as my analyses of individual poems will show. But the tendency of successive critics to read literary impersonality as embodying, almost by definition, a form of moral or intellectual evasion has diverted attention from the remarkable aesthetic consequences of these poets’ pursuit, however paradoxical, of an impersonal voice.

As I have already argued, the impersonality of Pound’s and Stevens’ verse should not simply be characterised as an inversion of the personal. Neither poet pursues an “escape from personality” with the stringency advocated by T.S. Eliot. Indeed, it would be misleading to yoke Pound and Stevens to Eliot’s impersonal theories, which have been criticised for so underrating individual creativity that they seem to make the poet merely “an amanuensis of the dead”.<sup>53</sup> Of course, the latter, contentious judgement is confounded by Eliot’s verse. When, in “East Coker”, the speaker divines “a lifetime burning in every moment / And not the one lifetime only”, he assimilates the urgencies of personal experience to a universal register, just as Pound and Stevens do. But the potential variations between Eliot’s impersonal theories and his own poetry, let alone the work of other poets, should be a warning against any simple reading of Pound and Stevens under the sign of Eliot. For Eliot’s doctrinaire account of impersonality continues to influence the terminology even of those seeking to interrogate his theories. Sharon Cameron, for instance, who places great emphasis on the fact that a truly impersonal perspective is, *sensu stricto*, an impossibility, risks following Eliot in representing the personal and the impersonal in poetry, along with related categories such as the subjective and the objective,

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<sup>52</sup> See, for instance, Levenson’s discussion of Eliot’s impersonal theories, which amount to a denial of “self-expression as the criterion of success”. Levenson, *Genealogy of Modernism*, 159.

<sup>53</sup> Maud Ellmann’s term, from her essay “Eliot’s Abjection,” in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, eds. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1990) 185.

as if they observed a fixed, binary relationship.<sup>54</sup> Neither Pound nor Stevens ever formalised an impersonal theory of poetry in strictly oppositional terms, in which an appeal to the impersonal agencies of myth and history would necessarily come at the expense of the poet's subjective experience. Eliot's impersonal theories are paradoxical: "not only the best, but the most individual parts of [a poet's] work may be those in which dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously".<sup>55</sup> But Pound and Stevens embody in their work a more fluid conception of the relationship between the poet's immediate, sensate experience and the tradition upon which he draws.

It is difficult to situate Pound and Stevens within the current literary critical discussions of impersonality, when those discussions tend to characterise the impersonal voice as merely a nexus of affectations, through which the major modernists sought to ennoble reactionary principles. But some of the most prominent approaches to the impersonal in philosophy of mind are congenial to Pound's and Stevens' subtle conceptions of selfhood and transcendence, and help to clarify the impersonal character of their verse. In Thomas Nagel's influential study, *The View from Nowhere*, the personal and the impersonal are not opposable absolutes. For Nagel, an impersonal perspective does not represent some unattainable extreme of self-abnegation – matching Eliot's call for a "continual extinction of personality" – rather, it reflects the subjective individual's appeal to more widely intelligible modes of understanding: "the distinction between more subjective and more objective views is really a matter of degree, and it covers a wide spectrum. A view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of an individual's makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is".<sup>56</sup> Nagel reads the allure of the impersonal as a symptom of the universal human thirst for truth: we improve our understanding of the world by broadening the categories of knowledge upon which we draw. This very ambition is central to the concept of impersonality embodied in Pound's and Stevens' verse. The impersonal modes that each refine are not calculated to suppress vivid particularities – the sensations and intuitions of personal experience – but to transcend what Nagel calls the "individual's makeup and position in the world". Both poets seek to transcend their bounded, incomplete, socially contingent selves, in order to attain the incisive and unclouded

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<sup>54</sup> See Cameron's discussion of impersonality in Eliot's *Four Quartets*, in Cameron, *Impersonality*, 144-79.

<sup>55</sup> Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 38.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 5.

perspective that Stevens attributes to his “major man”: “Who in a million diamonds sums us up”.

The term “impersonal mode” encompasses the variety of means through which Pound’s and Stevens’ impersonal sensibilities are manifested in their verse. The OED defines the philosophical meaning of “mode” as “a manner or state of being of a thing; a thing considered as possessing certain non-essential attributes which may be changed without destroying its identity”. I use the word in this sense, to refer to the general characteristics of the impersonal idioms that Pound and Stevens refined, the precise qualities of which may vary from poem to poem. When, at various stages in the thesis, I wish to differentiate between the local, linguistic properties of a particular poem and the impersonal effect that they compose, I substitute for “mode” a terminology appropriate to the dynamics of the poem in question.

## Chapter 2: Beginnings

### Imitate, Translate: Pound's Early Verse

*Great poets seldom make bricks without straw; they pile up all the excellences they can beg, borrow, or steal from their predecessors and contemporaries, and then set their own inimitable light atop of the mountain.*

Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, 1910

Pound's early poetry is shaped by obsessive and eclectic enthusiasms: all that he could "beg, borrow or steal". His first sustained efforts in verse produced *Hilda's Book*, a collection of love poems for Hilda Doolittle.<sup>1</sup> The stylised diction and nostalgic themes of this volume reflect Pound's early poetic and academic interests. Later, in his essay on Lionel Johnson, Pound describes the literary environment of his adolescence:

In America ten or twelve years ago one read Fiona MacLeod, and Dowson, and Symons. One was guided by Mr Mosher of Bangor. I think I first heard of [Lionel] Johnson in an odd sort of post-graduate course conducted by Dr Weygandt. One was drunk with 'Celtism', and with Dowson's 'Cynara', and with one or two poems of Symons' 'Wanderers' (*LE* 367).<sup>2</sup>

Pound outgrew these early interests, but he never entirely disowned them: traces of Dowson's classicism, Symons' symbolism, and Johnson's austerity endure in *The Cantos*. Though *Hilda's Book* is not merely indebted to but derivative of these early influences, its verses amount to more than juvenilia. Pound's exploitation of sonnet forms in particular, in "L'Envoi" and "Rendez-vous", is precociously assured. But A.D. Moody is right to observe that "the dominant language and sentiments [of the volume] are the clichés of romanticized Christianity".<sup>3</sup> Technical competence is offset by emotional conventionality, and it is remarkable that a poet later famed for obscurity should produce, even in apprentice work, verses so replete with unguarded and effusive personal sentiments. Indeed, the discrepancy between these orthodox passions and the metaphysical senses of

<sup>1</sup> For accounts of their early relationship, see Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1988) 59-63, and Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet*, 35-6.

<sup>2</sup> This essay first appeared as the "Preface" to the 1915 *Poetical Works of Lionel Johnson*, published by Elkin Mathews.

<sup>3</sup> Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet*, 34.

“love” explored in *The Cantos* is significant. Pound’s epic encompasses all manner of conventional desires, from pagan and explicitly sexual love, to the more temperate, platonic Eros of classical myth. But, crucially, these themes are not explored as extensions of the poet’s own emotional life, but as necessary elements of the integrated cycles of nature, history and art. Canto XXXIX in particular, which refashions the Circe episode of the *Odyssey* into a mystic fertility rite, demonstrates Pound’s capacity to derive elevated and impersonal symbolism from intimate descriptions: “Thus made the spring, / can see but their eyes in the dark / not the bough that he walked on” (XXXIX/195). But Pound’s own loves are almost always mentioned obliquely in his mature work, and often with scant regard for conventional tropes: “Some cook, some do not cook, / some things can not be changed” (LIV/275). Only in the final fragments of *The Cantos* is personal romance again openly acknowledged, bringing the focus of Pound’s poetry full circle:

That her acts  
                   Olga’s acts  
                           of beauty  
                                   be remembered  
(Fragment (1966)/824)

There are few proto-impersonal elements in *Hilda’s Book*, but some intimations of Pound’s mature style present themselves in perhaps the finest poem in the volume, “The Tree”.<sup>4</sup>

Naethless I have been a tree amid the wood  
 And many new things understood  
 That were rank folly to my head before. (PT 14)

These lines position the poet *within* the tradition he seeks to apprehend, while the arboreal metaphor associates artistic endeavour with the timeless order of nature. There is, perhaps, danger of exaggerating the significance of these details in hindsight, but it is inarguable that *Hilda’s Book* presaged certain of Pound’s later preoccupations, as did his next volume, *A Lume Spento*. A majority of the poems in *A Lume Spento* were composed in Venice, and the sterile grandeur of those surroundings is reflected in several of the volume’s less appealing offerings, involving dull pastiches and a weakness for stilted archaisms. In some

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<sup>4</sup> “The Tree” is the only poem from *Hilda’s Book* that Pound included in his selected poems, *Personae* (1926).



poems, however, there are indications of significant progress and improvement, particularly in “Cino” and “Na Audiart”, poems inspired by the Provençal tradition.

“Cino” explores a self-condemning voice, through which the realities of courtly love – which pit the troubadour’s pure artistry against the tarnished pleasures it secures – are exposed in the protagonist’s jaded indiscriminacy: “Bah! I have sung women in three cities, / But it is all the same” (*PT* 24). His various conquests achieve vitality and consequence only when retrospectively memorialised in verse, “having become the souls of song”, and Pound elides two voices and perspectives when Cino parodies his lovers’ fickle speech – the persona adopts a further persona: ““(Oh they are all one these vagabonds) . . . But *you*, My Lord, how with your city?””. Evidently, despite their protestations of enduring desire for Cino, his lovers are less than steadfast in their affections. Touchingly, these competing cynicisms are momentarily interrupted, when Cino’s derisive tone cedes to a gentle aside: “they mostly had grey eyes”. However, even this fleeting admission is soon lost in the leaden archaisms of Cino’s homage to “Pollo Phoibee”: “Bid thy ‘fulgence bear away care. / Cloud and rain-tears pass they fleet” (*PT* 25). These lines, less focused and assured than the rest of the poem, are either a failure by Pound to replicate the style of a troubadour lyric, or a deliberate, and more successful, attempt to demonstrate the limitations of Cino’s hackneyed appeals. In any case, the speaker’s desired end to torment strikes an indulgent note, embodying his refusal to seek a more enduring vision of love. But, at the close of the poem, Pound’s own voice emerges from behind the mask:

I will sing of the white birds  
 In the blue waters of heaven,  
 The clouds that are spray to its sea.                    (*PT* 25)

Here the diction stands in stark contrast to the preceding lines, achieving an uncomplicated purity through the monosyllables and limpid images. The first two lines each advance a single image, the blemishless “white birds” and “blue waters”, whilst in the final line three distinct images are conjoined: the clouds, the spray and the sea. The balanced dactyls and sibilance of this concluding phrase achieve a subtle resonance that belies Cino’s cynical bombast, whilst the projection of the qualities of the sea, experienced in this life, onto the heavens, encountered in the next, embody a fitting ambition for a poet: to seek an elevated and lasting lyrical form. The sea later becomes an important imaginative resource for

Pound, who seems naturally drawn both to its Old English associations with danger and the romantic wanderer and to its classical associations with gods and legends, particularly with the Odysseus who so spectacularly haunts *The Cantos*.

“Cino” reveals both the comparative limitations of Pound’s early monologue forms, and, fleetingly, a sense of the achieved style towards which he was working. “Na Audiart” offers intriguing comparisons with “Cino”, as well as with later Provençal poems such as “Near Périgord”, which, like “Na Audiart”, draws heavily on Bertrams de Born’s “Dompna, puis de mi no·us cal”. “Na Audiart” presents a more reserved speaking voice than that encountered in “Cino”. Instead of a cynical and promiscuous speaker we hear a devoted yet disappointed one. Admittedly, this speaker is ultimately as damned as Cino according to the ethical framework that Dante applies to de Born in the *Inferno*. But Pound’s treatment of frustrated love transcends both Christian morality and Renaissance convention, through the exploration of a theme alien to de Born’s original poem:

Oh, till thou come again.  
 And being bent and wrinkled, in a form  
 That hath no perfect limning, when the warm  
 Youth dew is cold  
 Upon thy hands, and thy old soul  
 Scorning a new, wry’d casement, (PT 27)

At the end of the first line, Pound supplies the footnote “reincarnate”, invoking the Pythagorean doctrine of the transmigration of souls.<sup>5</sup> This belies the “carpe diem” message found elsewhere in the poem, and places the consequences of its action within a moral paradigm that seems antithetical to the troubadours’ predilection for unfettered trysts. So the illicit love described in “Na Audiart” is compromised by classical ethical scruples, which divorce the poem from the promiscuous ethos of “Cino”. In one sense, Pound’s modifications, reflecting an unexpected prudishness, betray the original ethos of de Born’s poem. As Peter Makin comments: “Pound’s product is as sexual as may be, but it is an early Yeatsian sex-in-the-head, or permanent state of unconsummated excitement.”<sup>6</sup> But

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<sup>5</sup> This connection is discussed in Peter Makin, *Provence and Pound* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978) 17-18. Briefly, Pythagoras’ doctrine encompasses the notion that the form in which one will be reincarnated is conditioned by one’s behaviour in the present incarnation, reflected in “Na Audiart” by the assertion that the lady will be “broken of ancient pride”.

<sup>6</sup> Makin, *Provence and Pound*, 18.

Pound's willingness to adulterate and extend the intellectual ambit of his speaker's concerns is highly significant. He is no longer pursuing a mere act of mimicry, or the swapping of one mask for another. "Na Audiart" demonstrates Pound's burgeoning ability to explore manifold perspectives from a single narrative standpoint, and to bring the full wealth of his own poetic enterprise to bear upon a given subject, even while operating through the impersonal remove of a poetic persona.

There are limitations in "Cino" and "Na Audiart", but these are qualified by indications, in the stylistic grace at the close of the former and the thematic complexity of the latter, of the qualities which, in a more sustained form, would later underpin Pound's impersonal mode. Even so, when reading these early poems, one has some sympathy for the view of Edward Thomas that "the thought dominates the words and is greater than they are".<sup>7</sup> To some extent, this is a consequence of the Browningsque monologue form, which is a prominent feature of *A Lume Spento*, and of Pound's next major volume, *Personae*.<sup>8</sup> Poems such as "Villonaud for This Yule", "Mesmerism" and "Marvoil", clearly attest to Browning's influence on Pound. In "Marvoil", as Hugh Witemeyer notes, the speaker is "an authentic historical figure", whose monologue, like Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto", "attempts to recreate the particular historical and psychological realities in which his art originated".<sup>9</sup> The impression of an authentic speaking voice is more successful and sustained than in "Cino" and "Na Audiart", but at the cost of the varieties of perspective and mood that both earlier poems had managed to explore:

Sing thou the grace of the Lady of Beziars,  
 For even as thou art hollow before I fill thee with this parchment,  
 So is my heart hollow when she filleth not mine eyes,  
 And so were my mind hollow, did she not fill utterly my thought.      (PT 99)

The archaisms might strike the modern ear more strangely than they struck readers in 1910, but the style of the poem is uniform, and it dutifully delineates the preoccupations

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Thomas, "'Two Poets': A Review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*," *English Review*, Vol. 3 (1909) 629: Reprinted in J.P. Sullivan, ed, *Ezra Pound, A Critical Anthology* (London: Penguin, 1970) 37.

<sup>8</sup> References to *Personae* can be chronologically misleading, as this 1909 volume included a number of poems from *A Lume Spento*, including "Cino" and "Na Audiart". So contemporary reviews of *Personae*, such as Edward Thomas's above, are in part a response to poems reprinted from the earlier volume.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Witemeyer, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound: Forms and Renewal, 1908-1920* (London: U of California P, 1981) 64.

faced by the real Marvoil in his surviving lyrics.<sup>10</sup> But here Pound's scholarly desire to replicate Marvoil's interests and idioms exactly contributes to a style that is ponderous and inert, as he borrows clichéd tropes and does nothing to revivify them. "Marvoil" anticipates a recurring weakness of Pound's *Cantos*, which, in their obsession with biographical minutiae, sometimes trade lyricism for didacticism. Conversely, one of the greatest achievements of Pound's mature style is his ability to capture personalities in the timbre of a single phrase, licensing quicksilver shifts in perspective and mood. As he developed his Imagist and Vorticist innovations, Pound steadily recalibrated his approach to Browningsque forms. This was not an outgrowing of Browning, whose influence is honoured in the early *Cantos*, but, Pound would become increasingly willing to step outside the unitary perspective of a given persona, allowing him to hold different voices and attitudes in simultaneous consideration.

As T.S. Eliot comments in his introduction to Pound's *Selected Poems, Ripostes* represents "a definite advance" over *Personae*.<sup>11</sup> The very title of the 1912 volume promises to oppose literary conventions. Accordingly, Pound's sometimes lukewarm attitude to Shakespeare is reflected in the volume's playful opening poem.<sup>12</sup> "Silet" covers the principal themes of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence – age, and the immortality of verse. The opening lines are particularly reminiscent of Sonnet 12:

When I do count the clock that tells the time,  
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night...

This draws Pound's impudent:

When I behold how black, immortal ink  
Drips from my deathless pen – ah, well-away!  
Why should we stop at all for what I think?  
There is enough in what I chance to say. (PT 231)

The latter sentiment, "there is enough in what I chance to say", is perhaps at odds with Pound's famous dictum that "literature is language charged with meaning" (*ABC* 28). As

<sup>10</sup> Though some, such as Rupert Brooke, were quick to condemn Pound's "foolish archaisms". See below.

<sup>11</sup> Eliot, "Introduction" to *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare is, with limited justification, omitted from the "VACCINE" reading list advocated in "How to Read", *Literary Essays*, 38.

an implied criticism of staid and conventional poetic forms the line is knowingly presumptuous, while appearing, paradoxically, in a poem that perfectly observes the conventions of the English sonnet. This irreverent tone persists in the following poem, “In Exitum Cuiusdam”, in which “‘Time’s bitter flood’! Oh, that’s all very well”, dismisses the solemn caveat in Yeats’s “But think about old friends the most: / Time’s bitter flood will rise”, Pound’s speaker concluding: “I know my circle and know very well / How many faces I’d have out of mind” (*PT* 231).<sup>13</sup> Such cavalier irreverence irritated certain contemporary reviewers. An unsigned review of *Personae* in *Nation* was censoriously entitled “Heresy, and some poetry”, while Rupert Brooke, in the *Cambridge Review*, was unafraid to list Pound’s failings: “He is blatant, full of foolish archaisms, obscure through awkward language not subtle thought, and formless”.<sup>14</sup> However, there is a noticeable division in *Ripostes* between its more combative offerings and lyrics such as “Δώρα”, which do not merely reject old conventions, but embody Pound’s desire to fashion a new poetic mode:

Have me in the strong loneliness  
Of sunless cliffs  
And of grey waters.                   (*PT* 241)

These direct and simple images, combining visual contrasts with syncretic consonance, are a more eloquent refutation of post-Romantic decadence than the derisive asides broached elsewhere in the volume. In this and similar poems in *Ripostes*, Pound begins for the first time to approach the economy and symbolic richness of Stevens in *Harmonium* (though any comparison carries a caveat: what we think of as Stevens’ “early poetry” was the work of a man well into middle age). As yet Pound’s bold imbalances of metre and line length are not wholly successful, but “Δώρα” undoubtedly signals the beginnings of a new poetic, as does “The Return”:

See, they return, one, and by one,  
With fear, as half awakened;  
As if the snow should hesitate

<sup>13</sup> Lines from Yeats’s “The Lover Pleads with His Friends for Old Friends”, *Yeats’s Poems*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1989) 106.

<sup>14</sup> Rupert Brooke, review, *Cambridge Review* (December 1909), reprinted in *Ezra Pound: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Eric Homberger (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) 58-9.

And murmur in the wind, (PT 244)

The actors and setting of this drama are uncertain, but the poem seems infused with Ovidian imagery, recalling the death of Actaeon in Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses*, which Pound famously dubbed "the most beautiful book in the language": "With them the silver hounds, / sniffing the trace of air!" (ABC 127; PT 244). In the delicate placement of pauses and stresses, Pound moves beyond the iambic rhythms that still dominate most poems in *Ripostes*. "See, they return, one, and by one", subtly enacts the hesitancy of the nebulous figures, yet the literal expression of that reticence, the word "hesitate" itself, paradoxically rests on the cusp of an enjambment, so that the reader is led swiftly onto the 'murmur in the wind'. Hugh Kenner notes the emergence of a single rhythmic figure - / ' oo / ' o / o/ - in the third stanza, contributing a sense of urgency appropriate to 'Gods of the wingèd shoe'.<sup>15</sup> But this pattern is fleeting, as the closing lines witness a return to a reliance on parataxis and typography to augment meaning:

Slow on the leash,  
pallid the leash-men! (PT 245)

This split line, with four syllables in the first clause and five in the second, balanced by the repetition of "leash", is an early token of Pound's intention to "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome" (LE 3). Yet despite the technical success of "The Return", it has, along with the rest of *Ripostes*, been left open to the charge, often levelled at Pound, that his technical innovations mask a paucity of meaning.<sup>16</sup> This may be a just criticism of Pound's early volumes, although a preoccupation with form is surely understandable in the apprenticeship of any poet. One of the readiest rebuttals of these criticisms presents itself not in an original poem, but in Pound's translation of "The Seafarer", in which several weighty preoccupations emerge. As R.P. Blackmur has pointed out, Pound's translations were important in developing his technique, and "The Seafarer" is characteristic of Pound's ability to extend the themes and stylistic achievements of his sources.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 190.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Sister Bernetta Quinn's comments on "The Return" in *Ezra Pound: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972) 62.

<sup>17</sup> R.P. Blackmur, "An Adjunct to the Muses' Diadem: A Note on E.P.", in *American Critical Essays: Twentieth Century*, ed. Harold Beaver (London: Oxford UP, 1959) 209-10.

Sea-fowls' loudness was for me laughter,  
 The mews' singing all my mead-drink.  
 Storms, on the stone-cliffs beaten, fell on the stern  
 In icy feathers; full oft the eagle screamed  
 With spray on his pinion. (PT 236-7)

Here the diction is wholly commensurate with the part-translated, part-imagined speaking voice of the Anglo-Saxon voyager. Pound's transposition of Old English alliteration into his "modern" translation is particularly impressive: "In icy feathers; full oft the eagle screamed". There are still deliberate archaisms, reflected in the stilted word-order of "was for me laughter", but these are hardly out of step with the subject and setting, whilst Pound's studied replication of the Anglo-Saxon half-line presages his later preoccupation with the modern verse line as an individual unit of sense, a notable feature of *Cathay*. Fred C. Robinson has defended idiosyncrasies in Pound's translation that Hugh Witemeyer and Donald Davie, to name only two, censure as "mistakes" and "howlers" respectively.<sup>18</sup> For example, Pound translates *byrig*, most commonly "towns" in Anglo-Saxon, as "berries". But Robinson shows that nineteenth century Anglo-Saxon dictionaries also offer "mulberry tree(s)" as a translation, allowing for Pound's eventual phrase "Cometh beauty of berries", which preserves the alliterative flavour of the original.<sup>19</sup> Many of Pound's decisions as a translator, both here and in his later approach to Propertius, are linguistically defensible, and are the consequences of literary judgements rather than the blunderings of an ingénue.

Not only does "The Seafarer" demonstrate greater stylistic complexity than most of the work in *Personae*, but it also demonstrates a greater preoccupation with meaning. The original poem is characterised by an overt Christian morality, which Pound, in his translation, systematically eliminates. A.D. Moody advances the theory that "The Seafarer" was originally a purely pagan poem, and that the religious overtones were added at a later date. But Pound could not have been certain of this, and his decision to focus exclusively on the pagan elements of the poem surely constitutes more than an attempt to "isolate the

<sup>18</sup> Witemeyer, *Poetry of Ezra Pound*, 120; Donald Davie, *Studies in Ezra Pound*, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Fred C. Robinson defends Pound's "serious engagement with "The Seafarer" in *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1993) 239-58. (253).

specifically ‘English’ quality” of “The Seafarer”.<sup>20</sup> The rejection of religious consolation permits a moving focus on the ineluctable transience of being:

And though he strew the grave with gold,  
His born brothers, their buried bodies  
Be an unlikely treasure hoard. (PT 238)

Looking back on “The Seafarer” in his *ABC of Reading*, Pound comments that the original poem resembles the ideogrammic qualities of Chinese poetry of roughly the same period: “I once got a man to start translating the **Seafarer** into Chinese. It came out almost directly into Chinese verse, with two solid ideograms in each half-line” (*ABC* 51, Pound’s typography).

From his first serious *vers libre* efforts in *Ripostes*, Pound’s practice and theories of poetry developed rapidly. In late 1912 and early 1913, *Poetry* and the *Egoist* carried *Imagiste* compositions by Pound, H.D. and Richard Aldington. Pound’s *Imagiste* manifesto appeared in *Poetry* in March 1913, including the famous assertion that “An “Image” is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”. A number of poems by Pound, Aldington, H.D. and F.S. Flint appeared shortly afterwards in *The New Freewoman*, followed by a rather haphazard anthology of allegedly *Imagiste* writings which appeared as *Des Imagistes*. In truth, as Pound later admitted, few of his collaborators in the movement truly shared his own poetic vision. Aldington, H.D., and Amy Lowell in particular, bridled at Pound’s unwavering devotion to *Imagiste* strictures. Concerned that his verse principles were becoming diluted, Pound walked away from the movement, which, still financed by Amy Lowell, and anglicised as “Imagism”, continued without him. With some bitterness, Pound dubbed this “new” school “Amygisme”, and switched his allegiance to Vorticism, the cross-disciplinary movement led by Wyndham Lewis. Though his own *Imagiste* phase was fleeting, the radical principles upon which Pound had instituted the movement, indelibly typified by “In a Station of the Metro”, had a lasting effect on his style. In *Lustra* (1916), Pound conflates the stylistic legacies of *Imagisme* with the Provençal themes that informed *Personae*. This synthesis is most

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<sup>20</sup> Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet*, 170-171.



effective in “Near Périgord”, a poem remarkable not just for its prosody, but for its narrative sophistication and for the variety of attitudes and voices it explores:<sup>21</sup>

All of his flank – how could he do without her?  
 And all the road to Cahors, to Toulouse?  
 What would he do without her? (PT 304)

These lines, and the first of the poem’s three sections, are filled with historical speculation. Is de Born’s love for the Lady Maent genuine? Or are his advances motivated by political expediency? Her castle, as Pound deduced, was in a position of great strategic importance, protecting de Born’s flank, and controlling the road to the castle of his great enemy, the Count of Périgord. No explicit judgement is offered on the sincerity of de Born’s emotion, but reiterated questions are themselves a wry indictment of his intentions: “Is it a love poem? Did he sing of war?” The interrogatives invite the reader to ape Pound’s own historical materialism, as if the responsibility to discern de Born’s true feelings lies with us as much as with the poet. Yet in the second section of “Near Périgord” the focus shifts away from historical preoccupations, and the poem’s action is reframed in an explicitly imagined context:

End fact. Try fiction. Let us say we see  
 En Bertrans, a tower room at Hautefort,  
 Sunset, the ribbon-like road lies, in red cross-light,  
 South toward Montaignac. (PT 305)

Despite the Provençal origins of the poem, these picturesque descriptions present a typically idealised, Victorian image of the mediaeval world. This impression is reinforced by an ornate diction, reflected in the balanced pauses and heavy alliteration of the third line. An image of Bertrans “testing his list of rhymes” in a tower-room seems itself to be a concession to cliché. But, by the end of the stanza, a new and menacing potency is revealed: “And the green cat’s-eye lifts toward Montaignac”. The physical description of Bertrans, “with a red straggling beard”, recalls Pound himself, so that the three stages of the poem, progressing from the historical, through the imaginative, to the self-consciously

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<sup>21</sup> *Pace* Humphrey Carpenter, who suggests that Pound’s return to Provençal sources indicates a creative drought: Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 206-7.

lyrical, may well enact Pound's own search for an authentic poetic voice (*PT* 305).<sup>22</sup> This search is further informed by the appearance in the poem of Arnaut Daniel and Dante. The former's conversation with Richard Cour-de-Lion demonstrates that the conventions of chivalry provide no clear insight into de Born's motives: "Do we know our friends?' / 'Say that he saw the castles, say that he loved Maent!' / 'Say he loved her, does it solve the riddle?'" (*PT* 307). This ambiguity cedes to a more straightforwardly Christian moral judgement, which draws upon Dante's description of de Born:

*I severed men, my head and heart*

*Ye see here severed, my life's counterpart.*" (*PT* 307, Pound's italics)

Dante, the last and greatest authority invoked in "Near Périgord", provides, in Pound's reworking, the most convincing resolution of the riddle so far: the arresting image of de Born bearing his own head symbolises his ultimate moral complicity in his own demise. Yet the poem is thrown back into uncertainty by the bathetic close of the second section, "Or take En Bertrans?", which invites us to judge de Born on his own terms. The third section reintroduces his speaking voice in dialogue with the Lady Maent, and explores the possibility of genuine love, distinct from the implied political manoeuvrings of the earlier sections:

And great wings beat above us in the twilight,

And the great wheels in heaven

Bore us together...surging...and apart...

Believing we should meet with lips and hands. (*PT* 307)

The tidal metaphor, "surging...and apart", recalls "Cino", and evokes the tempestuous uncertainty of the lovers' relationship, whilst the "great wheels in heaven" imply that their destiny is beholden to some higher power. The benefits of Pound's association with *Imagisme* are reflected in the condensed phraseology: "Believing we should meet with lips and hands", the synecdochic imagery aptly conveying physical passion, and embodying the "elliptical perception of metaphorical expression" that Pound found in Dante, and sought

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<sup>22</sup> Donald Davie prefers to read the poem as dramatizing the process of historical research, ultimately suggesting that historical reality resists us: Davie, *Studies in Ezra Pound*, 59-60. That is certainly a facet of Pound's approach, but I believe the poem can also be read as enacting the search for an authentic diction.

to imitate (*SR* 158). However, the hieratic overtones become muted when the focus of the poem returns to an emphasis on the necessary physical dimension of a relationship to sustain love: “She who had nor ears nor tongue save in her hands”. This contact is lost, “untouched, unreachable”, leaving the relationship doomed, as the final lines bitterly acknowledge:

And all the rest of her a shifting change,  
A broken bundle of mirrors...!” (*PT* 308)

This concluding image evokes both Maent’s incomplete radiance and the intermittent brilliance of de Born’s verse. It recalls the attempt in “*Na Audiart*” to create an idealised lover, formed from the borrowed qualities of several women, but it also refers, reflexively, to the irresolution of the poem’s central question – what was the real motivation for de Born’s pursuit of Maent? Though this question goes unresolved, the poem achieves an aesthetic and technical resolution, in that it refines the subtle and elliptical expression that characterises the best of Pound’s mature work. Both the complex yet irreverent voice of *Sextus Propertius* and the lamentations of the socially deracinated Mauberley owe something to Pound’s achievement in “*Near Périgord*”, which combines a Browningsque persona with the compressed and limpid diction inherited from the Provençal. This diction, prefigured in the best moments in *Personae*, draws upon Pound’s association with *Imagisme*, and the control of tone he refined in the luminous translations of *Cathay*. In *Lustra* Pound was able to approach familiar Provençal themes without surrendering his own poetic preoccupations to the authenticity of a borrowed speaking voice, whilst the troubadour tradition gave him a setting in which these personal preoccupations could achieve a generalised and impersonal weight.

## **Cathay**

*All that poetic form requires is a regular and flexible sequence, as plastic  
as thought itself.*

Fenollosa, “The Chinese Written Character”

Ernest Fenollosa’s essay, “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry”, which Pound edited and revised, is not merely a bold excursion into a nascent field; it is almost a



obvious. Though the emotional directness of Li Po's poem is out of key with the impersonal sensibility that dominates in *The Cantos*, Pound's techniques for registering the speaker's emotion anticipate his later verse: private regrets are generalised through a combination of aphoristic statements ("There is no end of things in the heart"), and simple images whose arresting particularity renders the emotional subtext both piquant and accessible ("Have him sit on his knees here"). Perhaps the single most remarkable feature of *Cathay* is the freshness and immediacy of its imagery. However, just as Fenollosa's theories have been queried, Pound's own competence as a translator has been called into question.<sup>26</sup> He had no Chinese when first approached by Fenollosa's widow to take charge of her husband's sprawling notes and fragments, and so was reliant on the work of an American Orientalist who had in turn been assisted in his studies of Chinese by the Japanese scholars Mori and Ariga.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, Pound was working at considerable remove from the original Chinese poems, although Wai-lim Yip has praised Pound's ability to replicate "the central concerns of the original author by what we may perhaps call a kind of clairvoyance".<sup>28</sup> In any case, Eliot's description of Pound as "the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time" holds true simply by virtue of the fact that *Cathay* is so widely read.<sup>29</sup> The achievement of the volume as a sequence of poems in *English* is widely acknowledged, and *Cathay* marks a pivotal moment in Pound's development, as the first true realisation of his ambition to "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase" (*LE* 3). Pound adapts the qualities that Fenollosa finds in Chinese verse to foment, in English, a style free from otiose description or plodding grammatical conventions. Fenollosa does not dismiss grammar and syntax, but he strips them to their barest essentials:

The sentence form was forced upon primitive men by nature itself. It was not we who made it; it was a reflection of the temporal order of causation. All truth has to be expressed in sentences because all truth is the *transference of power*. The type of sentence in nature is a flash of lightning [Fenollosa's italics].<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This is beyond my abilities to judge. For a linguistically informed reading of *Cathay* that remains sensitive to Pound's ambitions, see Ming Xie, "Elegy and Personae in Ezra Pound's *Cathay*", *ELH*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Spring, 1993) 261-281.

<sup>27</sup> Pound did not try to disguise his second-hand engagement with the original Chinese. As Hugh Kenner points out, he even used the Japanese variant of Li Po, "Rihaku", when his poems went to press, making clear his debts to Fenollosa, Mori and Ariga: Kenner, *Pound Era*, 222.

<sup>28</sup> Wai-Lim Yip, *Ezra Pound's "Cathay"* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969) 88.

<sup>29</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Introduction" to *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. and introd. Ezra Pound (London: S. Nott, [1936]) 16.

Pound himself is unambiguous when urging poets towards “economy of words”, or arguing that certain English translations of Aeschylus would be improved by “more sense and less syntax” (*LE* 273). But his theoretical position, that meaning should be created by vivid juxtaposition rather than by linear accumulation, has tended to govern critical descriptions of his praxis. So Hugh Kenner’s analysis of diverse motifs in *The Cantos* “as parts, integral parts, of a larger rhythm of juxtaposition and recurrence” and Donald Davie’s contention that *The Cantos* “are articulated . . . by a syntax that is musical, not linguistic” still hold sway.<sup>31</sup> These accounts are not the whole truth. Insufficient attention has been trained on particular passages in Pound in which the “traditional” relations of syntax – to propositional and grammatical sense – are significant, governed by sense as much as by sound. Fenollosa himself emphasises the “truth . . . that acts are successive, even continuous; one causes or passes into another.” Though Pound does refine an increasingly paratactic mode, prizing the incisive phrase over the unbroken clause, this throws the residual grammatical congruities of his verse into sharper relief. Along with its focus on pure imagery, *Cathay* reveals how syntactical emphases remain a valuable resource for Pound, supplying local, linguistic energies that shape the broader contours of his poetry. In “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”, carefully modulated syntax is crucial to the poem’s semantic progress and aesthetic power. Initially, images are not juxtaposed, but conjoined:

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead  
 I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.  
 You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,  
 You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.  
 And we went on living in the village of Chokan:  
 Two small people, without dislike or suspicion. (*PT* 251)

Here parallel syntax enhances the affinities between “two small people”, as the participial phrases in the second, third and fourth lines – “pulling flowers”, “playing horse”, “playing with blue plums” – describe comparably innocent experiences, which are finally conjoined in a further participial phrase, “we went on living”. These lucid and reciprocal expressions

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<sup>31</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1951) 280; Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy: An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1976) 20.

reflect the lucid and reciprocal experiences they describe. But, in the following stanza, the disruption of childhood certitudes by the emotional complications of adolescence is conveyed in a disrupted word order:

At fourteen I married My Lord you.  
 I never laughed, being bashful.  
 Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.  
 Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back. (PT 251)

Whereas the first stanza strung three sentences across its six lines, here each line is end-stopped. The rigidity of the lineation suggests the unnatural constraints of an arranged marriage, as does the abrupt insertion of the new, submissive and honorific “My Lord” before the old, intimate “you”. And the final clause, “I never looked back”, is beautifully placed, as the subject of the sentence “looks back” grammatically, in search of a past participle crucial to the meaning. This deliberate and controlled syntax seems decidedly at odds with the predominant parataxis of Pound’s mature style. But the technical achievements of *Cathay* are of enduring significance for the lyric elements of *The Cantos*, particularly Pound’s uncanny ability to generate powerful emotion from an economy of means:

The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.  
 The paired butterflies are already yellow with August  
 Over the grass in the West garden;  
 They hurt me. I grow older. (PT 252)

Arresting prepositions in successive lines – “in wind”, “with August” – indicate the subjection of leaves, butterflies and, implicitly, people to remote and indifferent forces beyond their understanding. That the “butterflies” are “paired” marks a delicately understated contrast with the speaker’s isolation, and their yellowing wings are a poignant symbol of decaying beauty and escaping time. So the intensity of the girl’s emotion has already been laid bare, before, in two short, sharp phrases, it is finally admitted: “They hurt me. I grow older.” These are the piercing insights for which the hypotaxis of preceding lines has prepared us. Complex processes of thought, represented through elaborated syntactical structures, have at last been distilled into an elementary subject-verb-object

pattern, which corresponds precisely with Fenollosa's definition of the sentence as a "unit of natural process".<sup>32</sup> Like the finest passages in *The Cantos*, "The River Merchant's Wife" represents intensities of feeling in limpid natural settings, and refines the layered images, deliberate lineation and iterative verbal action of Pound's mature style. It must be admitted that Pound does not always write with such economy and poise. Consider the oft-praised Canto 45:

Usura rusteth the chisel  
 It rusteth the craft and the craftsman  
 It gnaweth the thread in the loom  
 None learneth to weave gold in her pattern  
 [ . . . ]  
 Usura slayeth the child in the womb  
 It stayeth the young man's courting  
 It hath brought palsey to bed, lyeth  
 between the young bride and her bridegroom

CONTRA NATURAM

(XLV/230)

A major strength of Pound's paratactic style is its implicit reliance on the reader's ingenuity to supply the propositional connections between untrammelled images. We are, in effect, enjoined to mimic, in our act of reading, the poet's original process of perception. But, in Canto XLV, the reader's agency is circumscribed by the poet's stridency. Pound's distinctive archaisms – "slayeth", "stayeth", "lyeth" – are structurally effective, serving to unite, sonically, strands of verbal action. But their intended semantic function, which is to invest a contemporary, economic attitude with the aura of age-old, unquestionable wisdom, is less convincing. Ethan Lewis has observed how the syntax of Canto XLV relentlessly compounds the predations of Usura, especially through "still-birth syntax": in Lewis's words, "the verb, invariably harsh, precedes a healthy combination, rendering it nugatory".<sup>33</sup> But, over the length of the canto, the cumulative effect of this condemnatory insistence begins to pall. Rhetorical coercion can only temporarily subdue the nagging sense that usury and the "young man's courting", to take one example, may not enjoy a logical connection, even though Pound has supplied an emotional and rhythmical one.

<sup>32</sup> Fenollosa, *Chinese Written Character*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Ethan Lewis, "Grammaria Usurae: Representational Strategies in Canto XLV". *Paiduema* 28. 2-3: 225.



Acuity of insight has been replaced by force of insistence. Many of the politically charged passages of *The Cantos* offend not just through the underlying, or overt, prejudices they disclose, but because the didacticism of these passages corrupts Pound's own, oft-stated principle that images should be left to speak for themselves. By contrast, the closing lines of "The River Merchant's Wife" bear witness to the understated poignancy that Pound is capable of evoking:

If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,  
Please let me know beforehand,  
And I will come out to meet you,  
As far as Chō-fū-Sa. (PT 252)

The simplicity of this diction is aeons away from the pastiches and affectations of *Personae*: sound and sense are intertwined by subtle alliteration – "through" . . . "narrows" . . . "river" – while the assonant monosyllables evoke patient resolve in the cadences of natural speech. So the final, qualifying half-line, "As far as Chō-fū-Sa", acts, *pace* Ronald Bush, as a quiet affirmation of the power of love to overcome adversity.<sup>34</sup> Pound's impersonal voice relies on his ability to charge historical events and remote landscapes with uncanny emotional weight, and the most enduring sections of *The Cantos* are marked by the re-emergence of the limpidity and clarity first achieved in *Cathay*.

### **"Three Cantos", *Homage to Sextus Propertius* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley***

In January 1917 Pound sent a manuscript, "Three Cantos", to Alice Henderson, intending that she should forward them to Harriet Monroe for publication in *Poetry*. Pound's relationship with Monroe was variable, and his decision to employ Henderson as a sympathetic intermediary suggests a particular sensitivity over the new offerings.<sup>35</sup> These "Ur-Cantos" were the first concrete manifestation of an ambition confided to Henderson eighteen months earlier: "I am working on a long poem which will resemble the *Divina Commedia* in length, but in no other manner. It is a huge, I was going to say, gamble, but

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<sup>34</sup> Bush argues that Pound is introducing an ambivalence of tone not found in Fenollosa's notes – i.e. "I will only come as far as Chō-fū-Sa in order to see you". Ronald Bush, "Pound and Li Po", in *Ezra Pound Among the Poets*, ed. George Bornstein (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) 42.

<sup>35</sup> Pound's troubled dealings with Monroe are discussed in Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 211-12.

shan't, it will prevent my making any money for the next forty years, perhaps" [Pound's typography].<sup>36</sup> Henderson's initial response to "Three Cantos" vindicated Pound's trust, "You've explored worlds beyond worlds, and it's a pleasure to follow you", and was certainly warmer than Monroe's: "I read two or three pages of Ezra's Cantos and then took sick – no doubt that was the cause".<sup>37</sup> "Three Cantos of a Poem of Some Length" finally appeared in July 1917, in issue X of *Poetry*, although Pound continued to revise and refine them in the interim.<sup>38</sup>

The significance of these "Ur-Cantos" is not measurable in any singular advances of tone or form. Save for occasionally experimental lineation, their style bears comparison with work in *Lustra*, and manifests a similar debt to the ideals of imagism. They are striking instead for their vastly enlarged scope, involving the attempt to construct a world not merely observed but transformed. In previous poems, even the complex "Provincia Deserta" or "Exile's Letter", the response of Pound's various personae to their varied realities is chiefly mimetic – their sensibility is revealed rather than described. In contrast, throughout the "Ur-Cantos", reality is actively refashioned by the poet's illuminating intelligence:

It is the sun rains, and a spatter of fire  
Darts from the "Lydian" ripples, *lacus undae*,  
And the place is full of spirits, not *lemures*,  
Not dark and shadow-wet ghosts, but ancient living,  
Wood-white, smooth as the inner-bark, and firm of aspect  
And all a-gleam with colour? (PT 319)

Here potent light-images coalesce into a paradisaical vision. Intricate patterns of sound, "shadow-wet...Wood-white", integrate the individual objects as part of a charged, tactile and living landscape. This timeless scene is grounded in the poet's personal experience – the passage begins as a description of Lake Garda – but this earthly location becomes a mere template for an imagined scene, the home of spirits, carefully distinguished from "*lemures*" (malevolent spectres). A series of negations, "not *lemures*, / Not dark and shadow-wet ghosts", signifies that the past, "ancient living", is not a source of barbarism

<sup>36</sup> Ezra Pound, *The letters of Ezra Pound to Alice Corbin Henderson*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Austin: U of Texas P, 1993) 120.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 190 & 194.

<sup>38</sup> Moody discusses the extent of Pound's revisions in *Ezra Pound: Poet*, 307-8.

but of inspiration, and its iridescence, “all a-gleam with colour”, is the light of civilisation. The recovery and rejuvenation of ancient settings through lambent and pellucid images is a major aesthetic technique in *The Cantos*, and the “Ur-Cantos” show Pound actively developing this trope, refining his impersonal voice as he does so.

The first poem begins with an address to Browning, in lines which reappear in a condensed form at the beginning of Canto II. This extended early engagement clarifies the importance of “Sordello” as an analogue for Pound’s own poetic enterprise:

Ghosts move around me patched with histories.  
 You had your business: to set out so much thought,  
 So much emotion, and call the lot “Sordello.”  
 Worth the evasion, the setting figures up  
 And breathing life upon them. (PT 318-9)

An evocative first line captures the modern poet’s position, enamoured by, yet also estranged from, the figures of the past. Browning provides an imperfect but animating example of how to overcome this cultural and intellectual estrangement, by investing myriad qualities in a single persona or legend. This approach is not wholly commended. It is “worth the evasion”, and the phrase “setting figures up” invests the adoption of personae with a sterility only partially redeemed by the tactile “breathing life upon them”, which itself carries a note of cliché. These clauses involve the same mixture of pragmatism and ambition that imbues Pound’s dictum “imitate, translate, create”, and the “Ur-Cantos” can be read as his first extended attempt to fulfil the final phase of that trinity.

In the second poem, the speaker retreats from a mythopoetic landscape to catalogue tawdry interactions contrasting with the order and grace of the spirit world. He repeats a forlorn query, “Where do we come upon the ancient people”, and traces a lineage of fleeting and forgotten beauty: “he found a flower and wept; / ‘Y a la primera flor,’ he wrote” (PT 322). Successive loves, of Catullus for Lesbia and of an unnamed troubadour for his lady, are sullied and burlesqued, and these disordered human affairs are set against a disordered landscape, shorn of light: “The maple leaves blot up their shadows, / The sky is full of Autumn” (PT 323). Though pervasive, the darkness affords the possibility for vivid contrast, and, in a fashion presaging Kublai Kahn’s “seal in vermillion” and Cosimo de Medici’s “red leather note book” in Cantos XVIII and XXI, the former allure of a faded chanteuse is rendered in suggestive gleams:

“Many a one  
 Brought me rich presents, my hair was full of jade,  
 And my slashed skirts were drenched in the secret dyes,  
 Well dipped in crimson, and sprinkled with rare wines...” (PT 323)

The progression of hues, from jade, through “secret dyes”, to crimson and, finally, to the caliginous red of “rare wines”, provides a visual impression of the singer’s decline. Throughout *The Cantos*, individual colours gradually accrue particular connotations: white for transcendence and longevity, green for illusory bounty or deceit, and red for adulterous love and violence. Again, Pound is experimenting with a symbolism he will later refine.

The focus shifts from debased love to debased conflict, introducing El Cid, a man of action cast out by the state, and returning to wage war “from empty perches of dispersed hawks, / From empty presses” (PT 325). El Cid returns in Canto III, his belligerence, “breaking his way to Valencia”, symbolising the decadent decline of the Renaissance. Like Sordello’s, Mayo Cid’s treatment in the revised *Cantos* is condensed, in another example of Pound paring down euphuistic expression from the “Ur-Cantos” whilst preserving the kernel of a given image or conceit. Pound was a famously astute foil for other poets, but such revisions reveal him to have been, at least early in his career, a fastidious editor of his own work too.

The poem proceeds with the macabre tale of Prince Pedro, who exhumed the corpse of his wronged love Inez, that his corrupt courtiers might pay proper homage: “Who winked at murder kisses the dead hand” (PT 325). As an odd postscript to this hellish image, the poem concludes with a tale of Pound’s friend, the painter Fred Vance, forced to return to America from Paris. The parallel wryly suggests an equivalence between medieval abominations and the horror of being forced to live in the philistine country of one’s birth.

In the third of the “Ur-Cantos”, Pound trains his attention on occultism and religious credulity. John Heydon, “Worker of miracles, dealer in levitation”, exemplifies a debased piety, at odds with the hieratic illumination of the first poem (PT 327). He is reinforced in his cod-spiritualism by a vision of a nymph, “Her eyes were green as glass, / Her foot was leaf-like”, whose verdure reinforces the associations of green timbres with duplicity and false plenty. Heydon’s idiocies, and those of other “mumbling Platonists”, are contrasted with the intelligence and pragmatism of Lorenzo Valla: “A patron of the

arts, of poetry; and of a fine discernment" (*PT* 327). The remainder of the third poem reworks Andreas Divus' account of Book XI of the *Odyssey*, in material which reappears, with minor changes, as Canto I. A deliberate progression from the hapless Heydon, via the staunch Valla, to the mythic and compelling figure of Odysseus clarifies the schema of the "Ur-Cantos" as a journey from ignorance to understanding. But Heydon and Valla are discarded in the early *Cantos*, whereas Odysseus takes centre stage, as the figure who most spectacularly haunts Pound's imagination throughout his long poem.<sup>39</sup>

Why did Pound so radically re-order the "Ur-Cantos"? The question is of particular moment to the kind of poetic sensibility he wished to create, as the "Ur-Cantos" dramatise Pound's search for the authentic voice which would sustain his epic vision. The first poem reads as an extended experiment with modes of perception, moving from an ironic, Browningsque persona to the fantastic and impersonal vision of the past as a translucent spirit world. Though Browning's influence is honoured in Canto II, it is the latter vision, incorporating elevated diction and transfigured landscapes, which presages the finest sections of *The Cantos*. The second poem is similarly inconsistent. Its gloom is effectively punctuated with flashes of colour and bursts of lyric energy, a technique expanded in *The Cantos*, but the poetic voice can be prosaic and self-dramatising: "One stave of it, I've lost the copy I had of it in Paris, / Out of a blue and gilded manuscript" (*PT* 322). Indeed, the mythic and visionary passages in the "Ur-Cantos" are continually and uncomfortably juxtaposed with examples of the awkwardly ironic and socially deracinated voice found in earlier poems such as "Anima Sola" and "Marvail". Pound's gradual renunciation of these solipsistic limitations can be traced through the two great poems which separate the "Ur-Cantos" of 1917 from *A Draft of XVI Cantos: Homage to Sextus Propertius* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*.

*Homage to Sextus Propertius* is not a translation in the conventional sense. This should be established early on, as the poem has come under repeated attack since Harriet Monroe published four sections in the March 1919 issue of *Poetry*. Critics have approached its perceived shortcomings in a variety of fashions, from William Gardner Hale's immediate and energetic condemnation, to Robert Graves' laboured parody "Dr Syntax and Mr Pound", an extended exercise in missing the point:<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Heydon eventually appears in Cantos XCI and XCII, but Valla is not invoked by name in *The Cantos*.

<sup>40</sup> Hale's barbs appeared in a letter, "Pegasus Impounded", to the following, April edition of *Poetry*: "If Mr Pound were a professor of Latin, there could be nothing left for him but suicide". *Poetry*, XIV (April 1919), reprinted in *Ezra Pound: The Critical Heritage*, 155-7. (157).

Dr Syntax: Ha! Very well. Let me see! Whom shall I put on to construe first? Surely our celebrated transatlantic scholar Ezra Pound who only yesterday . . . distinguished himself by rendering *Unde pater sitiens Ennius ante bibet* as if *sitiens* meant ‘sitting’, not ‘a-thirst’.<sup>41</sup>

The sneering tone is typical of Pound’s detractors, and overlooks an obvious consideration, raised by J.P. Sullivan, that had such supposed mistakes been genuinely inadvertent, Pound “would not been able to read Propertius at all or get anything like the sense out of his elegies that he does”.<sup>42</sup> “Sitting” is a false cognate that evidently appealed to Pound’s sense of mischief as he surveyed the text, producing an additional image, the seated Ennius, and a more marked sense of time: “Wherefrom father Ennius, sitting before I came, hath drunk” (*PT* 529). A literal translation verges on tautology: “Where father Ennius previously drank when he was thirsty”.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, the quality of the *Homage* as poetry in English was rarely considered by Pound’s contemporary critics.

Aside from a few well-documented morphological “howlers”, Pound’s occasional infidelity to the emotional sense of the original Latin has also raised eyebrows.<sup>44</sup> For instance, Propertius reverently invokes Virgil:

Actia Vergilium custodis littora Phoebi,  
 Caesaris et fortes dicere posse rates,  
 qui nunc Aeneae Troisni suscitatur arma  
 iactaque Lavinis moenia littoribus.                    (II. 34. 61-4)

Vincent Katz’ translation faithfully reflects Propertius’ praise for Virgil’s capacities:

Vergil can write of the Actian shores of Phoebus  
 the protector and Caesar’s mighty fleet,  
 who now stirs the weapons of Trojan Aeneas

<sup>41</sup> Robert Graves, *The Crowning Privilege: Collected Essays on Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1959) 117.

<sup>42</sup> J.P. Sullivan, *Ezra Pound and Sextus Propertius: A Study in Creative Translation* (Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1964) 5.

<sup>43</sup> My translation, placing exactitude before elegance.

<sup>44</sup> It is not the aim of this study to address at length Pound’s alleged inadequacies as a classicist. For a detailed reading of Propertius’ original poetry, leading to an analysis of Pound’s *Homage*, see Michael Comber, “A Book Made New: Reading Propertius Reading Pound. A Study in Reception”, in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, no.88, (1998) 37-55.

and fortifications built on Lavinian shores. (II. 34. 61-4)

But Pound's translation reflects his own distaste for the "Tennysonianized version of Homer" (L 87):

Upon the Actian marshes Virgil is Phoebus' chief of police,  
     He can tabulate Caesar's great ships.  
 He thrills to Ilian arms,  
     He shakes the Trojan weapons of Aeneas,  
 And casts stores on Lavinian beaches. (PT 544)

"[T]abulate" is a particular slight on what Pound saw as Virgil's mechanical verse, but its sense is alien to Propertius' poem; as is the reattribution of Phoebus' epithet "custodies" to Virgil, and the derogatory rendering of that epithet as "chief of police". This cavalier alteration of sensibility has occasionally troubled Pound's defenders as well as his critics, as it complicates the argument that the *Homage* is faithful at least to the spirit of Propertius. Donald Davie attacks Hugh Kenner, T.S. Eliot, J.P. Sullivan and John Espey for being each "determined to eat his cake and to have it, to assert that *Homage to Sextus Propertius* is not a translation and yet that somehow it is".<sup>45</sup> The criticisms of Eliot and Espey are at least partially just, for in their insistence on a knowledge of the original Latin to make sense of Pound's poem, they cede ground to those who condemn the poem as a poor translation. Eliot omitted the poem from his 1928 selection from Pound on the questionable grounds that "If the uninstructed reader is not a classical scholar, he will make nothing of it", whilst Espey argues that the poem "requires for its fullest savor some knowledge of the text on which it is based".<sup>46</sup> Davie attempts to counter these judgements by arguing with persuasive force that the *Homage* is "*in no sense* a translation" (Davie's italics).<sup>47</sup> Yet this designation, though tempting, fails adequately to convey the close attention Pound clearly paid to the original text. In reframing images, conceits, and occasionally whole narrative strophes from the *Elegies*, Pound was capable of great imitative as well as adaptive ingenuity, and even his seemingly outrageous liberties are often an irreverent response to the Latin text, as we have seen. Though an exploration of

<sup>45</sup> Davie, *Studies in Ezra Pound*, 73.

<sup>46</sup> Eliot, "Introduction" to *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems*, 19; John J. Espey, *Ezra Pound's Mauberley: A Study in Composition* (London: Faber, 1955) 103.

<sup>47</sup> Davie, *Studies in Ezra Pound*, 73.

this depth of engagement with the original text may not be required for the “fullest savor” of the *Homage* in English, it offers an insight into Pound’s ambitions for the poem, and the continuing development of his verse principles.

Thus a reading which seeks to account for the qualities of the *Homage en bloc* – its merits both as a translation and as an autonomous poem in English – necessarily falls between the positions of Eliot and Davie. Hugh Kenner and J.P. Sullivan, whose arguments are more nuanced than Davie allows, both occupy this middle ground. Kenner astutely emphasises Pound’s idiosyncratic theory of translation as a major factor in the hostile reception of the *Homage*, citing his dictum that “*Logopoeia* does not translate; though the attitude of mind it expresses may pass through a paraphrase”.<sup>48</sup> The quotation is a reminder that Pound had no qualms about developing muted facets of the Propertian persona at the expense of the literal sense of the *Elegies*. His translation is true to his own creative response to Propertius, rather than to some notionally objective reading. J.P. Sullivan is similarly sympathetic to Pound’s view of translation, and his term “creative translation” seems the most apt coinage yet devised for this approach.<sup>49</sup> The phrase conveys Pound’s discerning approach to Propertius’ Latin, whilst allowing for his occasionally wild deviations from its original sense. Far from being a weakness, this adaptive quality is in fact the greatest strength of Pound’s poem, for the freedom he permits himself as translator contributes to the most flexible and successful poetic voice he had yet achieved. As Michael Alexander observes, in a telling phrase: “Pound’s imagined Propertius may not be all of Propertius, but he liberates much of Pound”.<sup>50</sup> The third and fourth lines of the *Homage* convey something of the potential of Pound’s stance. Here is the original Latin:

primus ego ingredior puro de fonte sacerdos  
 Itala per Graios orgia ferre choros. (III.i.3-4)

Which Pound renders:

I who come first from the clear font  
 Bringing the Grecian orgies into Italy,

<sup>48</sup> Kenner, *Poetry of Ezra Pound*, 149n; the quotation is from Pound’s *Polite Essays*, 170.

<sup>49</sup> Sullivan, *Ezra Pound and Sextus Propertius*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander, *Poetic Achievement*, 114.



and the dance into Italy. (PT 526)

“Sacerdos” may be ignored solely for stylistic reasons, but it is also possible that Pound excised the word “priest” to avoid sully his classical schema with unwanted Christian connotations. His translation of “The Seafarer”, after all, systematically eliminates the overt Christian morality of the Anglo-Saxon original; and though Propertius employs “sacerdos” metaphorically, to signify the strength of his devotion to Callimachus and Philetas, Pound is nothing if not selective in his adaptation of the Propertian persona. A faithful translation would retain the agreements of “Itala . . . orgia” and “Graios . . . choros”, as Katz renders it: “bringing Italian rituals through Greek music”.<sup>51</sup> But Pound elides these grammatical boundaries, repeating “into Italy” to create two balanced, mirroring half-lines, in which “dance” echoes the sibilance of “Grecian orgies”, investing the latter clause with a compressed resonance. The translation of “orgia” as “orgies” is also an indulgence of the type guaranteed to annoy pedants, but it signals Pound’s focus on the qualities of the *Homage* as verse in English, as well as his delight in linguistic idiosyncrasies and *faux amis*, which is evident throughout the poem.<sup>52</sup>

Pound’s liberties are not mere whim; they are designed to extend the ambit of his perception beyond Propertius’ historical moment. Propertius’ *Elegies* pit the intimacy of his love against the political and military exigencies of the state. But though these two forces are in conflict, the Roman poet is capable of treating both seriously, balancing their opposition in often rational, non-partisan terms. The speaker of Pound’s *Homage* shows no such restraint. His tone continually shifts, from parodies of the heroic rhetoric of empire and myth, to soft confessions of love, and even, at times, to a sense of defeated endeavour that is distinctly Pound’s own. A deliberate and contemporary political resonance is immediately apparent:

Annalists will continue to record Roman reputations,  
 Celebrities from the Trans-Caucasus will belaud Roman celebrities  
 And expound the distentions of empire. (PT 527)

As in *Cathay*, the cross-cultural parallels are not forced, but inhere in delicate modulations of diction. “Annalists” and “dintensions”, albeit the former responds to the Latin

<sup>51</sup> Propertius, *Complete Elegies*, trans. Vincent Katz, 233.

<sup>52</sup> The Oxford Latin Dictionary offers “secret rites (of Bacchus)” as the primary meaning of “orgia”.

“annalibus”, introduce an anaemic, modern tenor at odds with the sententious verbal actions: “record”, “belaud”, “expound”. The tone is both satiric and resigned, signalling the speaker’s weary indifference to “Roman reputations”, whilst the dismissive “distentions of empire” hints at an association between the expansionist and militaristic tendencies of Rome and the foreign affairs of Britain and America. Pound made this connection clear in a letter to the editor of the *English Journal*, in January 1931: “[The *Homage*] presents certain emotions as vital to me in 1917, faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the British Empire, as they were to Propertius some centuries earlier, faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the Roman Empire” (L 231). Set against these dual imbecilities, the artist emerges early on in Pound’s poem as a defiantly exceptional figure, whose preoccupations transcend his historical moment:

But for something to read in normal circumstances?  
 For a few pages brought down from the forked hill  
                   unsullied?  
                   I ask a wreath which will not crush my head.  
                   And there is no hurry about it;  
 I shall have, doubtless, a boom after my funeral,  
 Seeing that long standing increases all things  
   regardless of quality.                  (PT 527)

“[N]ormal circumstances” is one of a number of quotidian phrases invested with unusual weight. It is both self-knowingly trite – as a condition impossible to define – and playfully heretical, challenging the bohemian assumption that art never stems from normality. Throughout the *Homage*, poetry is cast as an explicitly *crafted* form, and the poet, no romantic free spirit, is a craftsman who requires his gifts to be acknowledged. Pound approaches the artist’s private concerns in a distinctly public voice – he elides the struggle for authenticity into the struggle for recognition – and this radical dynamic underlies the rapid tonal shifts which characterise the opening section of the *Homage*. The verse paragraph hinges on a sincere sentiment, rendered with monosyllabic purity: “I ask a wreath which will not crush my head”; but this momentary earnestness is swiftly undercut by a further sardonic denigration of the cultural milieu: “long standing increases all things / regardless of quality”. These fluctuations are finally resolved in the serious and assured

dictum with which the opening section concludes, encapsulating the poem's underlying theme and the poet's aspiration:

Stands genius a deathless adornment,  
a name not to be worn out with the years. (PT 529)

In the second section, the diction is more consistent, tracing Propertius' vacillation over the subjects his verse should pursue. Phoebus' sage advice is rendered with a light-hearted touch, through which Pound implicitly acknowledges the latent presumptuousness of his earlier appeal to posterity:

...“You idiot! What are you doing with that water?  
“Who has ordered a book about heroes?  
....  
“No keel will sink with your genius  
“Let another oar churn the water (PT 529)

Propertius is urged to turn away from his “book about heroes” to focus on more intimate matters, in lines which inscribe Pound's view of the artist as one unfettered by public expectations. Here, the poet's vanity is as much to blame for his waywardness as any external pressure: “No keel will sink with your genius”. Accordingly, sections three and four of the *Homage* retreat from matters of state and poetic legacy, to survey various affairs of love with a refined comic touch. First, Propertius is seized by irrational fears which bar him from visiting Cynthia: “Shall I entrust myself to entangled shadows, / Where bold hands may do violence to my person?” (PT 530). Then, having been constrained by priggishness, he presses his servant for news of Cynthia's ensuing dismay:

I guzzle with outstretched ears.  
Thus? She wept into uncombed hair,  
And you saw it,  
Vast waters flowed from her eyes? (PT 532)

Like the poet's grandiose vision of epic verse in the second section, this is another form of debilitating vanity. Here it prevents Propertius from playing his proper part as a lover, his

adoration for Cynthia collapsing amid indecision and conceit. Significantly, the poet's successive inadequacies are articulated in bespoke styles: mock-heroic for his poetic pretensions, ironic for his romantic ones. In the fifth section, these distinct comic and lyric abilities are symbolically combined, to create an enlarged voice, adequate to the speaker's love for Cynthia:

If she goes in a gleam of Cos, in a slither of dyed stuff,  
 There is a volume in the matter; if her eyelids sink into sleep,  
 There are new jobs for the author,  
 And if she plays with me with her shirt off,  
       We shall construct many Iliads.  
 And whatever she does or says  
       We shall spin long yarns out of nothing,                   (PT 534)

These lines follow a framing clause; part concession, part boast: "My genius is no more than a girl", which completes a temporary dislocation of Propertius' sensibility from his literary forebears. Cynthia has become his sole inspiration, but her varieties of experience license a variety of poetic responses: "ivory fingers" bespeak a platonic and hieratic love; her robes, "a slither of dyed stuff", seductively adulterate this purity; and the synecdochic image of eyelids as they "sink into sleep" evokes a vulnerability that offers "new jobs for the author". Cynthia emerges as an object for reverence and protection, and the repeated references to the writer's craft tentatively imply that the protection he offers is the lady's preservation, ever youthful, in his verse. This reverent ambition cedes to more material proceedings: "And if she plays with me with her shirt off, / We shall construct many Iliads". Though the arch tone undercuts the earlier platonic mood, it also adds a dash of realism to Propertius' passions, by qualifying the preceding mannerly descriptions with a tactile and erotic image.

Yet despite this leavening bawdiness, Pound casts Propertius as an unconvincing sybarite. Having achieved emotional repletion, he is immediately moved to justify his declared sublimation in singular romance, to excuse but also to vindicate a wilful withdrawal from the preoccupations of the state. Though this intention is vigorously pursued – "Neither would I warble of Titans . . . Nor of Thebes . . . Nor of Xerxes" – the prolixity of the poet's warbling on precisely these themes is self-contradictory: he is consumed by the mantle he seeks to reject (PT 534-5). Davie connects this irony with the

earlier assertions of “Au Salon” (1912), in which “the poet announces at the top of his voice the right to speak *sotto voce*, he denies in a voice of thunder that he is duty bound to speak thus always”.<sup>53</sup> The comparison is tonally astute, but in the *Homage* Pound’s perspective extends beyond the aesthete’s revulsion for “the whole aegrum vulgus / Splitting its beery jowl”.<sup>54</sup> Artistic privations cede instead to an expansive and crucially impersonal stance:

And my ventricles do not palpitate to Caesarial *ore rotundos*,  
Nor to the tune of the Phrygian fathers.

Sailor, of winds; a plowman, concerning his oxen;  
Soldier, the enumeration of wounds; the sheep-feeder, of ewes;  
We, in our narrow bed, turning aside from battles:  
Each man where he can, wearing out the day in his manner.                    (PT 535)

The phrase “ore rotundas”, literally “with a round mouth”, carrying twin connotations of eloquence and pomposity, is Pound’s own. Propertius employs the simple “nomen” (“name”, used in the sense of “reputation”) to refer to Caesar’s deeds, revealing another instance of Pound adding sardonic and rebellious overtones to his translation. But despite this vituperative energy, the speaker is swiftly cast in an inclusive lineage of sailors, soldiers and farmers. His refusal to “sing of a tumult” is altered from affected defiance to a consequence of stoic endurance, shared with ordinary citizens of the state. This dynamic should not be embroidered as evidence of some proto-democratic impulse, as there is little suggestion of equality or commonality between poet and labourer. But the poet is insisting that the right to autonomy be shared equally, that farmers, sailors, and even, symbolically, soldiers, should each be able to evade the demands of a warlike state, and tackle the problems of existence in their own way.

Pound is fully aware that his public plea for private autonomy is problematic – the play of the collective “We” against the discriminating “Each” at the beginning of successive lines cheerfully acknowledges the inconsistency that Davie recognises. But this superficial contradiction should not obscure the wider implications of Pound’s plea for the kind of poetry he wishes to write. It signals the beginnings of an attempt to create a

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<sup>53</sup> Davie, *Studies in Ezra Pound*, 75.

<sup>54</sup> “Au Salon”, (PT 171).

disinterested and expansive voice, in which the quality of jaded resignation in “wearing out the day in his manner” is not bound to the speaker’s experience. Indeed, though the sense of suffering in these lines is acute, their sensibility is anti-Romantic. In Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode”, for instance, the speaker is at first divorced from feeling. His “stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief” is an inert and secondary emotion, and the poem’s poignant natural imagery is less a cause of distress than a reflection of the failure of the poet’s imaginative powers. The perspective of the poem contracts from the cosmic, a wild and daunting landscape, to the personal, in the speaker’s affection for the Lady, the “friend devoutest of my choice”.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” moves from an expansive to an intimate register. It takes Shelley some time to produce the word “I” in his poem, but the note of personal suffering, which it finally arrives, is explicit “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!”<sup>56</sup> For Coleridge and Shelley, their respective odes are a means of confronting and representing acute personal emotions that could not otherwise be described. Pound’s Propertius undergoes a very different emotional trajectory. His personal travails are continually generalised, as hardships to which true artists have been prey throughout history, and through this recognition the speaker implicitly places himself amongst “companions of the Muses” (*PT* 528). The distillation of amaranthine significance from private experience is a central feature of Pound’s impersonal mode. It recurs in Propertius’ vision of his own funeral, in which initially solipsistic concerns, “No trumpets filled with my emptiness . . . a small plebeian procession”, are expanded into a meditation on death:

“He who is now vacant dust  
 “Was once the slave of one passion:”  
 Give that much inscription  
 “Death why tardily come?”

You, sometimes, will lament a lost friend  
 For it is a custom:  
 This care for past men (*PT* 536)

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<sup>55</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Dejection: An Ode”, *The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 114-8.

<sup>56</sup> Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind,” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 300.

These lines vitiate the pieties of mourning with monosyllabic severity: “it is a custom”, contradicting the familiar conceit that the poet may cheat death through the survival of his works, and insisting that even passionate love must end in “vacant dust”. Soon after, Cynthia’s inability to grasp Propertius’ ghost is rendered in a brilliant phrase, which implicitly likens her anguish to the poet’s despairing inability to sublimate himself in a lost cultural tradition: “Vain call to unanswering shadow” (PT 536).

The speaker’s morbid vision of his own demise further complicates an already divided persona. Propertius’ genuine ambitions for his verse, “Stands genius a deathless adornment”, are continually juxtaposed with proof that the real experience of the artist is far removed from such lofty statements. His romantic aspirations end squalidly with the clap, “a knife in my vitals, to have passed on a swig of / poison”, whilst the penultimate stanza viscerally undercuts the notion that the poet may have an influence on society at large:

For the nobleness of the populace brooks nothing below its  
own altitude,  
One must have resonance, resonance and sonority...  
like a goose. (PT 545)

In less skilful hands, such pessimism might easily unbalance the poem, bordering as it does on invective. But the force and sincerity of earlier passages – the sensuous evocations of love, the hieratic visions of enduring art – symbolically contradict Propertius’ sardonic and bitter complaints. Despite the speaker’s numerous grievances, he conjures an idealised figure of the artist – a craftsman, in tune with the rhythms of history, and able to transcend the limitations of his historical moment – which develops the nascent motif of the “Ur-Cantos”. Accordingly, the final line confirms Propertius’ hope, maintained against the indifference of the public and against his own vexation, that he will join a lineage of artists, and that posterity will “number him in the song”:

And now Propertius of Cynthia, taking his stand among these. (PT 72)

As I have already suggested, *Homage to Sextus Propertius* more closely prefigures Pound’s later style than *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. But the latter poem extends Propertius’ anxieties over the poet’s public rôle, anxieties in which Pound is obviously invested.

*Mauberley* falls into two distinct sequences. The first sequence, dated 1919, comprises thirteen poems written in the voice of the semi-autobiographical E.P. The second, dated 1920, charts the parallel travails of the wan aesthete Mauberley, in five languid and heavily stylised lyrics that mirror E.P.'s preoccupations. *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* is a complex work, and has been subject to many exhaustive commentaries. I shall confine my remarks to the final poem in E.P.'s sequence, "Envoi", which is of moment to the development of Pound's impersonal voice. E.P. thirsts for a pure and enduring poetic register, unsullied by the contemporary iniquities described in preceding sections of the poem:

Tell her that sheds  
Such treasure in the air,  
Recking naught else but that her graces give  
Life to the moment,  
I would bid them live  
As roses might, in magic amber laid,  
Red overwrought with orange and all made  
One substance and one colour  
Braving time. (PT 557)

This lady, "her that sang me once that song of lawes", endures as an image of the rose in amber. A delicate and ephemeral form of beauty is preserved, but it is a beauty only in conditional mood. For the variegated graces that had given "life to the moment" in Waller and Lawes are in 1919 reduced to monochrome aspic.<sup>57</sup> E.P.'s recognition that the lyrical cadences of the Jacobean cannot sustain a living beauty in a world of brutal "hysterias, trench confessions, / laughter out of dead bellies" is a hard one (PT 552). And Pound's use of his seventeenth-century forbears to make that point anticipates his impersonal technique in the later *Cantos*, the authorial attitude being implicit in the juxtaposition of the references.

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<sup>57</sup> Henry Lawes set Edmund Waller's "Go Lovely Rose" to music. Henry Lawes, "Go Lovely Rose". Nigel Rogers and Paul O'Dette. *Songs of an English Cavalier*. Virgin Classics, 1993. CD.





poems, the energy of the verse is sapped by insecurities about the capacities of the imagination. Take “To the One of Fictive Music”:

Yet not too like, yet not so like to be  
 Too near, too clear, saving a little to endow  
 Our feigning with the strange unlike, whence springs  
 The difference that heavenly pity brings.  
 For this, musician, in your girdle fixed  
 Bear other perfumes. On your pale head wear  
 A band entwining, set with fatal stones.  
 Unreal, give back to us what once you gave:  
 The imagination that we spurned and crave. (CPP 71)

Despite the poise and intricacy of these lines, “To the One of Fictive Music” exemplifies a recurrent weakness in *Harmonium*: its emotive energy is vitiated by excessive artifice. Prominent end-rhymes, “springs...brings” and “gave...crave”, also conjoin complementary verbs, creating too easy a symmetry between the sound and sense. And, in the sixth line of the stanza, the pleasing consonance of “bear” and “wear” comes at the cost of a stilted word-order, which disregards the cadences of natural speech. The poem recognises that the wiles of its musician, though bewitching, are “too near, too clear” to be of lasting value. Implicitly, the poet must seek a more independent and complex art, adequate to “The imagination that we spurned and crave.” It is possible to read the poem’s ornate diction as deliberately reflecting the sterility of thought that the poet must discard, though it is not clear what form the desired imaginative renewal should take.<sup>59</sup> A clearer sense of Stevens’ ambitions emerges in “The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage”:

But not on a shell, she starts,  
 Archaic, for the sea.  
 But on the first-found weed  
 She scuds the glitters,  
 Noiselessly, like one more wave. (CPP 4)

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<sup>59</sup> Stevens, writing in 1928, declares that “the point of the poem” is that “the imaginative world is the only real world” (L 252).

These lines imply a typically Jamesian contrast between a sophisticated but “archaic” Europe and a naïve but vigorous America. Botticelli’s Venus, festooned with shell and attendant Anemoi, is a static and placid figure, whereas the paltry nude, even when reduced to a “first-found weed”, still “scuds the glitters, / Noiselessly”. The poverty of the image is offset by the energy of the verbal action, suggesting that American poets, though divorced from European history and tradition, can still achieve a vital and dynamic art. But this achievement is only partial and provisional, a form of “meagre play”, for the poem casts forward to “when the goldener nude / Of a later day // Will go, like the centre of sea-green pomp”. Once again, the crucial triumph of the imagination is not realised, but projected into an uncertain future. Stevens finally confronts the conflict between mind and world in “Anecdote of the Jar”:

The wilderness rose up to it,  
 And sprawled around, no longer wild.  
 The jar was round upon the ground  
 And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.  
 The jar was grey and bare.  
 It did not give of bird or bush,  
 Like nothing else in Tennessee.

(*CPP* 61)

Just as “The Paltry Nude” subverts Botticelli, “Anecdote of the Jar” supersedes the ethos of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. The Grecian urn is heavily engraved, “What leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape”, and its evocative images “lead” the poet toward his final recognition that “beauty is truth, truth beauty”.<sup>60</sup> But Stevens’ jar is “grey and bare”, a tabula rasa. No personal emotion or particular experience impinges upon the poem’s gnomic abstractions, and, despite the simple lexis, successive clauses resist paraphrase. An impersonal effect is achieved at the expense of any clearly deducible meaning, and the poem’s sonic patterns do not necessarily serve to clarify the sense. Orotund vowels – “round”, “ground”, “tall” – associate the jar with a stately and impassive control, and also

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<sup>60</sup> Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, 534-7.

suggest a lack of dynamism, leading us to question whether this control is benign. The poem is often taken as symbolising the power of art to restore order and intelligibility to a chaotic modern world, a reading that clearly aligns Stevens' preoccupations with Pound's burgeoning ambitions in this period. But, even if "Anecdote of the Jar" achieves what "The Paltry Nude" could only envision for the future – the symbolic triumph of the imagination over reality – this comes at the cost of the energy of the earlier poem's language. The Jar's inertia – "it did not give of bird or bush" – suggests a sterile, deadening art, which misses the very vitality of the experiences that it would apprehend. In this respect, "Anecdote of the Jar" is comparable with the wan formulations of Pound's Mauberley: in both cases, a flawed attitude to art is dramatised through deliberately impoverished verse. Even so, Stevens' deepening preoccupation with the pressures of reality is clear, and, in two of the finest poems in *Harmonium*, his technique rises to meet the challenge that these pressures pose.

"Domination of Black" and "The Snow Man" are companion pieces, appearing sequentially in the first edition of *Harmonium*. The two poems are central to an understanding of that volume, but each has often been misread by critics keen to impose their own epistemological schema on Stevens' early poems. "A mind that examines such a poem for its prose contents gets absolutely nothing from it", Stevens wrote of "Domination of Black", and no discussion of either poem would be complete without the recognition that it is a primarily poetic endeavour, not a philosophical one (*L* 251). "Domination of Black" is centrally concerned with the poet's fear of death, and his sense of isolation and inconsequence amidst the vastness of space. Its scope expands from the intimacy of the hearth – which has both meditative and domestic connotations – to the immensity of the cosmos. The central figures and images are all introduced in the first of the poem's three sections:

At night, by the fire,  
 The colors of the bushes  
 And of the fallen leaves,  
 Repeating themselves,  
 Turned in the room,  
 Like the leaves themselves  
 Turning in the wind.  
 Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks

Came striding.

And I remembered the cry of the peacocks. (CPP 7)

These opening lines present a compressed sequence of images, undirected by verbal action until the auxiliary “repeating” in the fourth line. Two spaces, the room and the world outside it, are conflated into one, and the images trace a condensed progression from renewal to decay: from fire – crucible of the phoenix, of which the peacocks are a gaudy parody – to fallen leaves. There are only two qualifiers in this first section: that the leaves are “fallen” combines their autumnal symbolism with a latently religious omen; and the “heavy hemlocks” seem ineluctable in comparison with the swirling, ephemeral leaves. Both details imply a negative cast of mind in the speaker, and though these emotional implications are scarcely sufficiently pronounced to be dubbed pathetic fallacy, the insights that they afford into the speaker’s psychology are unexpected. Elsewhere in *Harmonium*, private feelings are even more determinedly suppressed:

My candle burned alone in an immense valley.

Beams of the huge night converged upon it,

Until the wind blew.

Then beams of the huge night

Converged upon its image,

Until the wind blew. (CPP 41)

The six lines of “Valley Candle” push the abstraction seen in “Domination of Black” to extremes. Both poems adopt a first person address atypical for Stevens, but the voice of “Valley Candle” is even more deracinated, and no effort is made to suggest that the perceptions explored in the poem are contingent upon personal experience. The subtle emotive frissons are rooted instead in generalised qualities of the landscape, the “immense valley” and “huge night”, which register the uncaring vastness of space, against which the artist’s candle is ultimately insignificant. Though merely suggestive, such details assume huge significance, as do similar nuances in “Domination of Black”, because the poem’s challenging abstractions force the reader to weigh the significance of every linguistic detail. It is not even explicitly stated that the candle is extinguished, which has prompted Robert Rehder to speculate that the poem might affirm rather than deny the poet’s power, presenting the process of perception “necessary to change chaos to order and to

communicate purpose”.<sup>61</sup> Though temptingly counter-intuitive, this reading ignores the effect of the poem’s most striking device, which is the attribution of “beams” not to the candle, but to the encroaching night. Space, imposing and eternal, is the prevailing force in “Valley Candle”, and the artistic inspiration symbolised by the flame is conclusively extinguished.

“Domination of Black” adopts a more complex, and perhaps a more emotionally charged, symbolism. Its leaves, peacocks and hemlocks combine visual abstraction with allusive richness, and they are continually re-ordered, qualifying and re-qualifying each other in an interconnecting tapestry. Colour associates the peacocks’ tails with the leaves; “turning” associates the wind with the flames; “loud” associates the hemlocks with the fire; and the peacocks’ piercing, unsettling cry strikes through every association, imbuing these accretive convolutions with a sense of the speaker’s escalating terror. This conceptual complexity is grammatically reinforced. Reiterated comparators – “like”, “as”, “just as” – reflect the speaker’s search for some stable point of understanding amidst the poem’s “turnings”. He is unable to locate the subject of the peacock’s distressed cry, unable to untangle this web of associations: “Was it a cry against the twilight / Or against the leaves themselves”.

In several other *Harmonium* poems, from “The Ordinary Woman” to “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock”, the essential variousness of the physical world has an affirmative quality. But in “Domination of Black” the disorienting swirl of images leads instead to a stark admission: “I felt afraid”. It is arguably the most direct emotional statement in the volume, anticipating the austere desolation of “The Auroras of Autumn”:

The scholar of one candle sees  
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame  
Of everything he is. And he feels afraid. (CPP 359)

This fear of vast and awesome nature contrasts with other conceptions of physical space in *Harmonium*. “Earthy Anecdote” delights in the potential for poetic perception to alter space, its “bucks” clattering to left and right “Because of the firecat”. “Theory” playfully acknowledges the reliance of a sense of self on one’s surroundings: “One is not a duchess / A hundred yards from a carriage”. And even in “The Comedian as the Letter C”, where the

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<sup>61</sup> Robert Rehder, *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (London: Macmillan, 1988) 216.

ocean manifests a strange and threatening power, there is compensation in the expansion of the individual imagination to register that power.

“Domination of Black” offers no such compensation. The planets which gather at its close lend external justification to the speaker’s disquiet, replacing his local pessimism with an immense weight of nihilism. It is left to its companion piece, “The Snow Man”, to offer glimpses of redemption. A symbolic contrast between “dominant” black and white snow could hardly be clearer, but the discrepancies in theme between the two poems are far more subtle. If “Domination of Black” registers the horrors of the abyss, “The Snow Man” interrupts these same horrors with only a momentary, fragile hope. Its opening lines reveal a landscape in which barren snow is as pervasive as threatening night:

One must have a mind of winter  
 To regard the frost and the boughs  
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And to have been cold a long time  
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun;

(*CPP* 8)

In the heady confluence of limpid images, words seem to lose their particularity: the normally adjectival “rough” becomes almost noun-like; “glitter”, usually a verb, becomes a noun. So tactile an evocation of landscape seems inimical to a “mind of winter”, and accordingly this wished-for insensibility is continually undermined. The opening two stanzas are identically structured, so that the first of their three lines introduces the requisite condition for the subsequent perceptions: “mind of winter...cold a long time”. This lends the pine-trees and junipers an alienating beauty, as the very apprehension of their frigid grace denies the speaker a palliative inattention, and the sense of barely suppressed emotion conjured by the scene is reiterated in “the distant glitter / Of the January sun”. January, though still a winter month, begins the cycle of the seasons, and so there is in the January sun a vestigial promise of future redemption, albeit “distant” and implicitly inconstant.

This momentary hope is deliberately positioned just before the poem's turn, "and not to think", which introduces the same terror of landscape encountered in "Domination of Black". Helen Vendler has commented at length on "The Snow Man" as a response to Keats's "In Drear-nighted December":

The feel of not to feel it,  
When there is none to heal it,  
Nor numbèd sense to steel it,  
Was never said in rhyme.

Vendler argues that "Borrowing Keats's phrase 'not to feel,' Stevens changes it into 'not to think' . . . he decides to accept Keats's challenge and try to say 'in rhyme' 'the feel of not to feel it'".<sup>62</sup> Much of Vendler's analysis is persuasive, and the Keatsian influence on Stevens is unarguable, but one might cavil at the claim that Stevens' poem is specifically an attempt to evoke "the feel of not to feel it". The tragedy in the poem surely derives precisely from the fact that the Snow Man's unfeeling indifference to a misery-inducing landscape is a state *inaccessible* to the poet. There is a sense throughout of a grief too great for the senses, which has nonetheless to be admitted, and this reading is supported by the structure of the poem's single sentence. After the initial imperative, the progression of verbal action runs thus: "to regard...to behold...to think...listens...beholds". The infinitives, which are directly grammatically associated with the opening, "One must", extend that injunction's uneasy combination of imperative and conditional moods. It is as if the speaker wills his own dramatic self-projection into the figure of the insensate Snow Man, but recognises the futility of the attempt even as it is made. Only in the final stanza, as the poem enters the simple present tense, does the tone become confidently assertive, though the assertion coincides with a flurry of negatives. Modes of perception are also finely differentiated: "to regard" seems passive and inert; "to behold" is to be conscious of revelation. The speaker "beholds" twice in the poem, but these instances are separated by more meditative action:

...and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,

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<sup>62</sup> Helen Vendler, *Words Chosen*, 47.



In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land

Full of the same wind

That is blowing in the same bare place (CPP 8)

The half-rhyming “sound” and “land”, surrounded by unstressed monosyllables, lend the tenth line a comforting solidity. But, paradoxically, this echo serves to bring into closer association the emotion that one might *project* onto landscape and the emotion that *inheres* in landscape. The misery in the sound of the wind and leaves “*is* the sound of the land” (my italics), an observation that collapses Stevens’ familiar mind/world dichotomy into a unity. This conflation of imagination and experience frames the final stanza:

For the listener, who listens in the snow,

And, nothing himself, beholds

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The Snow Man’s lack of human feeling, “nothing himself”, allows him to confront this barren landscape head on, recognising its emptiness along with his own. He beholds “Nothing that is not there” – resisting the poet’s own compulsion to project personal thoughts and emotions onto the landscape – and this ultimate clarity, or ultimate inhumanity, reveals the “nothing that is”: a scene unclouded by ominous associations, a mere void. The poem’s overarching conceit, that the contemplation of a final “nothingness” may be preferable to the poet’s own wintry thoughts, is certainly daunting. But we are not enjoined simply to accept this judgement. Rather, an implicit compensation for human frailty is registered in the very acuity of the images which urge the speaker towards his bleak conclusions. Not for nothing is the Snow Man dubbed a mere “listener”. The black coals we imagine for his eyes could never register the “distant glitter / Of the January sun”, and the aesthetic harmony of the poem’s charged images suggests an alternative means of reconciliation with the world. In this sense, the poem functions almost as a condensed version of the Persephone myth: it illustrates a crisis of feeling, but preserves in the very depths of that crisis the eventual promise of renewal.

“Domination of Black” and “The Snow Man” showcase the felicities of Stevens’ early, symbolist style. Both poems begin with a surface apparatus, elements of which are

then repeated to draw the reader into the text, rather like the deepening perspective of a painting – one thinks of Uccello’s “The Hunt in the Forest” – which gradually aligns the viewer’s perspective with that of the artist. In Stevens’ case, the artist’s perspective, as reflected in these poems, is bleak. Like Pound’s Propertius, the voices of *Harmonium* are often restless, striving for elusive consolations.

### The Longer Poems

“Sunday Morning” tackles the decline of faith head on. In its opening lines the gaudy paraphernalia of modern living – a peignoir, “late coffee and oranges”, and a cockatoo – have displaced “The holy hush of ancient sacrifice” (*CPP* 53). There is an obvious antagonism between these ephemeral objects and the religious solemnity they serve to “dissipate”, but the diction of the opening lines seems calculated to diminish this contrast. Many phrases, from “Complacencies of the peignoir” to “green freedom of a cockatoo”, employ assonance and extended vowel sounds to achieve a sonic permanence which belies their literal transience, whereas “holy hush” suffers an enunciatory triteness that contradicts its literal sense. These stylistic effects subdue incongruent areas of experience – the sacred and the quotidian – under a settled, unifying mood, prompting the reader to discard the conventional associations of spiritualism with eternity, and priming him for the inverted logic to follow. “Complacencies” are grammatically tied to the peignoir, but the indulgent spirit of this inscrutable garment pervades the opening stanza. This is significant, in that the dissatisfactions that provoke the woman’s dream – dissatisfactions in which we sense the poet is also invested – stem not from hardship, but from the comfortable *ennui* of a Sunday morning:

The pungent oranges and bright, green wings  
Seem things in some procession of the dead,  
Winding across wide water, without sound.                    (*CPP* 53)

These lines effect an inversion, in which reality no longer displaces ancient myths but rejuvenates them. The shift perhaps anticipates the speaker’s desire that his own verse should similarly transform experience, although later in the poem the artistic impulse is carefully differentiated from the religious one. Indeed, the religious imagery, though rich

and evocative, is freighted with ambiguous connotations; for the stanza's closing line introduces an etymological subversion of the sacred: "Dominion of the blood and sepulchre". In biblical language "sepulchre" carries overtones of duplicity, especially when an innocent exterior conceals inner corruption: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead *men's* bones, and of all uncleanness" (Mathew 23:27). Thus Stevens' employment of the term for Christ's own tomb is subtly provocative, suggesting that Christianity itself has become an arid and casuistic doctrine.

Such nuances in "Sunday Morning" often operate at a tangent to its surface meanings, and so the argument of the poem progresses, *faux-naïf*, as if the first stanza had merely introduced, not traduced, the spiritual. Hence the second stanza, in anticipating the woman's own objections to the religious impulse, professedly introduces a fresh motif in the poem, yet actually preserves its semantic continuity:

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?  
 What is divinity if it can come  
 Only in silent shadows and in dreams?  
 Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,  
 In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else  
 In any balm or beauty of the earth,  
 Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?            (CPP 53)

The woman anticipates the pseudo-choric figures of Stevens' later poetry, such as the spokesman of "Esthétique du Mal", in that the connection between the views she articulates – or those projected on to her – and the deeper sensibilities of the poet is left deliberately uncertain. Her intensifying emotion is suggested by the three progressively lengthening questions, of one, two and four lines respectively, but it is not clear whether the poet is complicit in this defiant energy, or merely describing a perspective at the opposite extreme to the ascetic religiosity explored elsewhere. Stevens goes to great lengths to avoid emotional introspection, which practice helps to shape the impersonal voice in which he later amplifies his supreme fiction. Here the woman's spiritual anxieties seem a shorthand for the uncertainties of the age, but the general resonance of her questions is offset by the particularity of her sensory experiences. "Divinity must live within herself", proclaims the poet, in the first of the poem's aureate dicta, and successive

evocative phrases locate this divinity in specific settings: “passions of rain”, “falling snow”, “forest blooms”, “Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights”. By the close of the stanza, it is clear that these immediate physical experiences have entirely superseded philosophical abstractions: “These are the measures destined for her soul” (*CPP* 54).

Following this insight, the poem trades Christian themes for images of a mythical pagan foretime. Jove, unlike Jesus, had an “inhuman birth”, and was connected in the classical consciousness both with merrymaking and with war – vital antitheses to Christian piety. But, crucially, he remains estranged from the physical landscapes that fuel the imagination: the “large-mannered motions” of his “mythy mind”, associable with no “sweet land” and alliterated into self-parody, are insubstantial next to the woman’s sensory experience. Now that paganism, too, has been vitiated, the poet ventures questions of his own: “And shall the earth / Seem all of paradise that we shall know?” Rather than furnish a concrete answer, he pauses to envisage what form an earthly paradise might take:

The sky will be much friendlier then than now,  
A part of labour and a part of pain,  
And next in glory to enduring love,  
Not this dividing and indifferent blue. (*CPP* 54)

Vendler suggests that these lines “spring from self-pity”, and she deprecates Stevens’ lack of “Nietzschean brio”.<sup>63</sup> Neither accusation is entirely fair, for the “dividing and indifferent blue” is not merely an indulgent projection of the poet’s mood, but a reflection of the restless collective conscience of the 1910s. There is no lack of “brio”, for instance, in the seventh stanza, and though the expression elsewhere in the poem is hauntingly restrained, the concepts expressed are challenging:

There is not any haunt of prophecy,  
Nor any old chimera of the grave,  
Neither the golden underground, nor isle  
Melodious, where spirits gat them home,

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<sup>63</sup> Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens’ Longer Poems* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1969) 55. Not every authority finds implacable animosity to the sacred in Nietzsche. Walter Kaufmann argues that the apparent fervour of Nietzsche’s atheism has sometimes been overstated, and that Jesus exemplifies in Nietzsche’s writing “a childlike state of freedom from the passions”; a sensibility that arguably has much in common with the accommodations being pursued in “Sunday Morning”, once “passions” are understood as referring here to destructive impulses. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974) 342.

Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm  
 Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured  
 As April's green endures; or will endure  
 Like her remembrance of awakened birds,  
 Or her desire for June and evening, tipped  
 By the consummation of the swallow's wings. (CPP 54)

The fourth stanza preserves the poem's antiphonal structure, seeming to deny the possibility of thematic resolution. But the increasing vigour of the poet's response to the woman's enduring anxieties undercuts the superficial felicity of J. Hillis Miller's contention that "The worst evil is...a romanticism which kicks itself loose of the earth, or a pressure of reality so great that it overwhelms imagination".<sup>64</sup> Stevens is more confident here in lasting imaginative transformation than Hillis Miller concedes. The pressure of reality, for now, is not a threat to the imagination; that will come in later poems. Rather, religion and the imagination are both forces that give meaning to reality. But whereas the former seeks to confect an idealised, sterile and unreachable paradise, the latter allows the poet to create meaning in the present. His speaker is wholly invested in the force of particular experience, reflected in the modulation of tenses: "As April's green endures; or will endure". And, in one sense, the mind will very definitely "kick itself loose" of earth, for a memory necessarily outlasts the particularity of the experience it recalls. This insight is registered in the imagery of the stanza's concluding phrase, in which the tension between momentary experience and lasting recollection inheres in the contrast between the plosive ictus of "tipped" and the hushed sibilance of "swallows wings".

In the next stanza, the pattern of dialogue reaches its conclusion, with the woman's final thirst for "some imperishable bliss", and the poet's crowning response: "Death is the mother of beauty; hence, from her, / Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams / And our desires". Without the looming tragedy of death, life's pleasures would be devoid of meaning, for there would be no encroaching blackness to qualify them. Yet the imagery that attends this insight is less suggestive of a vital reality than a kind of detached Elysium:

She makes the willow shiver in the sun  
 For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze

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<sup>64</sup> J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens," *Critical Essays on Wallace Stevens*, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988) 83.

Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.  
 She causes boys to pile new plums and pears  
 On disregarded plate. The maidens taste  
 And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.        (*CPP* 55)

These dreamlike images are saved from the sterility of the afterlife because they at least admit of change. But the verbal action that describes these changes recalls the wistful estrangement from feeling embodied in the reverie of the opening stanza: “whispered” . . . “relinquished” . . . “disregarded” . . . “littering”. This withdrawn tone aside, the argument, as David Daiches observes, is one “that Milton’s Adam might have used to show that the consequences of the fall were not all bad”.<sup>65</sup> The parallel is astute, for “Sunday Morning” implicitly casts mankind as newly “fallen”, since the sustaining myths of antiquity are inadequate to the modern world. Thus the poem becomes simultaneously an investigation into the essential bond between reality and the imagination and an embodiment of the power of the imagination to uphold that bond.

But, having arrived at this insight, the speaker has yet to dramatise the character of the new world promised by his liberating vision. Some critics have read the seventh stanza as the most crucial for an understanding of Stevens’ implied poetic ambitions. Here the declamatory confidence of the speaking voice seems most assured:

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men  
 Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn  
 Their boisterous devotion to the sun,  
 Not as a god, but as a god might be,  
 Naked among them, like a savage source.        (*CPP* 55-6)

These lines are suggestive of joy in the sheer physical fact of being, an ethos condensed, sonnet-like, in the stanza’s concluding lines: “And whence they come and whither they shall go / The dew upon their feet shall manifest.” Taken in isolation, these rousing images endorse Stevens’ later assertion that “The poem is simply an expression of paganism, although, of course, I did not think that I was expressing paganism when I wrote it” (*L* 251). This quotation is often cited as an example of Stevens’ unhelpful flippancy when

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<sup>65</sup> David Daiches, *God and the Poets* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1984) 173.

referring to his own poems, but the latter clause is telling in another sense, suggesting some high minded ideal in the young poet, dismissed as merely pagan by a significantly older man.<sup>66</sup> The nature of this ideal is difficult to paraphrase, and the poem itself is laudable for the absence of manifesto phrases. What is clear, at least, is that Stevens' desire for sublimation in a sensate world is not simplistically asserted. B.J. Leggett has argued that stanza VII is the apotheosis of Nietzschean ideology in the poem, in that "the stanza represents the final unmasking of one of its ideologies as an *ideology* [Leggett's italics]".<sup>67</sup> In other words, in erecting a fiction to replace religion, Stevens has created a vision just as impossible as the one he seeks to replace. But too often critics have focused in this way on the pagan abandon of the seventh stanza, without recognising that its apparent spontaneity is only licensed by the bruising meditation of the sixth:

Is there no change of death in paradise?  
 Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs  
 Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,  
 Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,  
 With rivers like our own that seek for seas  
 They never find, the same receding shores  
 That never touch with inarticulate pang? (CPP 55)

If the pleasures of earthly experience are merely reproduced in celestial stasis, then true happiness will be impossible, for lack of change prohibits both the consummation of joy and the manifestation of sadness against which joy must be measured. Thus the poem is not simply a naive expression of the puissance of reality. Rather, its vision encompasses the "sure obliteration" of the preceding stanza and the "inarticulate pang" presented here, so that the compensations that the poet finds in secular imagination are authentic and hard-won. The restless dissatisfaction of the concluding lines, expressed in "waiting, sleeplessly", functions on two levels. It both emphasises mankind's collective restlessness, which informs the religious impulse, and conveys the poet's singular dissatisfaction with unsubstantial myth and transient reality, which compels him to create anew. One response to this urge for renewal comes in the bawdiness of stanza VII, but this is merely one form that artistic rebellion may take. If the tone of stanza VII seems aberrant, it is because it is a

<sup>66</sup> Stevens was 48 when he replied to L. W. Payne, Jr.

<sup>67</sup> B.J. Leggett, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP, 1992) 41.

mood-experiment, indicating the extremities to which the poet is pushed in his search for truth. Critics who focus on this celebration of pure paganism as a flaw or jump in the argument are largely missing the point. The resolution achieved in the poem is aesthetic, not logical, and its remarkable final stanza transcends the limitations of the preceding theses:

She hears, upon that water without sound,  
 A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine  
 Is not the porch of spirits lingering.  
 It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."  
 We live in an old chaos of the sun,  
 Or old dependency of day and night,  
 Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,  
 Of that wide water, inescapable.  
 Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail  
 Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;  
 Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;  
 And, in the isolation of the sky,  
 At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make  
 Ambiguous undulations as they sink,  
 Downward to darkness, on extended wings.            *(CPP 56)*

Now the poet is confronted by a reality that does not correspond to any hieratic spiritual or religious order, but reflects merely "an old chaos of the sun". This condition is not without its attractions: it is "unsponsored, free, / Of that wide water"; that is to say, free from the sterility of Christian myth. The naturalistic images are not transcendent, but entropic: their cadences lead, ineluctably, "to darkness". But the initial dive enacted in "sink / Downward" gracefully flattens out, metrically and semantically, into the long glide of "on extended wings", the fragile beauty of this image reminding us of life as its own transient reward, not as an adjunct to some contrived Elysium. The poignancy of this recognition, and of "Sunday Morning" as a whole, is licensed by an impersonal idiom that finds its emotional charge in symbolic and abstract images, rather than in overtly personal experience.



Stevens' comments on "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" are famously offhand, and suggest a transparent poem: "I had in mind simply a man fairly well along in life, looking back and talking in a more or less personal way" (*L* 251). This impression is rather misleading. Each of the poem's numbered stanzas is an intelligible unit of thematic and aesthetic sense, but the progression of ideas throughout the whole poem is at first difficult to follow, anticipating the edict of "Man Carrying Thing" that "The poem should resist the intelligence / Almost successfully" (*CPP* 306). Indeed, the opacity of "Le Monocle" might survive a tenth reading, let alone a first, and this thematic complexity places it in a small subset of the poems in *Harmonium* – those that witness Stevens actively striving for an impersonal mode adequate to his artistic vision.

From the outset, "Le Monocle" courts involution:

"Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,  
 O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,  
 There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,  
 Like the clashed edges of two words that kill."  
 And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.  
 Or was it that I mocked myself alone?  
 I wish that I might be a thinking stone. (*CPP* 10)

The quotation has manifold significance. Its precious tone, "not nothing, no, no, never nothing", parodies the stylised, gnomic idiom of many of the volume's shorter lyrics, reliant on precise images and fine gradations of meaning to sustain their studied abstractions. As an act of reportage, it alerts the reader to his implied status as latecomer to a train of thought already in progress. And it also admits, immediately and, for *Harmonium*, atypically, to a time and place extrinsic to the contextual borders of the poem. But perhaps most crucially, the use of quotation symbolically distances the speaker from his own utterances. "[W]as it that I mocked myself alone", he ponders, immediately surrendering the tacit omniscience of the lyric "I", and introducing the dilemma which runs through the poem: does the artist's attempt to apprehend the world becomes – by reason of its futility – an act of self-mockery?

Thus uncertainty frames the first of the poem's cryptic maxims: "I wish that I might be a thinking stone". The speaker ostensibly desires an insensate sentience, permitting the dry pleasures of the mind without the anguish of the heart. But the following stanza offers

a stylised, Yeatsian vision of the rejected sensual world, “the choirs of wind and wet and wing”, that belies this wish, and the speaker is thrown into uncertainty:

Shall I uncrumple this much crumpled thing?  
I am a man of fortune greeting heirs;  
For it has come that thus I greet the spring.                    (CPP 11)

Harold Bloom takes the first of these lines as a sexual lament, “more likely the question refers to Stevens’ own sexual organ”, though the poet’s testimony contradicts this interpretation: “I am some hundreds of years behind other people, and it is going to be a long time before I let a commercialism like sex appeal get any farther than the front fence” (L 251).<sup>68</sup> A “crumpled thing” is surely chiefly suggestive of crumpled paper: the discarded lyrics which represent the poet’s failures to reflect the vitality of nature, and, like his lover, “make believe a starry *connaissance*”. The opposition between withdrawn aestheticism and a vibrant but transient physical passion does not appear contrived merely to create a dialectic pattern. Rather it is suggestive of a dilemma keenly felt by the forty-year-old Stevens, who is unable to reconcile the intellectual and physical spheres. The speaker rejects the inadequate succour of intellectual tradition: “I shall not play the flat historic scale”. Yet artistic exemplars remain dear to him, and their value seems threatened by the lady’s sensuous allure: “Why, without pity on these studious ghosts, / Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep?”

Lucy Beckett finds in “Le Monocle” much that recalls “the weary revulsions of the *Prufrock* poems”.<sup>69</sup> The comparison is tonally astute, but the poem reveals a particular dynamic which, rather than aping early Eliot, instead anticipates his mature verse. In *Ash-Wednesday*, the speaker’s desire to reframe personal experience in an impersonal, religious tradition is undermined by the plangent evocation of the physical desire he would renounce:

From the wide window towards the granite shore  
The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying  
Unbroken wings

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<sup>68</sup> Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1977) 39.

<sup>69</sup> Lucy Beckett, *Wallace Stevens* (London: Cambridge UP, 1974) 76.

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices  
 In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices  
 And the weak spirit quickens to rebel  
 For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell  
 Quickens to recover (VI, 192-9)

Though “lost”, these ephemeral images have their own strange permanence, reflected in the chiasmic iteration of “fly seaward, seaward flying”. Here is a more compelling vision than any remote and static heaven, and we observe a similar dynamic at play in “Le Monocle”, in which prelapsarian bliss is symbolically rejected through the attribution of tellurian qualities to the Edenic apple:

But it excels in this, that as the fruit  
 Of love, it is a book too mad to read  
 Before one merely reads to pass the time. (CPP 11)

“Sunday Morning” introduced the concept that beauty is compelling because of its very transience, “Death is the mother of beauty”, but “Le Monocle” complicates this paradox, as the speaker’s recognition of the value of transient pleasure sits uncomfortably alongside his acceptance of his own diminished capacity to take part in the amours of youth, reading merely “to pass the time”. This conceit soon becomes axiomatic:

For me, the firefly’s quick, electric stroke  
 Ticks tediously the time of one more year. (CPP 12)

Again, the sonic qualities of the verse augment its meaning, the clipped alliteration of “quick, electric stroke” setting up a sharp contrast with the orotund vowels of “one more year”. These phrases manifest a kind of schizophrenia, simultaneously gesturing to different facets of the speaker’s persona. That he should retain the sensitivity needed to register the quickness and electricity of the firefly’s flight surely undercuts the very assertion that this signifies merely the tedium of the unfurling seasons. But the poem’s argument has no obvious logical progression. Many of its stanzas are best understood as individual mood-experiments: units of rational and aesthetic sense which may contribute to an intelligible overall schema, but not necessarily in a particular linear sequence.

Perhaps the most crucial change in mood arrives in the sixth stanza, a crux in the poem, which challenges the validity of the artistic process. The deliquescent imagery of its opening lines recalls the “dividing and indifferent blue” of “Sunday Morning”. In the earlier poem, this “blue” signified the drabness of a present reality soon to be replaced by the animating forces of the imagination. But here the suggestion is that age clouds artists’ apprehension of things being various, so that “The ephemeral blues must merge for them in one, / The basic slate, the universal hue”. The rhythmic balance of the latter line – comprising a pair of three-word phrases, hinging on a strong caesura – lends this description a deadening finality, suggesting that the reduction of the ephemeral to the universal is inimical to the creative process. This in turn undercuts the seeming auspiciousness of the following line, “There is a substance in us that prevails”, which becomes less suggestive of enduring vitality than enduring yearning for vitality. The suggestion of disappointment in old age anticipates the decaying fruits of stanza VIII.

Even should the old poet attempt to recapture a sense of the variety of experience, his attempts are implicitly doomed, as the comparable efforts of bald amorists to transcribe the “fluctuations” of love – properties of youth alien to the now-desiccated poet – provoke a sterile pedantry: “their scrivening / Is breathless to attend each quirky turn”. The amorists’ tawdry insignificance, as “introspective exiles, lecturing”, is a condition genuinely feared by Stevens, implying a diminishing confidence in the capacities of his poetic voice, a voice that in “Sunday Morning” had seemed markedly more secure.

Parable soon displaces pessimism, as stanza VII opens with a curious sequence of images:

The mules that angels ride come slowly down  
 The blazing passes, from beyond the sun.  
 Descensions of their tinkling bells arrive.  
 These muleteers are dainty of their way.  
 Meantime, centurions guffaw and beat  
 Their shrilling tankards on the table-boards.            (*CPP* 12)

Two states are parodied in these lines: a religious state of mind, attending divine epiphanies inadequate to sustain the spirit; and a communal, Bacchic abandon, also inadequate, but more immediately appealing. Both demand a state of mind implicitly inaccessible to the poet, who seems unable either to rejoice in myth or to luxuriate in

sensory experience, as his explication makes clear: “The honey of heaven may or may not come, / But that of earth both comes and goes at once”. He is moved temporarily to entertain a resolution for this dilemma: “Suppose these couriers brought amid their train / A damsel heightened by eternal bloom”. Such a damsel has obvious appeal, but she is too convenient a fiction, like some eternal Persephone, combining the allure of physical love with the permanence of the spiritual. The classical references serve only to reinforce the impossibility of permanent joy, and the salving vision melts away, to be replaced by nihilism:

Two golden gourds distended on our vines,  
 We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,  
 [ . . . ]  
 The laughing sky will see the two of us  
 Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains. (CPP 13)

The bodies of the speaker and his love are clinically “distended”; the personified sky is “laughing” at their plight; and the accelerating alliteration of the final line compounds the ineluctability of physical decay. Furthermore, the image of “Two golden gourds” corresponds more readily to the undertone of sexual defeat that Bloom divines in earlier stanzas. In any case, the evocation of physical decline is striking, and the tone of resignation contrasts with the forced dynamism of stanza IX, in which euphoric and martial imagery recalls the penultimate stanza of “Sunday Morning”. But here the violence and idiocy of war are conflated with the desultoriness of the poetic act, in “verses wild with motion, full of din”, and the speaker mocks his own tendencies towards melodrama: “Most venerable heart, the lustiest conceit / Is not too lusty for your broadening”. Despite these ironies, the end of the stanza witnesses the speaker risen from his previous resignation, and searching for an authentic voice once more: “Where shall I find / Bravura adequate to this great hymn?”

This question is an obvious focus for the final three stanzas. In the first, the speaker eschews the religious impulse in terms that connect mythmaking and masturbation: “Memorabilia of the mystic spouts, / Simultaneously watering their gritty soils”. The speaker removes himself from the company of corrupt mystics by adopting instead the mantle of a yeoman, who “know[s] no magic trees, no balmy boughs”, but is able to forge genuine connections between the mind and reality: “I know a tree that bears / A semblance



The descending pigeons of “Sunday Morning” offered the exquisite possibility of redemption on their “extended wings”, but here there is no scope for “ambiguous undulations”, as the blue pigeons are mired in iterative banalities, “around and round and round”, while the white pigeons, like many of the poet’s aspirations, merely “flutter to the ground”. Different coloured birds may dramatise individual aspects of the same creature, just as the dark and rose rabbis may reflect the differing moods of the poem’s singular speaker, and thus his shifting response to the external world. Perception is all in these lines, and midway through the stanza we find the implication of poetic progress. Whereas the dark rabbi “found / Man proved a gobbet to my mincing world”, the rose rabbi avers his determination to “still pursue, the origin and course / Of love” in an explicit present and into an implied future. But this apparent resolution is undercut by the concluding lines: “but until now I never knew / That fluttering things had so distinct a shade”.

These latter phrases can be read in a number of ways, suggesting either the speaker’s renewed determination to grapple with the breadth and detail of experience, or his slightly awed sense that this copiousness defies description, and necessarily defeats the poet in search of a supreme fiction. In “Sunday Morning” the speaker seemed content to have reached an accommodation, albeit imperfect, between real and imagined experience, but “Le Monocle” searches in vain for such a reconciliation, as its favourable presentations of art are continually undercut by the poet’s fear of irrelevance and decay.

As Eugene Paul Nassar has observed, a draft poem in *Opus Posthumous*, “The Naked Eye of the Aunt”, was clearly intended as a counterpoint to “Le Monocle”.<sup>71</sup> In this poem the lady, object of the poet’s affections, is herself vitiated by decay: “A maid of forty is no feathery girl”. But, crucially, her vision is unmediated by any monocle, and her naked eye reveals a world more unambiguously foreboding than the visions of “mon oncle”: “With what a weedy face / Black fact emerges from her swishing dreams” (*CPP* 547-8). This provides an important corrective to any reading of “Le Monocle” that is too conscious of the near-nihilism of stanzas VIII and XI. The poet’s transfiguring perception, symbolised by his uncle’s eyeglass, allows him to apprehend multiple facets of human experience, seeming intermittently to fulfil Stevens’ later dictum that “After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption.” Even so, the morbid treatment of age in “Le Monocle”, and its critique of the

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<sup>71</sup> Eugene Paul Nassar, *Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration* (Pennsylvania: U of Pennsylvania P, 1968) 150.

false promises of love, suggest a diminished confidence in the creative process which anticipates the anxieties of “The Comedian as the Letter C”:

The imagination, here, could not evade,  
 In poems of plums, the strict austerity  
 Of one vast, subjugating, final tone. (CPP 24)

“The Comedian” is an ambitious and expansive work, but its acknowledgement of a threat to the imagination from “one vast, subjugating, final tone” reflects Stevens’ increasing creative uncertainties in the years following “Sunday Morning”. Crispin, like Odysseus in Pound’s Canto I, embarks on a voyage after knowledge, the stages of which correspond loosely to stages in Stevens’ own career. Crispin encounters different manifestations of reality, to which he must find seriatim resolutions. At first, it appears that the hero will be able to confect “some starker, barer self / In a starker, barer world”. But, over the course of the poem, the daunting weight of reality proves overwhelming, and Crispin is “washed away by magnitude”. Each temporary stay against disorder clutched by Crispin is, we feel, a stance that Stevens had previously tested in his verse. So the successive “failure” of each of these approaches to reality suggests that Stevens is tacitly writing off elements of his own early career. Intimations of personal defeat, which we feel Stevens shares with Crispin, abound in the poem: “What counted was the mythology of self, / Blotched out beyond unblotching” (CPP 22).

The connection between Stevens and Crispin is similar to the connection between Pound and Mauberley. Stevens places himself at an ironic remove from Crispin, and was later at pains to acknowledge the comic dimensions of his voyage.<sup>72</sup> But the poem itself provides no obvious solution to the daunting intractability of the world that so troubles its hero, and the final sentiment is resigned: “So may the relation of each man be clipped.” “The Comedian as the Letter C” is ultimately constrained by Stevens’ personal anxieties, which he would take some time to overcome.

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<sup>72</sup> “You have to read the poem and hear all this whistling and mocking and stressing and, in a minor way, orchestrating, going on in the background” (L 351-52).



In its seriousness, self-scrutiny, and concern to find new modes, rhythms and motifs to alter expression and reflect a new age, the early work of Pound and Stevens lays firm foundations for their later, major achievements. My additional contention, that the two poets were consciously working towards comparable impersonal modes in this period, is complicated by the lack of symmetry between their early collections. Though *Harmonium* contains poems written between 1912 and 1923, it represents a more uniform and consistently excellent body of work than do Pound's writings in the same period, unless comparison is limited to Pound's most significant early poems: *Cathay*, *Homage to Sextus Propertius* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. One might attribute this contrast to greater scruple and self-awareness on Stevens' part, and it does seem likely that he made more judicious use of the waste-paper basket than Pound. But representations should be made in the younger poet's defence. For one thing, Pound's technical innovations, which placed him in the vanguard of the *Imagiste* and *Vorticist* movements, necessitated extensive trial and error. Stevens is not averse to experimentation, but most of the stylistic avenues explored in *Harmonium*, if not well-trodden, were at least amply signposted by the *Symboliste* writings of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé. Material considerations are also of moment. Stevens may have had to sacrifice some of his energies to the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, but this at least saved him from trying to earn a living as a man of letters: "I didn't for a moment like the idea of poverty, so I went to work like anyone else and kept at it for a good many years" (L 320). Stevens could publish when he wished. Pound had no such luxury. As he wrote, bitterly, to Harriet Monroe, "The problem is *how*, how in hell to exist without over-production" (L 48).

These obtrusive contrasts might threaten to unbalance a consideration of Pound's and Stevens' early work *collateralis*, were they not offset by a clutch of compelling parallels, through which important resemblances between their most significant poems begin to emerge. Each poet produced his first unequivocally major work in 1915: Pound in the luminous translations of *Cathay*, Stevens in the plangent cantos of "Sunday Morning". It is arguable that, in these works, each poet achieved the essential technical facets of an impersonal mode – revealing the insights of a detached speaker through contrasts and allusions, rather than through the linear accumulation of sense – before he had yet refined the impersonal sensibility that might allow these techniques fully to be exploited. Style preceded substance. And, even as the Modernist movement reached its zenith – as Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses* both appeared in 1922 – Pound and Stevens, self-consciously and separately, arrived at a crossroads. *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and *The*

*Comedian as the Letter C*, both hugely ambitious works, struggle to accommodate private sensitivities to the manifest indifference of the universe. And the *personae* of these poems, each combing visionary eloquence with a weary, defeated idealism, reflect their creators' ongoing search for a sensibility adequate to a challenging and alien modernity. Pound's Mauberley and semi-autobiographical "E.P." have much in common with Stevens' Crispin. Mauberley's pallid and overwrought lines anticipate Crispin's inadequacy to "the difficulty of rebellious thought" (CPP 32). And E.P.'s insights, though more vital and energetic than Mauberley's wan lamentations, are still reactive, limited by external pressures that leave his sentiments, like Crispin's, "concluding fadedly" (CPP 37). In both poems, the speakers cannot yet transcend the poverties that they describe.

If Pound and Stevens had reached similar cruces, their immediate responses could not have been more different. *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* cannot properly be called a "crisis poem", because Pound already knew the form and measure of the poetry he wanted to write, and had, as the "Ur-cantos" testify, already begun writing it. Read in isolation, *Mauberley* seems a brooding and embattled work. But, set against the nascent development of the Cantos, E.P.'s fulminations and Mauberley's pieties read almost as a sardonic *adieu* to London literary life, allowing Pound to come to terms with a phase of his career that was drawing naturally to a close. In contrast, Crispin's anxieties do not signal an easy transition or change of direction for Stevens. Rather, the struggles of the hapless voyager appear to be a direct proxy for Stevens' own fundamental uncertainties about the value and direction of his work. After the publication of *Harmonium* in 1923, Stevens entered a long period of poetic inactivity, and would publish nothing of significance for over a decade. The contrast between Pound's ongoing productivity and Stevens' silence is symbolically enhanced by an inquiry Pound made in 1927, via the proxy of William Carlos Williams, into Stevens' willingness to contribute poems to *The Exile*. Stevens demurred that he had no work to send.<sup>73</sup> So, for a time, the two poets' paths starkly diverged. Pound busied himself with the Cantos, publishing *A Draft of XVI Cantos* in 1925, and then *A Draft of XXX Cantos* in 1930, while Stevens occupied himself with his family and career. The latter's correspondence in this period contains frequent excuses that he was too busy to write, citing a sense of added responsibility after the birth of his daughter, Holly, in 1924. But these quotidian duties cannot entirely explain Stevens' lack of output, as a more intimate

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<sup>73</sup> Stevens' letter to Williams eventually appeared as "A Letter," in *Antaeus*, XXXVI, (Winter, 1980) 146. This episode is mentioned in Milton J. Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 124.

and unguarded letter to Williams seems to show: “I have been moved to the attic, so as to be out of the way, where it ought to be possible for me to smoke and loaf and read and write and sometimes I feel like doing all of these things but, so far, I have always elected to go to bed instead” (*L* 245). Outwardly, Stevens seems not to have been exercised by his long silence, and it would be wrong to impute to him an unspoken turmoil merely to satisfy the romantic assumption that genius must ever be restless and unconsolated. But it is legitimate to note that the poems that immediately precede and follow his hiatus, with the exception of a few beautiful miniatures in *Ideas of Order*, are arguably constrained by a similar set of limitations. In moving from “The Comedian as the Letter C” to “Owl’s Clover”, Stevens traded one set of anxieties for another, leaving the stage after the private creative crisis recorded in “The Comedian”, only to be confronted, when next he took up his pen, by the pervasive uncertainty of the nineteen-thirties about the place of art in politically febrile times.

When set in chronological parallel, the rapid advances of Pound’s early *Cantos* seem difficult to reconcile with the ongoing anxieties of Stevens’ stuttering middle phase. This is not a case of Pound’s solving problems to which Stevens could find no answer. Indeed, the vituperative “Hell Cantos”, to say nothing of the politically charged verse that was to follow, show that a thirst for contemporary relevance could be as deleterious to Pound’s verse as to Stevens’. But Pound had found a productive idiom, if not a perfect one. Only in 1937, in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, did Stevens achieve a similarly fitting style. The verbal economy and thematic flexibility of that poem inaugurate the essential techniques of Stevens’ mature work. Yet the importance of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” is not only a matter of technique; its impersonal sensibility brings Stevens’ poetic ambitions once more into accord with Pound’s. In the figure of the guitarist, Stevens refines his sense of the artist as autonomous creator, adequate, as Crispin was not, to the challenges of the reality he faces. And in the closing cantos of the poem, Stevens extends the poet’s own creative practice as a template for collective enlightenment. This is a triumph of the imagination over the deadening realities of the present: a celebration of the ability to conceive a world that will be different tomorrow. In other words, the poem looks forward, as well as back, and in this it belatedly matches a sequence of developments that Pound had mastered some years before. For Pound’s famous dictum “imitate, translate, create” is not a unitary programme of improvement: its three phases correspond to a sequence of tenses. Imitation produces verse dominated by a past tense, by the work that directly inspired it. Pound’s Provençal poems, for instance, which revel in the landscape

and sensibilities of the Troubadours, are an exercise in sophisticated pastiche. Translation, in Pound's sense of the term, requires an active present tense, as the poet reshapes the vital elements of an older work into a poem adequate to the exigencies of the present age: *Cathay* and *Propertius* exemplify this art. But creation demands a future tense, which is also essential to the impersonal modes that Pound and Stevens strove to refine. Pound's paradiso terrestre and Stevens' supreme fiction posit a future in which the insights of artists will resist the material vulgarity of the modern world, and in which the finest achievements of the past will be sustained. In both cases, the transfiguring vision is licensed by the liberating possibilities of an impersonal voice, which can move beyond the confines of a singular perspective, and outside a fixed point in time.

This model of tenses is inexact. Both poets, in their early work, achieve fleeting visions of futurity, such as the prophetic asides in Pound's *Three Cantos*, or Stevens' lusty parable in Canto VII of "Sunday Morning". And though some of Stevens' early, *symboliste* poems could be described as exercises in imitation, he produced no translations to compare with Pound's.<sup>74</sup> However, the broader parallels that the schema affords have definite value. Each poet struggled to come to terms with a daunting inheritance, each struggled against contemporary social forces inimical to art, and each gradually evolved an impersonal voice that transcended these struggles, and provided a hieratic mode in which future salvation, aesthetic or material, could be imagined.

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<sup>74</sup> Stevens did produce some translations, such as his 1918 "Moment of Light", a translation of "Instant de clarté" by Jean Le Roy. But his translations are not among his major poems. It is tempting, if a little indulgent, to wonder whether Stevens' troubled progression from imitation to creation was impeded by his omission of the middle phase. But this would perhaps exaggerate the general applicability of Pound's dictum, which cannot be used as a yardstick for other poets, though it does seem apposite to his own writing.

## Chapter 3: Finding a Form

### The Early Cantos

*A modern work it is said must have a purpose, which may be the God - an artist must serve Mammon - he must have "self concentration" selfishness perhaps. You I am sure will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity and be more of an artist, and 'load every rift' of your subject with ore.*

John Keats, To Percy Bysshe Shelley, 16 August 1820

Pound's impersonal mode is not merely an asset to *The Cantos*: without it they could not have been written. In tracing the ebb and flow of civilisations, Pound requires a perspective from which to collate essential insights, and an idiom in which to preserve them. The scale of Pound's ambition is obvious from the first lines of Canto I, which begin *in medias res*:

And then went down to the ship,  
 Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and  
 We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,  
 Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also  
 Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward  
 Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,  
 Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess. (I/3)

That the poem should begin here – not just with the *Nekuia*, but with this particular passage – has important implications. In Homer, Odysseus' seven-year sojourn with Circe is a curious period of stasis, conveniently rounding the length of his voyage to ten years, which mirrors the siege of Troy. So Odysseus' departure from Circe's island is a return to action, renewing the spirit and purpose of the epic after an artificial lull. Pound, by implication, is similarly renewing Homer's noble spirit, after a lull of nearly three thousand years.

*The Cantos* do not offer literary pastiches, following *Homage to Sextus Propertius* with homages to Homer or Dante. Nor are they exercises in nostalgia, which simply

contrast an aureate past with a fallen present. Instead, they record an audacious attempt to recover what has been lost. Michael Alexander accurately describes Pound's "faculty for palimpsestuousness, the literary romance of the past carried to new depths of verbal resonance".<sup>1</sup> For Pound does more than lament the dying of the light: he makes of the past a living presence:

Sun to his slumber, shadows o'er all the ocean,  
 Came we then to the bounds of deepest water,  
 To the Kimmerian lands, and peopled cities  
 Covered with close-webbed mist, unpierced ever  
 With glitter of sun-rays  
 Nor with stars stretched, nor looking back from heaven  
 Swartest night stretched over wretched men there. (I/3)

These undulating, loosely dactylic cadences, are married to an extraordinary sequence of images, which function as a condensed parable of human endeavour: moving from obscurity ("deepest water") to society ("peopled cities"), and then reaching for heaven and the stars, before falling back into an enveloping darkness. Pound's indebtedness to the rhythmical and metrical characteristics of Anglo-Saxon verse is reflected in the internal rhymes and dense alliteration that accelerate this long sentence towards its unbroken final line. The phrases "Sun to his slumber" and "shadows o'er all the ocean" each correspond to the internally rhymed Anglo-Saxon half-line, and are syntactically separated. But together the clauses also form an ideogram, and the alliterating sibilants "Sun . . . slumber . . . shadows . . . ocean" blur their separation, intertwining light with shade, and the intimacy of a dream with the ocean's infinite expanse. Pound's earlier translation of "The Seafarer" anticipates these techniques, and, in the *ABC of Reading*, Pound comments on the susceptibility of Anglo-Saxon metre to his ideogrammic method: "I once got a man to start translating the **Seafarer** into Chinese. It came out almost directly into Chinese verse, with two solid ideograms in each half-line" (*ABC* 51, Pound's typography).

The ideogrammic method is essential to the operation of Pound's impersonal mode, allowing him to draw luminous particulars into an aesthetic or thematic synthesis. Consistently, Pound's images are things "in time", embodying continuous movement:

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, *Poetic Development*, 144.



will be supplied later.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we find Pound striking a dramatic pose, in ambiguous homage to another literary forebear:

Hang it all, Robert Browning,  
there can be but the one “Sordello.”                    (II/6)

Browning’s *Sordello* initially abandons art for politics, in the hope of gaining wider influence, only to realise that he was most persuasive as a poet: “(closed he his inculcating / A poet must be earth’s essential king)” (*Sordello*, V:505-6).<sup>3</sup> The mock vituperative opening of Canto II sets Pound and Browning in competition as heirs to this realisation – as does the erotesis “But *Sordello*, and my *Sordello*?” – only for the claims to primacy of both poets to be comprehensively quashed: “Lo *Sordels* si fo di Mantovana”.<sup>4</sup> This recognition provokes Pound to chafe against his own debt to Browning, so that the opening of Canto II can be read as dramatising the forging of a new and independent style. Accordingly, there follows a remarkable alteration in tone, as the stylised belligerence of the opening lines is abandoned, and the speaker’s solipsistic cavilling cedes to a blur of images:

So-Shu churned in the sea.  
Seal sports in the spray-whited circles of cliff-wash,  
Sleek head, daughter of Lir,  
                  eyes of Picasso  
Under black fur-hood, lithe daughter of Ocean;  
And the wave runs in the beach-groove:  
“ Eleanor, ελέναυς and ελέπτολις ! ”                    (II/6)

Again, the impersonal, lyric voice, skipping from image to image, affords an unlikely synthesis: the seal is first vividly described in its natural element, then revealed as a “daughter of Lir”, the Celtic sea-god, whilst its “eyes of Picasso” introduce a theme of

<sup>2</sup> See discussion of Canto XVII below.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Browning, *Sordello* V:505-6, *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, eds. Roma A. King, Jr., et al. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1970) 285.

<sup>4</sup> I.e. All *Sordellos* are ultimately facsimiles of Dante’s original *Sordello*. Carol F. Terrell records that the line is a quotation from a *vida* of *Sordello* in Camille Chabaneau’s *Les Biographies des Troubadours en Langue Provençale*, Carol F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980) 5.



metamorphosis that runs throughout the canto. Like Stevens in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, Pound honours Picasso’s facility to transfigure that which he depicts. Thus, in the following lines, Helen, Tyro and Dionysus are transfigured amidst a seascape that can both illuminate and obscure perception:

There is a wine-red glow in the shallows,  
A tin flash in the sun-dazzle.           (II, 38-9)

Eugene Paul Nassar has pointed out that these recurrent wave images are designed to convey the “partial image”, a semblance of static form glimpsed in the foam.<sup>5</sup> The elliptical “fair Dafne of sea-bords” is one such image, as is the “glass wave over Tyro”, which disguises her rape, and so perverts the natural order just as it obfuscates the poet’s perception. Canto II is deeply concerned with modes and qualities of perception. Stevens habitually achieves a distancing effect, in poems such as “Asides on the Oboe”, by projecting his facility for finer feeling onto a mythic “central man”. Pound employs a similar device by implicitly aligning himself with Acoetes, who alone recognised the divinity of Dionysus. And Acoetes’ repeated testimony, “I have seen what I have seen”, asserts the poet’s rôle as an essential witness to history.

Canto II moves from a solipsistic mien, chaffing against Browning’s influence, to a lyric and meditative idiom, in which the travails of the modern poet cede to an impersonal synthesis of mythic and pastoral imagery. The beginning of the following canto strikes a more intimate note, as Pound recalls resting on the Dogana’s steps in Venice, just as Browning had done decades before. This detail is not merely sentimental: it binds Pound to the cultural legacies he seeks to extend. On a first reading, these opening lines seem a reminder of the confident and determined self-fashioning that had characterised Pound’s London years, as they assert his status as inheritor of a great tradition through overt rather than symbolic means, and mark a rare moment in *A Draft of XXX Cantos* when the poet becomes, albeit fleetingly, the central subject of his poem. But the following lines swiftly dissolve the spatio-temporal fixity of the canto’s opening, so that we as readers match Pound’s own imaginative journey from modern Venice into the mythical past:

Gods float in the azure air,

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene Paul Nassar, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound: The Lyric Mode* (London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 20.

Bright gods and Tuscan, back before dew was shed.  
 Light: and the first light, before ever dew was fallen. (III/11)

The timeless beauty of Tuscany prompts a vision of eirenic contentment, before the ruin of history complicated man's relationship with the transcendent, "back before dew was shed". "First light" combines the notion of an originary power with prelapsarian innocence, and so follows a loosely Christian conception of man as the architect of his own downfall. But this wistful lament is swiftly corrected by the practical vigour of Myo Cid. The Cid is the definitive man of action, "Breaking his way to Valencia". This belligerence encapsulates the decadent decline of the Renaissance, in which the ideals that inform Pound's *reverie* above were sullied. A sense of moral and cultural decay is summed up in the equivocal motto of the Este which concludes the Canto: "Nec Spe Nec Metu" (III/12).

From the corruption and "Drear waste" at the close of Canto III, the poem undergoes another rapid shift in tone and theme. Canto IV traces the poet's attempt to preserve truth and beauty in the aftermath of destruction: 'Troy but a heap of smouldering boundary stones' (IV/13). The parallels between ancient conflicts and the wastage of the Great War are ever present in Pound; yet this canto is suffused with images of light and unsullied natural objects, which swiftly displace the desolate ruins of Troy:

The silver mirrors catch the bright stones and flare,  
 Dawn, to our waking, drifts in the green cool light;  
 Dew-haze blurs, in the grass, pale ankles moving. (IV/13)

Mirrors are an oft repeated symbol in *The Cantos* for the mutating force of the artist's perception, whilst dawn is vividly associated in Pound's imagination with both the origins of civilisation and the sources of personal creativity. It is the power of his imagination to illuminate and transform that allows the poet to confront a series of conflated classical and Provençal tragedies. First, the elliptical "Ityn" introduces the Ovidian legend of Procne, Tereus and Philomela, which functions as a condensed metaphor for debased love, just as it does for Eliot in *The Waste Land*: "And still she cried, and still the world pursues, / 'Jug Jug' to dirty ears".<sup>6</sup> This suggestive allusion is swiftly coupled with the similarly tragic story of Guillem de Cabestanh, and followed by a lengthier depiction of Actaeon. There is

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<sup>6</sup> Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 64.

a clear division in Canto IV between tragic victims (Itys, Cabestanh, Actaeon) and poets (Ovid, Vidal and, of course, Pound), but Actaeon's demise is particularly poignant, as he is punished for glimpsing the same divinity sought by the poets:

Not a patch, not a lost shimmer of sunlight,  
the pale hair of the goddess. (IV/14)

The repeated negatives, which jar with the affirmative images they introduce, suggest Actaeon's momentary confusion, whilst the lengthening sibilance of "lost shimmer of sunlight" enacts his burgeoning recognition of Diana's beauty. Actaeon's misfortune captures a particularly morbid truth for the poet, that the ability to perceive beauty can be a curse. As we have seen, Stevens refines the same insight in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle", in which "Death is the mother of beauty". Momentarily, it appears that a resolution for this quandary is at hand:

Thus the light rains, thus pours, *e lo soleills plovil*  
The liquid and rushing crystal  
beneath the knees of the gods. (IV/15)

Here water is supplanted by crystal in its association with light, symbolising the greater permanence of divinely inspired perception, exercised "beneath the knees of the gods". Yet this attitude is soon recast as a projection of Arnaut Daniel's convictions, for "liquid and rushing crystal" contracts, some lines later, to a "shallow eddying fluid", suggesting that ancient deities are an insufficient spur for an artist in the modern age. Time and again in the early *Cantos* an elevated or transfiguring vision (for which the impersonal perspective is a prerequisite) is attained, only to be obscured by the poet's anxious awareness of his subjectivity and personal limitations. Pound retains in these early cantos a sense of isolated futility: "One scarlet flower is cast on the blanch-white stone" (IV/15). Thus the Odyssean search for succour and understanding goes on, and the canto moves past "Gray stone-posts leading", to close with the image of poet and reader each entwined in the literary legacy of the past:

And we sit here...  
there in the arena... (IV/16)

In Canto V, the timeless and impersonal voice which Pound has already intermittently achieved seems suddenly elusive, for “the clock ticks and fades out”. Moments of visionary experience fall “on the barb of time”, and, accordingly, the pellucid natural order that had seemed a mainstay of the poet’s inspiration becomes instead an agent of change and flux (V/17):

Fades the light from the sea, and many things  
 “Are set abroad and brought to mind of thee,”  
 And the vinestocks lie untended, new leaves come to the shoots,  
 North wind nips on the bough, and seas in heart  
 Toss up chill crests (V/18)

Whereas in Cantos III and IV the poet’s vision habitually contracts to an intense focus on particular images, here his perspective expands to take in the deadened reality which lies outside such bursts of fleeting inspiration. “Fades light from the sea-crest”, declares the speaker, in adaptation of Sappho’s poem to Atthis.<sup>7</sup> In its original context the image is uncomplicated pathetic fallacy, encapsulating Sappho’s sense of loss at Atthis’ desertion; but in Pound’s hands the phrase carries renewed force, stripping his own wave imagery of its previous fecundity. Pound is fond of asyndeton, layering image upon image without the intermission of conjunctions; but here the strong caesuras and plentiful “ands” break up the rhythm of the verse, so that the clauses unfold hesitantly, like a gradual admission of unsavoury truths: the untended vinestocks, the bitter North wind, and the uncaring sea.

Despite these pessimisms, Canto V is by no means an admission that the battle for inspiration must be lost. A reference to Iamblichus introduces the Neoplatonic concept of light as an originating force, and deepens the associations Pound has already made between the impersonal voice of *The Cantos* – essential to their associative structure and vatic insights – and the lambent natural imagers into which these essential insights are so often distilled.<sup>8</sup> Platonism carries religious overtones, but for Pound the concept was far removed from any covert, Hebraic monotheism. In the *Guide To Kulchur* Pound distinguishes

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<sup>7</sup> For an account of Sappho’s poem, see Claude Calame, “Sappho’s Group: An initiation into Womanhood”, *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*, ed. Ellen Greene (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996) 118-22.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of Platonism in *The Cantos* see A. D. Moody, “The *Cantos* of Ezra Pound: ‘to build light’”, *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 308-318.

between “two mystic states . . . the divine splendour with goodwill towards others” and “the man on fire with God and anxious to stick his snotty nose into other men’s business”. Pound describes the first state as “a dynamism...paradisical and a reward for itself seeking naught further” (*GK* 223-4). In other words, the Platonic spirit is revered as archetypal for the dedication of the artist to his craft, a theme expanded later on in the sequence. Notwithstanding these connotations, in its first manifestation in Canto V, Platonism is threatened by darkness:

John Borgia is bathed at last. (Clock-tick pierces the vision)  
 Tiber, dark with the cloak, wet cat gleaming in patches.  
 Click of the hooves, through garbage,  
 Clutching the greasy stone. “And the cloak floated.” (V/18-19)

The evocative euphemism “is bathed” and the image of the “Tiber, dark with the cloak” embody the corruption of Renaissance Italy, as the cloak, suggestive of concealment, envelops an entire river in gloom. Pound has cast deviousness in feline form before, notably in his treatment of Bertrams de Born: “and the green cat’s-eye lifts toward Montaignac”.<sup>9</sup> Though corrupt, Bertrams is a compelling figure, whose scheming Pound does not explicitly condemn. Similarly, the darkness of Canto V is not a prelude to the coarse barbarism of the “Hell Cantos” (XIV and XV); rather it presents “Europe” in the Jamesian sense, corrupt yet sophisticated, debased yet still alluring. This complicates any notion of history as a benign treasure trove for the poet. Once again, he is alone on the “moonlit river”, and the aesthetic touchstones which should support his redemptive vision of the world are once more intangible, and “run in the wind” (V/20).

These insecurities provoke a fresh tack, and Canto VI revives the numinous and timeless images that shape the poem’s elevated, lyric mode: “The stone is alive in my hand, the crops / will be thick in my death year” (VI/21). The focus of this canto on individual acts of love and kindness qualifies the preoccupation of preceding cantos with purely hieratic and mythic subjects. Indeed, much of Canto VI reads as subtle qualification, remedying the thematic lacunae of preceding cantos, before the following canto recapitulates their major themes in a rush, flitting between the ages in search of illumination.

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<sup>9</sup> “Near Périgord” (*CPP* 305).

Initially, the preoccupations of Canto VII are not visual but aural: “poor old Homer blind, / blind as a bat, / Ear, ear for the sea-surge”. Homer’s is a model of fully achieved art, as is the work of Henry James, “weaving an endless sentence”; but their example is difficult to follow in a desolate age of “false marble” and “old men’s voices” (VII/24). The speaker’s reaction to these difficulties, “stubborn against the fact”, recalls E.P.’s defiance in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. Luminescent tropes from earlier cantos are repeated as if for comfort:

The sea runs in the beach-groove, shaking the floated pebbles,  
Eleanor!

The scarlet curtain throws a less scarlet shadow;  
Lamplight at Buovilla, e quel remir, (VII/25-6)

Water imagery is once more employed to signify impermanence and flux, “shaking the floated pebbles!” just as people are shaken by the irresistible movements of history. Pound may have in mind the gloomy imagery of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 60 – “Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore / So do our minutes hasten to their end” – while Terrell suggests that the scarlet curtain refers to Golding’s translation of the *Metamorphoses*: “As when a scarlet curtaine streynd against a playstred wall / Dooth cast like shadowe, making it seem ruddye therewith all”.<sup>10</sup> Pound characteristically adapts this metaphor, so that the “less scarlet shadow” suggests that the originary light of civilisation grows steadily weaker, leaving us with “Lamplight at Buovilla”. Just as Arnaut Daniel was forced to imagine the attainment of his paramour, so Pound must rebuild the weakened legacy of Homer, Ovid and Dante. Canto VII restores the poet as a detached and impersonal “watcher of things, / Of things, of men, of passions, / Eyes floating in dry, dark air”, and the first section of *The Cantos*, “full of flames and voices”, establishes the technical and thematic foundations of Pound’s impersonal vision for his epic (VII/27).

Cantos VIII–XI form a group, concerned with the life and times of Malatesta, an Italian lord and *condottiere*. These cantos provide the first lengthy consideration of a particular historical figure in the poem, presaging the detailed treatments of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams in later *Cantos*. But Malatesta’s struggle also becomes an extended metaphor for the perennial difficulties facing the artist in any age, and to this

<sup>10</sup> Terrell, *Companion to the Cantos*, 33; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. William Golding (1567) (London: Penguin, 2002) 311.

extent we discern Pound's own preoccupations in the verse, which surface in the first line of Canto VIII:

These fragments you have shelved (shored).                    (VIII/28)

The line parodies Eliot's "These fragments I have shored against my ruins", which, according to George Dekker, invites the reader to view the preceding Canto VII as Pound's own "Waste Land".<sup>11</sup> Dekker reads the allusion as hostile to Eliot, carrying the suggestion that "*The Waste Land*, far from making the useful part of the past more available, rather 'shelves' it again".<sup>12</sup> Implicitly, therefore, Pound's verse will redress this deficiency, by finding fresh energies in ancient history and myth.

Pound's ambition to abandon the "dogmatic deduction" and "diffuseness" he had criticised in Eliot is all very well, but his own approach to history creates aesthetic problems.<sup>13</sup> To some extent, Pound's verse creates the mindset through which it can best be understood: *The Cantos* teach us to be pattern-seeking. But the Malatesta sequence begins to place patterns before poetry. Pound's densely referential style – a central component of his impersonal mode – is pushed to an extreme, as lengthy excerpts from Malatesta's letters and notebooks are introduced to questionable effect:

"Magnificent and Exalted Lord and Father in especial my  
 "lord with due recommendation: your letter has been pre-  
 "sented to me by Gentilano da Gradara and with it the bay  
 "pony (ronzino baictino) the which you have sent me                    (IX/39)

These documentary details seem at odds with the oracular voice encountered in earlier cantos, which had endeavoured to represent elements of natural beauty and timeless knowledge. The Malatesta Cantos anticipate the flaws of the China and Adams Cantos, in that the reader is sometimes overwhelmed with seemingly arbitrary details, the value and significance of which Pound does little to clarify. Still, the often prosaic and functional idiom of these cantos certainly captures something of the brusque dynamism of their hero. Thus in Canto VIII Malatesta

<sup>11</sup> Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> George Dekker, *Sailing after Knowledge: The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Routledge, 1963) 31.

<sup>13</sup> From Pound's annotations of *The Waste Land* manuscripts. See T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber, 1971) 11 & 39.

Commanded the Milanese in the spring,  
 The Venetians at midsummer,  
 The Milanese in the autumn,  
 And was Naples' ally in October,

He, Sigismundo, *templum aedificavit* (VIII/32)

These lines invest Malatesta's military conquests with the same vigour and inevitability as the changing seasons, moving from the brightness of spring to the darkness of winter. For all its dense and prosaic detail, the Malatesta sequence preserves the elemental symbolism of preceding cantos, so that Malatesta's defining achievement, "templum aedificavit", is an implicit node of light set against October darkness. The embattled Lord is attempting to recapture the tranquillity of his early youth, when

...the wind is still for a little

And the dusk rolled

To one side a little (VIII/32-3)

But Malatesta is born into a world that denies the possibility of tranquillity. His Temple, "so full of pagan works", is an offence against the religious mores of his time, just as his military conquests, "REX PRODITORUM", are an offence against the ruling elite (IX/41; X/44). These juxtapositions, between Malatesta's personal will and the corrupt, philistine forces who oppose him, culminate in an extraordinary image:

In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it. (XI, 127)

Even in an age of pervasive corruption and violence, Malatesta is able to "gather" the resources necessary to construct his Tempio. However, the phrase has negative implications for poets in the modern age, setting the artist at odds with the bulk of society – "the gloom" – and forever struggling against the current. Though Pound's attitudes should not be read as co-extensive with Malatesta's, the latter's fortitude, creativity and position *en dehors* social convention are indisputably approved in these cantos, just as his eventual fall is recounted with compassion:



And he wrote to young Piero:  
     Send me a couple of huntin' dogs,  
 They may take my mind off it.                   (XI/49)

Though the Malatesta sequence is fundamental to the development of Pound's overall vision for *The Cantos*, its implications for his impersonal voice are less clear. Cantos I – VII have already begun to reveal the mosaic patterns and syncretic effects made possible by a detached, vatic and impersonal sensibility. So for Pound then to tie his poem so closely to a single sensibility and subject in Malatesta might be viewed almost as an aesthetic and technical regression. The documentary elements of Cantos VIII – XI are certainly dubious, yet the acuity of the images in which Pound represents Malatesta's fall are remarkable, and remind us of the poet's genuine investment in the histories he describes, and of the acute personal emotion shrouded in the impersonal narratives of *The Cantos*.

In Canto XII the focus of the poem shifts abruptly to usury, destructive of the human potentiality embodied by Malatesta. The opening, "And we sit here / under the wall", refers back to Canto IV, but the total absence of light or lyricism anticipates Pound's vision of Hell in Cantos XIV and XV. Baldy Bacon, the main actor of Canto XII, is an inversion of Odysseus, cowardly and corrupt, whilst the "quintessential essence of usurers" delineated in subsequent lines stands in fixed opposition to the transcendent lyrics to come (XII/53).

Pound's sequencing of Cantos – they do not appear in chronological order of composition – is significant, as Canto XII could readily be treated *en bloc* with XIV and XV, were it not for the intermission of Canto XIII, an evocation of Confucian order. Pound does not regard history as a simple progression from barbarism to civilisation, as this canto aptly demonstrates. Rather, glimmers of civilisation have existed at various points in history, when the right conditions have been met:

And Kung said, and wrote on the bo leaves:  
     If a man have not order within him  
 He can not spread order about him                   (XIII/59)

Order, stemming from individual responsibility, lies at the heart of civilisation, and an ordered society is one that provides the conditions in which an artist may flourish: "And

‘When the prince has gathered about him / All the savants and artists, his riches will be fully employed’ (XIII/59). The canto teems with images already charged with creative energy by the earlier cantos, from the “lower river” by which Kung walks, to the sound of Tian’s lute rising “like smoke, under the leaves” (XIII/58). Such images cast Confucian order as an extension of inalienable natural principles, recalling the Platonic concept of originary light, and the artist’s search for this order is rendered with extraordinary poignancy at the canto’s close:

“...The blossoms of the apricot  
     blow from the east to the west,  
 And I have tried to keep them from falling.” (XIII/60)

These lines can be read as a dulcet reiteration of Malatesta’s ambitions, but the delicate imagery also recalls Actaeon’s cursed vision of “the pale hair of the goddess”, reminding us that the ability to perceive beauty is coterminous with the troubling awareness that it is finite.

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Pound’s vision of Hell has provoked numerous criticisms. Marianne Moore, in an otherwise generous review of the *Draft*, deals tersely with XIV and XV: “Stock oaths conduce to ennui, as would the stock adjective”.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile Eliot, in *After Strange Gods*, objects to the moral arbitrariness of the Hell Cantos: “If you do not distinguish between individual responsibility and circumstances in Hell, between essential Evil and social accidents, then the Heaven (if any) implied will be equally trivial and accidental”.<sup>15</sup> The qualifying “(if any)” carries a whiff of condescension to the *Draft*’s numerous paradisaic images, which are in fact neither trivial nor accidental. But condescension aside, whereas Moore’s aesthetic censure of the Hell Cantos is incisive, Eliot’s doctrinal objections rather miss the point. The very collapse of the distinction Eliot draws, between responsibility and circumstance, is part of what makes Pound’s Hell hellish. These cantos do not conceive an “essential Evil”, but depict instead the chaos of a modern world without meaningful communication or personal fortitude:

<sup>14</sup> Marianne Moore, “The Cantos”, *Poetry*, Vol. XXXIX, No.1 (October 1931) 45.

<sup>15</sup> T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber, 1934) 43.

And the betrayers of language  
 . . . . . n and the press gang  
 And those who had lied for hire;  
 the perverts, the perverters of language,  
                   the perverts, who have set money-lust  
 Before the pleasures of the senses;                   (XIV/61)

The implicit approbation of “pleasures of the senses” might well offend an Anglo-Catholic sensibility, and the transgressions listed, of political and fiscal corruption, are not so much offences against “morality” in a Biblical sense as indicators of modern social malaise. Thus Eliot has a point when he terms this hell “a perfectly comfortable one for the modern mind to contemplate”; though this too tallies with Pound’s intentions, as he remarked to Wyndham Lewis: “You will readily see that ‘hell’ is a portrait of contemporary England, or at least Eng. as she wuz when I left her” (*L* 191). In short, there is much to support George Dekker’s contention that Eliot undermines Pound’s hell “merely by taking it more solemnly than Pound intended it to be taken”.<sup>16</sup>

Eliot’s criticisms may not touch directly on poetic impersonality, but the questions he raises over Pound’s vision of hell are germane to the symbolic mechanisms of the poem. On the one hand, Pound’s avoidance of conventional ethics is in keeping with the conceptual progression of the *Draft*, as the primacy of individual responsibility over any imposed morality was made clear in Canto XIII, which immediately precedes the Hell Cantos:<sup>17</sup>

And they said: If a man commit murder  
                   Should his father protect him, and hide him?  
 And Kung said:  
                   He should hide him.   (XIII/59)

However, the congruence of these Confucian ideals with the implicit moral order of Cantos XIV and XV is obfuscated by an unremittingly visceral tone, which compromises the

<sup>16</sup> Dekker, *Sailing After Knowledge*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> For an account of Canto XIII as an introduction to the Confucian philosophy of *The Cantos*, see David Gordon, “Confucius, Philosophe,” *Paideuma* 5 (1976): 387-8.

effectiveness of the poetry. There is some precedent for this coarse diction in Dante, whose *Inferno* offers its fair share of sadistic and scatological imagery, but at times Pound seems to descend to a splenetic rant:<sup>18</sup>

skin-flakes, repetitions, erosions,  
 endless rain from the arse-hairs,  
 as the earth moves, the centre  
     passes over all parts in succession,  
 a continual bum-belch  
     distributing its productions.           (XV/65)

There is little subtlety in these lines, and limited poetic artifice beyond the layering of repellent images and the plosively alliterated “bum-belch”. We might flip this assessment on its head, and argue that the abusive style enacts the perfidy being described, were it not for the fact that the technique is so pervasive, becoming monotonous throughout the two Cantos. Far from expanding the disinterested and impersonal voice of earlier cantos, the presiding sensibility of the Hell Cantos is emotionally engaged and aesthetically stunted. Despite this, there are still ingenious formulations. The “malevolent stupidities”, “melted ossifications” and fabians “crying for the petrification of putrefaction” recapture interest that might be lost in the swirls of negativity, and ensure that many of Pound’s barbs hit home. And towards the end of XV there is a welcome alteration in tone, as light once more punctuates the darkness:

Plotinus gone,  
 And the shield tied under me, woke;  
 The gate swung on its hinges;  
 Panting like a sick dog, staggered,  
 Bathed in alkali, and in acid.  
 ‘Hέλιον τ’ ‘Hέλιον  
     blind with the sunlight,  
 Swollen-eyed, rested,  
     lids sinking, darkness unconscious.           (XV/66-7)

<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of the range of tone in Dante’s *Inferno*, see Thomas Goddard Bergin, *Dante’s Divine Comedy* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 33-47.

Plotinus, conflated with Perseus and armed with Minerva's shield, leads the poet away from horror: "keep your eyes on the mirror". The significance of Plotinus, as of Iamblichus in Canto V, is not explained beyond his temporary incarnation as Perseus, but certain of his philosophies are closely matched with Pound's vision of hell, as A.D. Moody observes: "Evil is that which is formless and shapeless, without order or measure...falling away 'in gloom and mud' into endless dissolution and darkness".<sup>19</sup> The poet is as yet "Blind with the sunlight" – unable fully to apprehend the visionary experience he desires – and the dying fall of Canto XV, inscribed with the synecdochic "Lids sinking", anticipates the lifting of darkness in XVI:

The grey stone posts,  
                                 and the stair of grey stone,  
 the passage clean squared in granite:  
                                 descending,  
 and I through this, and into the earth,  
                                 patet terra,  
 entered the quiet air  
                                 the new sky,  
 the light as after a sun-set,                                  (XVI/69)

This association of light with stone is anticipated by Malatesta's temple, and is a recurring trope in the poem, later condensed in Canto XLVII: "The light has gone down into the cave" (XLVII/238). Stone, like the "forest of marble" in Canto XVII, offers a tangible link with the past, so that the poet's descent down "the stair of grey stone" symbolises a retreat into a mythical foretime. The light which envelops him is light "as after a sun-set", which poignantly conveys the sense that artists in the modern age are somehow latecomers, straining to revivify lost traditions. Accordingly, this vision pre-dates Christian soteriology, corresponding instead to the classical concept of Elysium; in this case populated by Sigismundo and his brother Novello, and "founders, gazing at the mounts of their cities" (63). These cities, legacies of heroic endeavour, are soon threatened by the fresh hell of the twentieth century and the Great War. The trials of a series of artists, Henri

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<sup>19</sup> Moody, *Platonism*, 311.

Gaudier, Wyndham Lewis and Ernest Hemingway, illustrate the impotence of the artist faced with such global suffering, and are a tacit admission that the achievements of a Confucius – or even a Sigismundo – are no longer possible in an age when “A la fin y s’attaquaient pour manger” (XVI/73).

Canto XVII begins a new sequence, *A Draft of the Cantos 17-27*, published in September 1928. The opening words, “So that”, refer back to the close of Canto I and the fleeting appearance of Aphrodite. Her spirit anticipates the preoccupations of Canto XVII, which return the poem to its lyric mode, discarding the ugliness of Hell:

So that the vines burst from my fingers  
 And the bees weighted with pollen  
 Move heavily in the vine shoots:  
 Chirr – chirr – chirr-rikk – a purring sound,  
 And the birds sleepily in the branches.  
 Zagreus! IO Zagreus! (XVII/76)

The opening line revives the theme of metamorphosis expounded in Canto II. Specifically, it evokes the legend of Apollo and Daphne, though Ovid’s account, in which Daphne’s arms “grow . . . into branches”, is contradicted by Pound’s image, in which the transformation begins at the fingertips, recalling the extraordinary delicacy of Bernini’s sculpture “Apollo e Dafne”.<sup>20</sup> Just as Daphne fled from Apollo, the poet is fleeing the oppressive philistinism described in Cantos XIV-XVI. These moving, oracular images wholly outstrip the monotone aggressions of the “Hell Cantos”, and the following lines clarify the poet’s renewed desire for organic experience, “Chirr – chirr – chir-rikk”, which culminates in an appeal to Dionysus: “IO Zagreus”. This immediately associates the numinous landscapes of Canto XVII with Eleusinian ritual, a connection reinforced by the appearances of Persephone and Hermes later in the canto. In effect, the Venice of Pound’s personal experience has become a transfigured, impersonal Elysium:

Flat water before me,  
   and the trees growing in water,  
 Marble trunks out of stillness,

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<sup>20</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 48.

On past the palazzi,  
                                   in the stillness,  
 The light now, not of the sun.           (XVII/76)

Like Stevens, Pound can take the kernel of private experience and invest it with universal resonances. These lines embellish the prior associations of light with water and marble, and supply an evocative metaphor for the creation of Venice: “Marble trunks out of stillness”. It is as if the city has grown organically out of the “flat water”, and, though manmade, is in perfect equilibrium with an originary, Eleusian order. Canto XVI offered a fleeting vision of Elysium after the poet’s descent via “grey stone posts, / and the stair of grey stone”, and in XVII this vision is extended, the amplification enacted by the changing quality of the light in each scene: the illumination of XVI is “as after a sun-set”, retaining a residual connection with the real world; but in the following canto light is explicitly “not of the sun”, emphasising the poet’s total sublimation in a mystical, otherworldly realm.

Time in Canto XVII is an unstable dimension, and the verse moves freely between different settings. From the initial vision of Renaissance Venice, the canto retreats into ancient myth, assembling a sequence of phantasmal images. The cave of Nerea (Pound is inventing a daughter for Nereus) is a primal forbear for Venice, marked by the same stillness, “No gull-cry, no sound of porpoise”, and the same eirenic glow, repeating “the light not of the sun” (XVII/77). Zagreus feeds his panthers in a radiant meadow, “clear as on hills under light”; gods and a chorus of nymphs are to be found “under the almond trees”; and Hermes and Athene appear “As shaft of compass, / Between them, trembled”. The latter image has dual implications: Hermes and Athene, symbols of travel and wisdom, “point the way”, but are also, like the poet, held in febrile tension with their natural settings.

This preoccupation with time, landscape and natural processes provides the conceptual framework for an elliptical account of Venice’s cultural history. It is a place to which “men of craft” have come “at one time, time after time”, another one of Pound’s finely discriminating phrases, which emphasises that, although many such visits were required to fashion the beauty of Venice, each visit, “at one time”, was itself an essential occurrence (XVII/78). For Pound, the artist, surrendering quotidian cares, should pursue his craft in harmony with the past. However, this beneficent vision is subverted following a quotation from Canto XI, “In the gloom the gold / Gathers the light about it”, which functions as a volta. Until this point, Venice has been presented through a sequence of

approbative and pellucid images, but the quotation recalls Malatesta's bitter struggles, and so complicates Pound's paradisaical vision:

Now supine in burrow, half over-arched bramble,  
One eye for the sea, through that peek-hole,  
Gray light, with Athene. (XVII/78)

The figure "supine in burrow" is Odysseus, an oblique reference to Book V of the *Odyssey*, at the close of which Odysseus lies shipwrecked and exhausted on Scheria, while "Athene poured sleep upon his eyes . . . to release him quickly from toil and pains".<sup>21</sup> "Gray light", obviating colour and clarity, places this wilderness in opposition to Venice/Elysium. But in Book VII Odysseus arrives at the kingdom of Phaeacia, whose "spreading harbours", "riding fleets" and "rising spires" provoke his admiration.<sup>22</sup> A clear parallel is presented between Odysseus' wonder at Phaeacia and Pound's wonder at Venice, but this equivalence also recasts Venice in a mysterious and alien light. First Koré, the Eleusian name for Persephone, appears in a field clouded "with green-gray dust in the grass", undermining her traditional association with spring and renewal. An elliptical reference to Aeëtes, "brother of Circe" and son of Helios, recalls the loss of the Golden Fleece, a lambent symbol of ordering power, to Jason. And the "Splendour" shipped to Venice is "as the splendour of Hermes", the god of thieves, renewing the association of opulence with corruption. Each reference complicates the previously encomiastic presentation of Venice, and in the final lines the city is further associated with personal ruin:

...the white forest of marble, bent bough over bough,  
The pleached arbour of stone,  
Thither Borso, when they shot the barbed arrow at him,  
And Carmagnola, between the two columns,  
Sigismundo, after that wreck in Dalmatia.  
Sunset like the grasshopper flying. (XVII/79)

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<sup>21</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, VII, trans. Alexander Pope, ed. Maynard Mack et. al. Vol. IX (London: Methuen, 1967) 236-7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, V.77.



The bent marble boughs and “pleached arbour of stone” cast Venice as a sheltered refuge, but the experiences of Borso, Carmagnolo and Sigismundo are at variance with this image, reiterating the legacy of corruption and personal sacrifice lurking beneath the city’s beautiful facade. In the vivid concluding ideogram these brusque truths are transcended, as the light of the sunset over Venice is matched with the natural simplicity of “the grasshopper flying”. Thus the lyrical idiom with which the canto began is finally restored, symbolising the artist’s ability to transform imaginatively a compromised reality.

Canto XVII is a major poem in its own right, but it is also integral to the impersonal mechanisms of the *Draft*. The verse achieves a vatic grace, personal experiences take on general applications, and mythic and historical allusions are drawn into an illuminating synthesis. Canto XVII is both the aesthetic pinnacle of *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, and the lyric in which Pound’s impersonal techniques are most effectively deployed.

The remainder of the *Draft* does not radically extend the impersonal techniques refined up to Canto XVII. But it does develop themes which are of moment to the preoccupations of Pound’s later verse. Canto XXV is chiefly concerned with corruption and disorder, moving from gambling in Venice to the corruption of Titian. However, these episodes surround a visionary, lyric axis:

Fading, that they carried their guts before them,  
 And thought then, the deathless,  
 Form, forms and renewal, gods held in the air,  
 Forms seen, and then clearness,  
 Bright void, without image, Napishtim,  
 Casting his gods back into the *vovç*. (XXV/119)

Phaethusa, daughter of Helios, has been imaginatively transported to Hades, “by meadows of Phlegethon”, surrounded, as was Odysseus, by the shades. She is a vision of beauty, and her presence is conceived as an elixir to banish the obscuring vapours of the underworld: “wine in the smoke-faint throat”. Though “Fading”, the shades remain gruesomely corporeal, carrying “their guts before them”, until an act of intelligence transfigures these ghosts through “form, forms and renewal”, leaving an impression of “gods held in the air”. This sequence of images functions as a condensed parable for the power of the creative intelligence, and the drive towards clear and unobstructed vision, presaged in Cantos XVII and XXIII, reaches its apotheosis in the “Bright void, without image”. As Kenner observes,

types of nothingness are carefully distinguished in this canto.<sup>23</sup> Vapid incompetence nullifies the actions of governments, “Nothing we made, we set nothing in order . . . We have gathered a sieve full of water”, but “nothing” also signifies space for fresh creativity, “as the sculptor sees the form in the air . . . / as glass seen under water”. We are more used to Pound preserving material objects than casting them aside, and, in his desire for an abstract purity – “Forms seen, and then clearness, / Bright void, without image” – he approaches, albeit temporarily, Stevens’ belief that “Light, too, encrusts us making visible / The motions of the mind and giving form / To moodiest nothings” (*CPP* 111).

Pound’s evocation of a pure and numinous sphere of knowledge, which lies at the very edge of human experience, reveals a telling similarity between his *paradiso terrestre* and Stevens’ supreme fiction. Of course, important differences between the two visions remain. The tension between the material and intellectual realms is not a source of perpetual anxiety for Pound, as it is for Stevens, although a sense of metaphysical dualism does occasionally give him pause. Canto XXIX contrasts the ineffable forces of the heavens with the seductive immediacy of natural objects, and so informs the conflict between two courtly rivals, Pernella and Cunizza. Pernella’s perfidy in love is symbolised by the elusive but compelling image of “a seal’s back / Glossy beneath the lanthorns”, whereas Cunizza is seemingly motivated by a more innocent and steadfast desire: “The light of this star o’ercame me” (XXIX/141-2). Love has previously been presented as either corrupting force or divine spur, but through Pernella and Cunizza these two characteristics are considered in parallel, and Pound swiftly extends this contrast to bring the broader prosaic and the metaphysical strands of the *Draft* into direct conflict, through a debate between “Lusty Juventus” and a “funeral director”. The latter, a personification of hypocritical neo-Protestantism, “Whose daughters’ conduct caused comment”, vocalises the life-denying mindset that the more prosaic sections of the poem have described. Juventus, meanwhile, embodies the vitality of the artist:

“Matter is the lightest of all things,  
 “Chaff, rolled into balls, tossed, whirled in the aether,  
 “Undoubtedly crushed by the weight,  
 “Light also proceeds from the eye; (XXIX/143)

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<sup>23</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 307-8.

Juventus rebukes the moral and philosophical intransigence of the funeral director in a series of paradoxical statements, which, as Daniel Pearlman has shown, provide “a metaphysical ‘explanation’ near the terminal point of the first thirty cantos of the contemporary *Inferno* portrayed in them”.<sup>24</sup> Materialism is dismissed as secondary to the power of ideas, “‘Matter is the lightest of all things’”, and the comic sexual undertones of “rolled into balls, tossed”, mock the funeral director’s hatred of physical pleasure. His clinching statement, “Light also proceeds from the eye”, functions as a meta-poetic assertion, emphasising that the artist does not merely register the beauties already latent in his physical surroundings, but seeks actively to illuminate the world (XXIX/143).

Cantos XXV and XXIX help to clarify Pound’s belief that “the light sings eternal”: even in the depths of corruption and squalor, tokens of civilisation will assert themselves against the surrounding iniquities, allowing the poet the necessary materials to write paradise (CXV/814). Despite this conviction, the *Draft* ends with a valedictory air. In the final canto, the death of the Borgia Pope symbolises the end of a period of civilisation in Europe, and precipitates a fall into darkness.

### **“The Relations Between Poetry and Painting”**

Stevens’ interest in the visual arts was no less significant than Pound’s. Though the younger poet was a key figure in the Vorticist movement, and trumpeted the radical credentials of his early poems, the development of Stevens’ verse in the 1930s reflects an equally keen awareness of the precepts of Fauvism and Cubism. Stevens took some time to assimilate effectively the techniques he learned from these movements to the patterns of poetry, but the formal innovations that he refined in this period are of crucial importance to the development of his impersonal mode.

“The Relations Between Poetry and Painting”, delivered as a lecture at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1951, was written some years after the poems to which its insights most obviously apply. Stevens’ early poems are often dubbed his most “impressionistic”, and even those poems of his middle years with an obvious debt to theories of painting, most notably “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, were composed well over a decade before Stevens took to the lectern. The essay’s belatedness is not necessarily a weakness, for even if, as has been argued, Stevens’ account of the lessons of painting is

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<sup>24</sup> Pearlman, *Barb of Time*, 110.

skewed rather heavily towards his own poetic practice, such tacit introspection offers useful insights into his retrospective sense of the growth of the poet's mind.<sup>25</sup>

Stevens initially justifies his comparison of "poetry in words and poetry in paint" under the aegis of an expansive vision: "The poetry of humanity is, of course, to be found everywhere". This is no mere bluster. It demonstrates Stevens' conviction that the irreducibility of human experience was worth asserting, even (or perhaps especially) to an academic audience in 1951. Nonetheless, as he dryly concedes, "One is better satisfied by particulars" (*CPP* 740). These include the remarks of painters on painting, often "as significant to poets as to painters", for "they are, after all, sayings about art". Stevens instances Blake as "carrying on in both métiers at once, with the economy of genius", and he insists on the broad applicability of painterly brocades:

Does not the saying of Picasso that a picture is a horde of destructions also say that a poem is a horde of destructions? When Braque says "The senses deform, the mind forms," he is speaking to poet, painter, musician and sculptor. (*CPP* 741)

Here Stevens is referring less to the technical implications of these theories for poetry than to the dually intuitive and constitutive state of mind essential for both poet and painter, a manumission from the expectations of realism. He writes with reserved approval of Leo Stein, who "improvised a definition of art: that it is nature seen in the light of its significance, and recognising that this significance was one of forms, he added 'formal' to 'significance'". Stein's remarks are cast as those of "a man whose center was painting", and Stevens, outlining the converse view of "a man whose center is poetry", rejects the commonplace but mistaken "sense that the technical pervades painting to such an extent that the two are identified". Instead, a certain "sensibility" binds poet and painter, though Stevens remains dissatisfied with "the dogma that the origins of poetry are to be found in the sensibility". Rather the "operative force" that drives the artist "seems to be a constructive faculty, that derives its energy more from the imagination than from the sensibility". The emphasis that Stevens places here on labour and artifice as coterminous with artistry tallies more closely with Pound's unsentimental take on the business of

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<sup>25</sup> Michel Benamou comments that Stevens' observations throughout the essay "bear the sigil of self-analysis": "Wallace Stevens: Some Relations Between Poetry and Painting", *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter, 1959) 47.

writing than is commonly accredited: “It is so completely possible to sit at one’s table and without the help of the agitation of the feelings to write plays of incomparable enhancement that that is precisely what Shakespeare did” (*CPP* 744). Inspiration and the imagination are firmly differentiated: the former an ephemeral and intermittent force, the latter capable of promoting that “miraculous kind of reason” crucial to meeting the formal challenges of both painting and poetry.

Stevens’ essay avoids a profound discussion of the technical implications for verse of theories drawn from the visual arts. Glen MacLeod argues that Stevens was less inclined to respond to the features of individual paintings than to concepts drawn more generally from what he called “the literature of painting”.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, several passages hint at technical correlations between poetry and painting, which Stevens suggests derive from the condition of the artist in the modern world. In a machine age, shorn of the fictions of antiquity, “the search for the supreme truth has been a search in reality or through reality or even a search for some supremely acceptable fiction”. Driven by a shared imperative to confront reality, modern poets and painters reveal in their work the same capability, through which the forms and certitudes of the observed world are collapsed and reordered by the creative process: “Under such stress, reality changes from substance to subtlety, a subtlety in which it was natural for Cézanne to say: ‘I see planes bestriding each other and sometimes straight lines seem to me to fall’” (*CPP* 750). Cézanne’s emphasis on the visually transformative function of the imagination, which Stevens evidently approved, helps to elucidate poems such as “The Common Life”:

That’s the down-town frieze,  
 Principally the church steeple,  
 A black line beside a white line;  
 And the stack of the electric plant,  
 A black line drawn on flat air.

It is a morbid light  
 In which they stand,  
 Like an electric lamp  
 On a page of Euclid. (*CPP* 204)

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<sup>26</sup> MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, xxiv.

A scene is developed image by image, line by line, with the deliberate avoidance of depth, colour or texture. The obdurate materiality of black and white, the shallowness of a “black line . . . on flat air”, and the irreverent association of a church steeple with an industrial stack symbolise the artist’s inability to redeem a poverty of experience. When the imagination fails, reality becomes merely a series of inert geometric forms, and images of light make stark the vacuity of the scene. Most obviously, light symbolises the relative occlusion of the poet’s insight, “Like an electric lamp / On a page of Euclid”; but light also affords essential contrasts, as the poem’s closing lines specify: “The men have no shadows / And the women have only one side”. As Michel Benamou has observed, here Stevens’ “plastic symbolism . . . equates shadowlessness to imaginative poverty and shadows to the life of the imagination”.<sup>27</sup>

Images of light have, of course, a symbolic importance in Stevens’ work beyond their purely painterly effects, but the poet’s sense of light as essential to contrast and aesthetic transformation, a conviction shaped by the visual arts, is nonetheless highly significant. Stevens’ quest for a perspective that transforms the real is intimately connected to his development of an elevated and impersonal voice, and this in turn reflects the specific challenges faced by the poet in the modern world. Stevens’ theory of poetry, as of painting, is marked by his emphatic conviction that art need not reach towards some mythic heaven, but can transform and elevate lived experience:

Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discovered it, is that man’s truth is the final resolution of everything. Poets and painters alike today make that assumption and this is what gives them the validity and serious dignity that become them as among those that seek wisdom, seek understanding. (*CPP* 750-1)

Stevens’ prose writings speak of poetry and painting in broad terms, associating shared outlooks and habits of mind rather than specific forms and schools. Many of his poems, however, reveal more direct influences. Impressionism, with its *impasto* textures and emphasis on light and shade, had an obvious general influence on Stevens’ limpid idiom;

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<sup>27</sup> Benamou, “Relations Between Poetry and Painting”, 55.

but certain poems reveal a more particular debt to cubism. The cubists maintained that perspectivism, in portraying objects from a single, static point of view, was inimical to their true essence. Instead they tried simultaneously to apprehend a multiplicity of viewpoints, by subverting realist conceptions of space and depth, and by subduing detail to the apprehension of simplified, abstract forms. It is an axiom of cubism that singular representations of form are, in fact, reductive, prompting Georges Braque's observation that it is "necessary to draw three figures in order to portray every physical aspect of a woman".<sup>28</sup> Stevens makes an early, imperfect attempt to fulfil Braque's dictum in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds":

In that November off Tehuantepec,  
The slopping of the sea grew still one night  
And in the morning summer hued the deck

And made one think of rosy chocolate  
And gilt umbrellas. Paradisal green  
Gave suavity to the perplexed machine

Of ocean, which like limpid water lay.  
Who, then, in that ambrosial latitude  
Out of the light evolved the morning blooms,

Who, then, evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds  
Diffusing balm in that Pacific calm?

*C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme.*

(CPP 82-3)

Here free-flowing images and sensory impressions are rendered in lines of immaculate pentameter, ordered in six tercets. The esoteric imagery might suggest a spontaneous reaction to experience, but this impression is denied by the poem's rigid structure, which instead enhances the contrasting representation of identical images from stanza to stanza. The deck is severally "hued", "streaked", "patterned" and "dozed upon"; chocolate is alternately "rosy", "chop-house", "porcelain", "musky", or, finally, "Chinese". All

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<sup>28</sup> From an Interview given by Braque in 1908. Quoted in Simon Wilson, *Tate Gallery: An Illustrated Companion*, rev. ed. (London: Tate Gallery, 1991) 118.

contexts are abandoned in the investigation of differing perspectives. Even the spatial and temporal setting, “In that November off Tehuantepec”, is iterated into banality in succeeding stanzas, serving only to reinforce our knowledge that the poem’s ever-changing impressions are ideas about the same place. Several critics have commented on the poem’s debt to Monet’s paintings of Rouen Cathedral, though the specific details of its seascapes, particularly their subtle variations of blues and greens, may bear closer relation to his “Saint-Georges majeur au crépuscule”.<sup>29</sup> In any case, a painterly sense of light and shade is central to the poem’s changing moods.

These visual variations dramatise varying mechanisms of perception, as the artist searches for an understanding adequate to mind and world. In the second stanza, the sea assumes an ominous and overwhelming guise, crushing the aesthetic sense as it did for Crispin: “The gongs rang loudly as the windy booms / Hoo-hooed it in the darkened ocean-blooms.”<sup>30</sup> The third stanza projects onto the ocean an “uncertain green, / Piano-polished”, whose effete and brittle beauty is impermanent, and soon dispelled by “rolling heaven”, whose motion apes the earth’s diurnal round. And in the fourth, a too-artful intellectual construct prompts distortion and deceit: “A too-fluent green / Suggested malice in the dry machine / Of ocean”. These stanzas record differing states of imbalance between reality and the imagination, and like a series of sketches preceding a final painting, they lead to a concluding stanza in which the preceding vagaries of perspective are dispelled:

The sovereign clouds came clustering. The conch  
Of loyal conjuration trumped. The wind  
Of green blooms turning crisped the motley hue

To clearing opalescence. Then the sea  
And heaven rolled as one and from the two  
Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue.                    (CPP 85)

Subtle shifts in verbal action reveal this final vision as fully achieved. “Made one think” has now become, in the second tercet, “one thought”, and the sea and heaven, sharply differentiated in preceding lines, are now “rolled as one” in the poet’s vision. The act of

<sup>29</sup> Claude Monet, “Saint-Georges Majeur au Crépuscule” (National Museum, Cardiff, Wales).

<sup>30</sup> “Sea Surface Full of Clouds”, first published in July 1924 in *Dial*, appeared only a year after *The Comedian as the Letter C*.



seeing and the act of imagination are wholly conflated, so that transformation is no longer achieved through a sterile or artificial effort. For the closing lines suggest that “fresh transfigurings” are most likely to arise when the *agon* to produce them ebbs, in a detachment from anxiety: “*la nonchalance divine*”.

“The Common Life” and “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” are not among Stevens’ finest poems, but they witness him beginning to explore techniques that make possible the expansion of his impersonal voice. The Cubist emphasis on multiple viewpoints liberated Stevens from a responsibility somehow to embody the full variety of experience – the anxiety that so inhibits “The Comedian as the Letter C” – and allowed him gradually to approach the “new knowledge of reality” refined in the meditations of his late, great works.

### **“The Man with the Blue Guitar”**

The importance of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” to the development of Stevens’ verse is commonly acknowledged. The poem represents a clear and self-aware retreat from the external pressures that bear upon “Owl’s Clover”, and it anticipates the meditative structure and abstract idioms of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*. But the poem’s technical advances, and the aesthetic insights that these afford, are not isolable from Stevens’ ongoing anxieties about the poet’s public rôle. He continually invokes an audience, as if wrestling with an implicit obligation to justify his art, and each of the poem’s avatars – guitarist, amorist, man of nature – battles against received opinion in some form. At times, the bearers of these opinions, remote and indistinct, seem little more than a philistine hoard, implacably hostile to art. But, elsewhere, the tone implies complicity between the speaker and his witnesses, reminding us that Stevens is also testing his own reliance on inherited assumptions and fustian habits of mind. In the second half of the poem, concerns about the civic authority of the artist cede to a broader preoccupation with the tension between imagination and reality. It appears that the poet must seek a private resolution for this tension, before expanding his personal insights into the lyric sermon of the concluding cantos. Stevens’ aspiration, in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, to reconcile a civic impulse with a thirst for artistic autonomy, is crucial to the development of his impersonal mode. And the techniques that he employs to effect an accommodation between private sensation and public utterance condition his later poetic ambitions.

Stevens was attentive to the political upheavals of the 1930s. In October 1935, he confided to Ronald Lane Latimer that he had completed a poem that might illustrate “the

sort of contact that I make with normal ideas” (L 289). The origins of this approach are important. As is well known, Stevens was chastened by a hostile review from Stanley Burnshaw, a thrusting Marxist critic, which accused his volume, *Ideas of Order*, of being “the record of a man who, having lost his footing, now scrambles to stand up and keep his balance”.<sup>31</sup> Stevens’ response, “Mr Burnshaw and the Statue”, was an ill-advised attempt, in his words, to “apply the point of view of a poet to Communism” (L 289). This poem, which became the latter part of “Owl’s Clover”, is an elaborate and sterile pastiche of Marxist precepts. It may be conceptually subtle, poking fun at the dogma that “Everything is dead / Except the future”, but the poet’s lyric gifts are squandered in a political treatise set to verse. Indeed, “Owl’s Clover” vitiates its own aspirations to political relevance, recognising the paradox that a society run by poets would create “A world impossible for poets, who / . . . are never of the world in which they live” (CPP 572).<sup>32</sup> Stevens’ own attitude to “Owl’s Clover” is reflected in his omission of the poem from the *Collected Poems* of 1954. So “The Man with the Blue Guitar” can be read as an urgent response to a crisis, composed briskly in the months following the publication of “Owl’s Clover”. It seems that Stevens must return to the foundational components of his style, stripping away the ornate excrescences of rhetoric, in order to recapture a fruitful interaction of mind and world. The poem’s language is markedly spare and direct, and the relationship of an artist with his public is subject to immediate scrutiny:

They said, "You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar."                   (I, CPP 135)

Note the quotation marks: the guitarist’s concerns are clearly differentiated from those of his audience, a distinction that is elided later in the poem, when the delineation of private and public perspectives becomes distorted. But, even in rejecting civic expectations at the outset of his performance, the guitarist is constrained by the language of those expectations, reflected in the *faux-naïf* expression “things as they are”, a phrase deeply

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Bates, *Mythology of Self*, 173.

<sup>32</sup> These lines are from the 1936 edition of *Owl’s Clover*. They were later cut from the poem, as part of the substantial revisions Stevens made before it was reprinted in *The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems* (1937).

conscious of its own complacency. Indeed, the inhibiting effect of public discourse is underscored throughout the opening cantos by a restricted and iterative lexis, which is surely suggestive of any artist's struggle to draw meaning from a poverty of experience. Consider the fourth canto:

A million people on one string?  
 And all their manner in the thing,  
  
 And all their manner, right and wrong,  
 And all their manner, weak and strong? (IV, *CPP* 136)

Helen Vendler finds in these lines “a certain silliness”, but it is arguable that their sing-song glibness is calculated to reflect the absurdity of the notion that art should encompass every facet of human experience.<sup>33</sup> And the hackneyed phrases that describe the multitude afford a deliberate contrast with the energy of the individual creative act as it is presented in Canto III: “To bang it from a savage blue, / Jangling the metal of the strings”. By implication, it is only in the acts of apprehension and creation that we meaningfully exist, and the elevated perception that licenses creation is the preserve of a select few. Stevens' initial commentary on *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, which appeared on the dust jacket of the first edition, is richly suggestive in this regard:

This group deals with the incessant conjunction between things as they are and things imagined. Although the blue guitar is a symbol of the imagination, it is used most often simply as a reference to the individuality of the poet, meaning by the poet any man of imagination (*CPP* 998).

Here the syntax casts “any man of imagination” as a concession, extending the particular capacities of the poet at least to those likely to be reading him. But the phrase signals a change in attitude for Stevens, who, having flirted with social commentary in “Owl's Clover”, is now at pains to insist on the “individuality of the poet”. “Individuality” inevitably implies a decerebrate collective from which one can be individuated, and, in his

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<sup>33</sup> Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, 124.

1942 essay *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words*, Stevens is unambiguous in asserting the poet's freedom from public expectation:

I might be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political, obligation of the poet. He has none. (*CPP* 659)

It would be misleading to suggest that "The Man with the Blue Guitar" simply prefigures this attitude. As Alan Filreis has pointed out, the poem does not amount to a straightforward rejection of social and political concerns.<sup>34</sup> But it is clear that Stevens is at least seeking to recalibrate the balance between the imagination and the world external to it, and, in searching for this balance, he explores numerous and sometimes conflicting attitudes. Accordingly, in Canto V, the speaker is subsumed in a collective crisis:

Poetry

Exceeding music must take the place  
Of empty heaven and its hymns,

Ourselves in poetry must take their place,  
Even in the chattering of your guitar. (V, *CPP* 136-7)

Here, as elsewhere, the compressed phraseology is no mere stylistic caprice. It dramatises the chaos against which the artist must contend, by forcing language into a state of febrile indeterminacy. "Ourselves" might include the guitarist, or connote only his listeners, reluctantly resigned to his "chattering". "Their" is also indefinite, referring either to the heaven and hymns of the previous line, or, elliptically, to "ourselves", suggesting that an imaginative self must replace the prosaic one. This subtle blend of tones, ranging from a vatic, impersonal voice to an inclusive "we", reflects the difficulty in locating a stable or unifying perspective amidst the poem's convolutions. At times, we discern a sense of estrangement associable with T.S. Eliot's *Prufrock* or Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. But like *Prufrock*, and unlike *Mauberley*, Stevens' speaker preserves the possibility that his personal troubles might be accorded general consequence. He is not, as

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<sup>34</sup> Alan Filreis, *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991) 279.

Pound's *personae* so often are, implacably *contra mundum*. The thematic progression of Cantos VII to XI reflects the sophistication of Stevens' response to external concerns.

Canto VII, in which Stevens registers the allure of the moon as a symbol of pure and detached artistry, briefly entertains the possibility of total retreat from "things as they are". The desire is underscored by the hostile atmosphere of the following canto:

The vivid, florid, turgid sky,  
The drenching thunder rolling by,

The morning deluged still by night,  
The clouds tumultuously bright

And the feeling heavy in cold chords  
Struggling toward impassioned choirs,

Crying among the clouds, enraged  
By gold antagonists in air –

I know my lazy, leaden twang  
Is like the reason in a storm;

And yet it brings the storm to bear.

I twang it out and leave it there. (VIII, *CPP* 138)

There is an echo here of Ben Jonson's "Hymn to Cynthia": "Thou that mak'st a day of night, / Goddess excellently bright" (348). But whereas Cynthia's irenic glow is a soothing light amidst the darkness, Stevens inverts the trope, so that the ominous chaos of night encroaches upon the day. This borrowing is richly suggestive. Perhaps Stevens is indicating that the guitarist has yet to find his Cynthia, or perhaps we are enjoined to reflect, more soberly, that Jonson's confidence and brio are beyond the modern poet. The sonic emphases of the following lines support the latter reading. First the decline of religious faith, a vast and unwieldy subject, is left beautifully implicit in the half-rhyme of "chords . . . choirs", the subtle dissonance of which effects a tremor of doubt. And, when collective worship fails to console, individual creativity struggles to compensate: after the

description of the guitarist's "lazy, leaden twang", the banal rhymes of the final couplet perform the sonic equivalent of a *faute de mieux* shrug: "And yet it brings the storm to bear. / I twang it out and leave it there." These early cantos struggle to match the assurances that will later characterise Stevens' "central man". In "Of Modern Poetry", for instance, the poet becomes, via a metaphor that deliberately recalls "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

A metaphysician in the dark, twanging  
 An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives  
 Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly  
 Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,  
 Beyond which it has no will to rise. (CPP 219)

Though the sound of the metaphysician's instrument, rendered by the repeated and incongruous "twanging", has the same static insufficiency as the notes of the blue guitar, the surrounding verse achieves an elegance and poise that Stevens denies himself in the earlier poem. The alliterative flourish of "string that gives / sound passing through sudden rightnesses", and the patterning of "below . . . descend", "beyond . . . rise", speak of a renewed lyric freedom. Set against this refined idiom, the early cantos of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" appear almost a rite of passage, striving to clarify the accommodations with reality that are a necessary precursor to the limpid yet economical diction of *Parts of a World*. For Stevens' guitarist cannot produce harmonies in abstraction. He must first confront disorder:

Slowly the ivy on the stones  
 Becomes the stones. Women become

The cities, children become the fields  
 And men in waves become the sea.

It is the chord that falsifies.  
 The sea returns upon the men,

The fields entrap the children, brick

Is a weed and all the flies are caught,

Wingless and withered, but living alive.

The discord merely magnifies.

Deeper within the belly's dark

Of time, time grows upon the rock. (XI, *CPP* 139-40)

The opening lines might initially strike the reader as a benign parable of human experience, condensing the ebb and swell of civilisations, but the rhythmic order of things is swiftly destabilized: "It is the chord that falsifies". Here music either imposes a false harmony upon the world, or else becomes the agent of destructive revelation, exposing squalor and natural decay. These parallel tendencies of the creative act provoke a rich and compelling response in Stevens, which combines an overt fear of nature's destructive power with an implicit yearning for sublimation in the sibylline rhythms of eternity, beyond the ephemeral human scale: "time grows upon the rock". This sense of awed subjection before reality recalls "The Comedian as the Letter C", and the legacy of that earlier poem is of moment for the thematic progression of "The Man with the Blue Guitar". For the latter poem is not only an immediate response to the deficiencies of "Owl's Clover": it faces a more longstanding anxiety over the pressure of reality, a pressure that, even in his intervening 30s poems, Stevens had yet fully to overcome. In "The Idea of Order at Key West", for instance, the importance of tangible reality is deliberately diminished, in order to liberate the intelligence:

For she was the maker of the song she sang.

The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea

Was merely a place by which she walked to sing. (*CPP* 105)

In "The Man with the Blue Guitar", reality is not merely the setting for Stevens' song. He is seeking a more enduring account of the world's influence upon the imagination, an account that his *Ideas of Order* phase, despite its verbal elegance, largely avoids. As Stevens commented in his *Materia Poetica*, "The real is only the base. But it is the base" (*CPP* 917). The guitarist, therefore, is a projection of the poet's struggle with the intractability of the material world. But, in contrast with previous poems, Stevens'

language reflects a determination to approach reality on his own terms. Whereas Crispin, a breathless catechumen of the imagination, is forced into a gaudy parody of lyricism in the vain attempt to apprehend “the one / Discovery still possible to make”, the guitarist breaks his world into single frames (*CPP* 29). Canto XV records a specific debt to Picasso: the lessons of Cubism, licensing multiple perspectives, and, conversely, permitting single, exaggerated facets of an object to signify the whole, allow Stevens to reconcile collective experience with the individual imagination. So Canto XII observes a contraction of focus that re-enacts in microcosm the progression of the preceding cantos:

The orchestra

Fills the high hall with shuffling men  
High as the hall. The whirling noise

Of a multitude dwindles, all said,  
To his breath that lies awake at night.           (XII, *CPP* 140)

This evocative and complex image combines the suffocating pressure of public expectation with the poet’s isolation in the face of such pressure. A contrast between the polyphonic orchestra and a solitary guitar twang is immediately obvious, and underlines the impossibility of fulfilling the demands of a multitude within the ambit of a single poem. This overwhelming of the senses anticipates Picasso’s “hoard of destructions”, quoted in canto XV, in which painting, like the discordant music of canto XI, can only exacerbate the chaos of reality. And Stevens discerns in the increasingly intractable and alien appearance of the world an air of Shakespearean betrayal: “Is the spot on the floor, there, wine or blood / And whichever it may be, is it mine?” (XV). The figurative idiom of Picasso’s “Blue Period” recurs throughout *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, although Stevens himself claimed that he “had no particular painting of Picasso’s in mind” (*L* 786). There are, nonetheless, exact parallels between canto XV and Picasso’s “The Frugal Repast”, in which a blind man and a sighted woman, both emaciated, sit at a table almost bare of food, indicating the poverty of experience and the poverty of the artist’s response to experience. Stevens’ description of his own creative anxieties employs strikingly similar imagery: “Am I a man that is dead / At a table on which the food is cold?” Stevens and Picasso share a horror of monochrome worlds, shorn of imaginative transfiguration, and both embody the



urge to transform experience in their desire to transcend the traditional limitations of their respective disciplines. Stevens' sense of dissociation from the real reaches its nadir in the pessimism of canto XVI: "The earth is not earth but a stone". This bleak recognition is a pivot, upon which the poem turns from public recital to private meditation.

Helen Vendler has argued that Stevens is excessively constricted by the spare voice of his guitarist.<sup>35</sup> This view exaggerates the poem's minimalism, and it also fails to encompass the experience of a linear reading, in which the import of Stevens' layered tropes emerges gradually. By reordering and re-contextualising particular words, the poem builds up its own weight of phrase, creating, in its concluding sections, an extraordinary richness from an economy of means. Therefore, despite her several incisive judgements, it is not entirely fair for Vendler to suggest that the poem might be "rearranged internally without loss".<sup>36</sup> The thirty-three sections of the poem may not make up a strictly linear narrative, but they are linguistically and thematically accretive. Crudely, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is divisible into three movements: the first fifteen cantos explore the uneasy relationship of the poet with his public; the next fifteen probe the exigencies of a private confrontation with reality; and the final three cantos recapitulate and extend the insights gleaned by the solitary poet to foment an empathetic and instructive mode. It is a paradox of the poem that it eventually reaches an imperative, public voice by at first turning away from civic concerns. As Yeats observes, in "Anima Hominis", "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry".<sup>37</sup> So it is possible to read "The Man with the Blue Guitar" as enacting a gradual progression from the rhetorical to the poetic. Consider canto 27:

The sea is a form of ridicule.

The iceberg settings satirize

The demon that cannot be himself,

That tours to shift the shifting scene. (XXVII, *CPP* 147)

These lines extend a now familiar concern over the difficulty of capturing experience, but their evocative sibilance, and the play of "shift . . . shifting", enact the difficulty with a

<sup>35</sup> Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, 119-20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>37</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Selected Criticism and Prose*, ed. and introd. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Pan P, 1980) 170.

flourish, and so implicitly rise to meet its challenge. As Stevens warned in his gloss for Simons, “The poem is the poem, not its paraphrase”, and the increasingly innovative and uninhibited expression of the later cantos is indivisible from the progression of the poem’s themes (*L* 362). For poetic language, gaudy and unpredictable, produces a resolution for Stevens’ anxieties that is aesthetic, not philosophical. Johan Huizinga, in his seminal work *Homo Ludens*, argues that the play-element in culture is gradually lost as society develops, until “only poetry remains as the stronghold of living and noble play”.<sup>38</sup> This diagnosis chimes with “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, as the poet is forced to withdraw from a beleaguered society in which “the employer and the employee contend”, in order to shape a creative response to such worldly cares. Accordingly, in the latter half of the poem, the sometimes careworn and programmatic language of the opening cantos is left behind, in favour of a newly incisive idiom: “The shapes are wrong and the sounds are false. / The bells are the bellows of bulls” (XXIX). Here a riot of alliteration enacts the paradox of perception being described: the argument is not carried by the paraphrasable content of the verse, but by its sound and form. This and other linguistic innovations dramatise a crucial insight – that the play-element of art does not falsify experience; rather the transient pleasure it affords is the only experience worth having:

To meet that hawk’s eye and to flinch

Not at the eye but at the joy of it.

I play. But this is what I think. (XXIV, *CPP* 146)

Here a moment of joyous perception becomes a gateway to more lasting insight: “this is what I think.” Harold Bloom is right to insist that Stevens has learned “the Whitmanian lesson of serious play . . . the jocular procreation of the me myself out of the dark and out of the madness of space”.<sup>39</sup> The development of this procreative energy is reflected in the dextrous modulation of one of the poem’s central tropes:

The earth is not earth but a stone,

Not the mother that held men as they fell

<sup>38</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998) 134.

<sup>39</sup> Bloom, *Poems of Our Climate*, 134.

But stone, but like a stone, no: not

The mother, but an oppressor...

(XVI, *CPP* 142)

The stone figures, initially, as an inert counterpoint to the idealised, Romantic conception of nature (not unlike Yeats's stone "in the midst of all", an immovable and ineluctable force, opposing creativity).<sup>40</sup> So in canto XIX, the function of the stone as a barrier to understanding is emphasised: "Being the lion in the lute / Before the lion locked in stone". In his gloss for Hi Simons, Stevens says: "The monster is what one faces: the lion locked in stone (life) which one wishes to match in intelligence and force, speaking (as a poet) with a voice matching its own" (*L* 360). Gradually, the poem rises to meet this challenge, so that reality, though stark and unadorned, seems finally less threatening:

One's self and the mountains of one's land,

Without shadows, without magnificence,

The flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone.

(XXI, *CPP* 144)

Here the stone becomes a symbol of the poet's humility, and his newfound sublimation in a natural order that had previously seemed inimical to art. There is, perhaps, a distant echo of Wordsworth's "A slumber did my spirit seal", which sees the poet's love "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees".<sup>41</sup> For the Romantic poet, the stone undermines spiritual transcendence, signifying the deadened state to which all things must eventually return. But, for Stevens, a return to these essential monads is a blessing, stripping away preconception, and permitting the poet to approach reality on his own terms. The final two cantos generalise this lesson, extending the poet's own creative practice as a template for a collective imaginative renewal:

Throw away the lights, the definitions,

And say of what you see in the dark

That it is this or that it is that,

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<sup>40</sup> W.B. Yeats, "Easter 1916", *Yeats's Poems*, 288.

<sup>41</sup> William Wordsworth, "A slumber did my spirit seal", *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) 147.

But do not use the rotted names.

How should you walk in that space and know  
Nothing of the madness of space,

Nothing of its jocular procreations? (XXXII, *CPP* 150)

These unrhymed lines have their own internal music: in patterns of consonance “say of what you see”, “it is this . . . it is that”; and in the rhythmical balance of “walk in that space” and “madness of space”. Whereas Stevens was constrained by the language of public discourse at the outset of the poem, here he urges his readers to eschew the “rotted names”, and embrace a guileless idiom, adequate to the spontaneous imagination. The oblique social critiques of the early cantos served chiefly to maintain the individuality of the poet. Now the central critique stems from an exacting but humane impulse to redeem a culture that has lost all sense of the energy and variety of experience: “How should you walk in that space and know / Nothing of the madness of space, / Nothing of its jocular procreations?” At the close of this canto, Stevens finally and symbolically refutes deadening societal assumptions, by twisting the language of those assumptions: “You as you are? You are yourself, / The blue guitar surprises you”. The latter phrase captures the shock of self-recognition that art is capable of provoking, and this awakening of the senses is the prelude to a prophecy:

The bread

Will be our bread, the stone will be

Our bed and we shall sleep by night.

We shall forget by day, except

The moments when we choose to play

The imagined pine, the imagined jay (XXXIII, *CPP* 151)

These final lines, skipping confidently across the internal rhymes, “bread . . . bread . . . bed” and “day . . . play . . . jay”, both enact a quickened sensibility and invest the final couplet with a Biblical authority. The guitarist's strained response to public expectation has

been transmuted, via the poet's private creative *agon*, into a delicate poise in which the dualities of successive cantos may be, for a moment, reconciled. This impersonal mode, drawing universal significance from individual experience, challenges Stevens' readers to match his own aesthetic progress from disaffection to an appeasement won by the mind from the recalcitrant world.

\* \* \*

*Naturally the bastards who do not want truth, who do not want a democratization of the perception of relations, howl and weep whenever poetry emerges from the lavender sachet and bric-à-brac category.*

Pound, "History and Ignorance", 1935

*We are preoccupied with events even when we do not observe them closely. We have a sense of upheaval. We feel threatened. We look from an uncertain present towards a more uncertain future. One feels the desire to collect oneself against all this in poetry as well as politics.*

Stevens, "The Irrational Element in Poetry", 1936

As these quotations show, during the thirties Pound and Stevens both actively engaged with the question of how poetry should respond to public affairs; a preoccupation amply reflected in *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, "Owl's Clover" and "The Man with the Blue Guitar". But the glaring contrast between the trajectories that each poet subsequently pursued, set against increasing political turmoil and then war in Europe, is unavoidable. Pound became ever more destructively concerned with politics and economics, and the prejudices that saturate his essays and broadcasts also bled into his poetry. Conversely, Stevens evolved an increasingly abstract and symbolic idiom, in which the details of contemporary life were subdued. Indeed, in the meditative depths of "Esthétique du Mal" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", material reality itself appears diminished, such is the emphasis placed on the transformative powers of the imagination.

Once again, obvious dissimilarities in the attitude and behaviour of the two men threaten to unbalance a comparison of their work, for their views of the poet as public

orator could scarcely be more different. The canon of twentieth-century poets may be rich and varied, but it contains few figures whose views could not be positioned somewhere on a continuum between Shelley's belief in poets as "unacknowledged legislators" and Yeats' contrary dictum that "We have no gift to set a statesman right".<sup>42</sup> Neither maxim, nor the conceptual space between them, can contain Pound or Stevens. Pound does not desire a merely tacit influence: he envisages a time in which the artist's right to legislate will be explicitly acknowledged. And Stevens does not relinquish the rights and responsibilities of public utterance with an altruistic flourish: he increasingly regards the conventional preoccupations of statesmen as immaterial to the metaphysical foci of his poetry. Of course, neither politics nor metaphysics is necessarily inimical to an impersonal poetic, and, as we have seen, both Pound and Stevens had, by the mid-thirties, cultivated a mode both subtle and expansive. But congruent techniques can be misleading if they serve radically different ends: if the broader sensibilities that the two poets choose to explore share no impersonal perspective and permit no meaningful comparison. There is a danger of partial estimation, of fitting poems to a critical argument, rather than responding critically to poetic complexities. It must be conceded that much of Pound's work in this period is alien, in tenor and theme, to Stevens'. But the possibilities of each poet's impersonal technique are maximised when their greatest themes – Stevens supreme fiction, Pound's paradiso terrestre – are most fully realised. In Cantos XXXVI, XLVII and XLIX, as in "Martial Cadenza", "Asides on the Oboe" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", a shared impersonal voice – mediating between history and modernity, reality and the imagination – emerges once more.

After *A Draft of Thirty Cantos* appeared in 1930, Pound swiftly added *Eleven New Cantos 31-41* (1934), *The Fifth Decad of Cantos* (1937), and *Cantos 52-71* (1940). His rate of production during the thirties, roughly four cantos per year, might not seem particularly arresting, until one realises that these cantos total almost 270 pages of verse – more than many poets produce in a lifetime.<sup>43</sup> As Michael Alexander has commented, Cantos 31-71 can be approached as a vast single section of Pound's epic, in that "their material is primarily historical".<sup>44</sup> Jefferson is the presiding figure of Cantos 31-41, with a supporting cast that ranges from Cavalcanti to Mussolini. Cantos 42-51 move from Siena to Chinese

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<sup>42</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 2002) 233; W.B. Yeats, *The Major Works*, 72

<sup>43</sup> The Adams Cantos, in particular, were written at an extraordinary speed, composed for the most part in the first three months of 1939. See David Ten Eyck, *Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) 33.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander, *Poetic Development*, 170.

prehistory, though corruption and usury are rarely far from Pound's mind. Cantos 52-61 deal with Chinese history up to 1735, the year of John Adams' birth, and Cantos 62-71 survey Adams' central rôle in the founding of American democracy. Large claims have been made for each of these sequences, based on the contention that their broader conceptual patterns, and Pound's marshalling of his extensive historical materials, supply an aesthetic pleasure not always extant in local energies of the verse.<sup>45</sup> This argument is difficult to sustain, for the expository accretions of the Chinese and Adams Cantos have eventually a numbing effect upon all but the most generous readers. Even Donald Davie, a decided Pound enthusiast, calls the Adams Cantos "a nonsensical hurly-burly of Adams' life".<sup>46</sup> Pound had taken an aspect of his impersonal mode, its ability to accommodate historical narrative, to a deleterious extreme. So those passages in which he abandons his documentary style, and returns to the subtle lyricism intermittently achieved in *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, shine especially brightly.

In the *The Fifth Decad of Cantos*, the contrast between inert, borrowed histories and charged, lyric insights is most acute. Cantos XLV, XLVI, XLVIII, LI and LII are each centrally concerned with banking and usury, offering an intricate web of historical anecdotes as evidence for their didactic theses. Amidst these Byzantine formulations, Cantos XLVII and XLIX emerge as oases of beauty and clarity. As arguably the finest achievement of Pound's mature style, they invite comparison with "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", the pinnacle of Stevens' middle-phase. In Canto XLVII, the impersonal mode comes into its own, as the poet's familiar hills and pathways around Rapallo are transfigured into a landscape of classical myth and Eleusinian mystery. XLVII is also, as William Cookson notes, a new beginning, restating the original premise of *The Cantos* as a voyage after knowledge.<sup>47</sup> Canto XLIX compounds this sense of renewal, returning to the Chinese theme of XIII. Most of the canto is loosely translated from a series of Chinese and Japanese poems, though, like the poems of *Cathay*, these translations are sufficiently free that the canto can be read as an original poem in English. XLVII and XLIX are the nearest fulfilment of Pound's original ambitions for the Cantos, before personal ruin would irrevocably alter the course of his impersonal epic.

Stevens does not presume quite so egregiously upon the reader's patience as the busily historicising Pound, but many of his efforts in this period also have their flaws.

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, A.D. Moody, "Composition in the Adams Cantos", in *Ezra Pound and America*. Ed Jacqueline Kaye. (New York: St. Martin's P., 1992).

<sup>46</sup> Davie, *Studies in Ezra Pound*, 139.

<sup>47</sup> William Cookson, *A Guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, rev. ed. (London: Anvil P, 2001) 67.

Hugh Kenner, so instrumental in establishing Pound's reputation, is unflattering about Stevens: "There is a great deal of language in these poems, with no one speaking it except the grave impersonal voice of poetry, and there is little variety of feeling. The most that happens is that the voice turns whimsical. That grave equable voice, as dispassionate as things, weaves its whimsical monologue".<sup>48</sup> Clearly, Kenner employs "impersonal" in a negative sense, associating it with a lack of vitality and felt experience. I should argue that his critique is too harsh as an overall assessment of Stevens' corpus; that the late poetry, in particular, creates great depth of feeling from an economy of means. But certain of Kenner's criticisms, especially when applied to Stevens' middle phase, do strike home. In the war poems, for instance, a perpetually detached and theoretical perspective risks aloofness or even self-indulgence, as Stevens seems to annex the imagery and vocabulary of conflict purely to expand his concept of "major men". In "Martial Cadenza", the hazardous technique bears fruit, licensing an evocation of "The present close, the present realized". But in "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War", Stevens' detachment becomes a weakness, as the whimsy diagnosed by Kenner seems inadequate to the brutalities it would describe. If Pound is to be criticised for his vituperation, then Stevens' detached response to the developing enormity in Europe should also be censured.

For Stevens, as for Pound, aspects of the impersonal mode could prove destructive. But, in the finest poems of *Parts of a World* and *Transport to Summer*, the disinterested perspective licensed by an impersonal voice allows Stevens finally to reconcile the ongoing tension in his poetry between reality and the imagination. In "Asides on the Oboe", the idealised poet is a spiritual, almost religious figure, at once detached from the reality he apprehends, yet still able to find meaning within it: "He is the transparence of the place in which / He is and in his poems we find peace". This evocation tallies with the "possible poet" described in "The Noble Rider and The Sound of Words":

He cannot be a charioteer traversing vacant space, however ethereal. He must have lived all of the last two thousand years, and longer, and he must have instructed himself, as best he could, as he went along. He will have thought that Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton placed themselves in remote lands and in remote ages . . . and he will wonder at those huge imaginations, in which what is remote becomes near, and what is dead lives with an intensity beyond any experience of life. (*CPP* 657)

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<sup>48</sup> Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (New York: Knopf, 1975) 74-5.



The “possible poet” is, strictly speaking, impossible, but exists as a figurative ideal: “He must have lived all of the last two thousand years”. In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”, Stevens’ impersonal voice allows him to adopt, test and discard contrasting attitudes to reality, without being overwhelmed by the ideal of the “possible poet”, or by the complexity and scale of the epistemic questions he proposes to tackle. A technique that combines a love of idiosyncrasy and vivid symbolism with a panoptic range of perspectives and intuitions also prevents “Notes” and other major poems from becoming mere philosophical exercises. Stevens’ qualified titles are not accidental: “*Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*”, “*Asides on the Oboe*”. These poems explore possible approaches, not definitive solutions, to the problems of existence. They seek the “new knowledge of reality” celebrated in Stevens’ final works.<sup>49</sup> But there is, evidently, succour and satisfaction in having established certain truths, if not about life, then about the poetry that must concern itself with life, as the three subtitled sections of “Notes” signify: *It Must Be Abstract*, *It Must Change*, and, finally, *It Must Give Pleasure*. In Stevens’ mature work, as in Pound’s, the impersonal mode becomes an essential resource, licensing an approach to metaphysical uncertainties, and providing an idiom in which the tentative compensations of poetry become charged and crystalline.

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<sup>49</sup> “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” (CPP 452).

## Chapter 4: The Vision Achieved

### *XI New Cantos*

*And Kung said "Wang ruled with moderation,  
In his day the State was well kept,  
And even I can remember  
A day when the historians left blanks in their writings,  
I mean for things they didn't know*

### Canto XIII

In *XI New Cantos*, Pound's focus shifts from the Italian Renaissance to American history. He prizes the years between the Revolution and the Civil War as a miniature age of enlightenment, shaped by great minds whose achievements have since been wantonly squandered. The peculiar emphases Pound places on particular episodes – from disturbances on the Ohio canal to the corruption of the Federal Reserve – variously reflect his Fascism, his Neoplatonism, and, more obliquely, the Confucian principles first broached in Canto XIII. Pound's political philosophy is largely drawn from Confucius' account of the ideal statesman, an account which also affords a revealing comparison with Stevens:

Chung Ni said: The master man finds the center and does not waver, the mean man runs counter to the circulation about the invariable . . . The master man's axis does not wobble. (*The Unwobbling Pivot* 103)

In Pound's translation of *The Unwobbling Pivot*, the Confucian "master man", like Stevens' "major man", emerges as a mainstay of order and unity in a fractured and disordered world. As I shall argue, Stevens' later poems outgrow his major men, shouldering the artistic responsibilities that had previously been projected onto imagined avatars. Pound, in his later work, similarly emerges from the shadow of his hero-figures, but he does so in straitened circumstances. The *Pisan Cantos* explicitly align the fate of civilisation with Pound's own plight, just as previous sections of *The Cantos* take

Odysseus, Malatesta or Jefferson as touchstones. Of course, the Poundian “master man” is also politically embattled, and in *XI New Cantos* this is reflected in an uneasy association of American idealism with Italian Fascism.

The bare political trajectory of *XI New Cantos* is wholly unedifying. Though individual cantos affect a detached and impersonal perspective, Pound’s handling of historical materials is often indulgent. The pseudo-empiricism of these cantos – their bandying of arbitrary statistics, dates and sums of money – together with the unexplained weight they place upon marginal figures and events, seem tokens of the very pettiness and cynicism that Pound purports to despise. In the later China Cantos and Adams Cantos (LII – LXXI), these indulgences are so pervasive that they effectively place both sequences beyond the scope of this study: it is difficult to make literary judgements about material so derivative and doctrinaire.<sup>1</sup> However, in *XI New Cantos*, along with *The Fifth Decad of Cantos*, the historical expostulations are interrupted by affirmative lyrics of remarkable grace and poise.

As I have already argued, Canto XXXVI is an oasis of calm amidst the chaos and iniquity of surrounding cantos. Its *fin’ amors* theme, inherited from Cavalcanti, asserts ancient principles of order and decorum lost to the modern world. The canto is also of moment to Pound’s impersonal voice, as the abstract “he” that the poem investigates – a personification of love – is idealised in terms that bear a remarkable resemblance to Stevens’ “central man”:

And his strange quality sets sighs to move  
 Willing man look into that forméd trace in his mind  
 And with such uneasiness as rouseth the flame.  
 Unskilled can not form his image,  
 He himself moveth not, drawing all to his stillness,  
 Neither turneth about to seek his delight  
 Nor yet to seek out proving  
 Be it so great or so small. (XXXVI/178)

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<sup>1</sup> Even Hugh Kenner, one of Pound’s most sympathetic readers, concedes that, in Cantos LII – LXXXI, Pound “wrote, in fact, too many pages for the ultimate good of the poem”: Kenner, *Pound Era*, 434. For an unwavering defence of the Adams Cantos as vital poetry, see A.D. Moody, “Composition in the Adams Cantos”, in *Ezra Pound and America*, ed. Jacqueline Kaye (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1992) 79-92.

A comparison of these lines with Pound's earlier translation of "Donna mi Pregħa" reveals an intriguing shift in emphasis. Whereas before he had written "None can imagine love / that knows not love", now the emotional facility is reframed as a token of the artist's dexterity: "Unskilled can not form his image".<sup>2</sup> The love ethic of *The Cantos* is no saccharine codicil to Pound's economic and political concerns. Love, envisioned in the broadest sense, is, rather, a form of intellectual harmony, which owes a good deal to the Neoplatonic *nous*, an idealised union of the intellect and the spirit that reveals a fleeting image of the divine. Pound's impersonal mode arises from his search for an idiom adequate to this divinity, for the paradisaical sections of *The Cantos* boldly attempt to embody those forms of hieratic understanding to which the poet must aspire: "that formed trace in his mind". Stevens creates an equivalent vision of an exalted and numinous realm of understanding in "Asides on the Oboe", when he invokes

The impossible possible philosopher's man,  
 The man who has had the time to think enough,  
 The central man, the human globe, responsive  
 As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,  
 Who in a million diamonds sums us up. (CPP 226-7)

Stevens' appeal to this ineffable figure is paradoxical, "impossible possible", as the piercing eloquence with which he apprehends the powers of his central man transcends the implication that those powers lie outside a mortal poet's grasp. "Asides on the Oboe" is, albeit obliquely, a war poem, in which the "man of glass", a symbol of generative energy, emerges as a counterweight to the waste of conflict, just as Pound's historical heroes, from Malatesta to Jefferson, transcend the limitations of their age.

The association of love with higher understanding forged in Canto XXXVI is extended in Canto XXXIX, in which different myths are skilfully combined. At the heart of the canto is a reworking of the Circe episode from Book X of the *Odyssey*. Circe's beguiling magic, a corruption of the natural order, threatens one of the qualities Pound most admires in Odysseus: his clarity of mind. Initially, the enchanted island is a place of sybaritic excess:

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<sup>2</sup> For the earlier version of these lines, see Pounds *Translations*, 139.

Girls talked there of fucking, beasts talked there of eating,  
 All heavy with sleep, fucked girls and fat leopards (XXXIX/193)

Sensual pleasures have overwhelmed the intellect, and are the result of duplicity: “κακα φάρμακ’ ἔδωκεν”.<sup>3</sup> Just as the spheres of politics and economics are beset by corruption, so the course of love can be perverted and debased. Circe herself is at first described in terms whose coarseness recalls Pound’s condemnation of usurers in Cantos XIV and XV: “Venter venustus, cunni cultrix”.<sup>4</sup> But Odysseus, aided by Hermes, resists Circe’s wiles, and his eventual union with the goddess achieves an equilibrium between the body and the spirit:

Betwene Aprile and Merche  
     with sap new in the bough  
 With plum flowers above them  
     with almond on the black bough  
 With jasmine and olive leaf,  
 To the beat of the measure  
 From star up to the half-dark  
 From half-dark to half-dark  
     Unceasing the measure  
 Flank by flank on the headland  
     with the Goddess’ eyes to seaward (XXXIX/195)

This ecstatic vision is charged by a distinctive rhythmical pattern, / - - / - , which compounds the energies of successive phrases: “flowers above them”, “beat of the measure”, “flank on the headland”. And a characteristic glut of prepositions defines the spatial and grammatical connections between individual images, and so binds them into a single, irreducible pattern. Pound’s mastery of different registers permits a remarkable progression in Canto XXXIX from the menace of the opening scenes to the poignancy of Circe’s awareness, with her “eyes to seaward”, that she and Odysseus are destined to part. Their love is subject to the same timeless imperatives that Pound divines in the transience of natural objects and the unending cycle of the seasons. As Daniel Pearlman argues, in his

<sup>3</sup> “She had given them evil drugs”.

<sup>4</sup> “Beautiful belly, priestess of the cunt”.

analysis of *XI New Cantos*, “Organic time will become the impersonal ‘hero’ against which the deeds and thoughts of men will be measured in many cantos to come”.<sup>5</sup> For all Pound’s political obsessions, the affirmative strands of his poetic vision are beginning to cohere. In the following sequence, “organic time” is not only a measure for the deeds of others; it emerges as the cornerstone of Pound’s imagined paradise.

### *The Fifth Decad of Cantos*

*Great art does not depend on the support of riches, but without such aid it will be individual, separate, and spasmodic; it will not group and become a great period (LE 221).*<sup>6</sup>

Pound idealised the Renaissance as a period in which the patrician benevolence of a wealthy few supported a revolution in painting, sculpture and architecture. The Venetian painter Giorgione, a favourite of Pound’s friend Adrian Stokes, typifies this spirit of invention.<sup>7</sup> Oil canvasses had traditionally been prepared with a light ground, upon which heavier tones were easily imposed. But Giorgione adopted a deeply shaded ground, allowing him to represent light as a fragile stay against encroaching darkness.<sup>8</sup> In *The Fifth Decad of Cantos*, Pound’s sharply delineated themes enact their own chiaroscuro. A survey of Pietro Leopoldo’s frustrated economic reforms doubles as a programme to redeem the modern state, while the decline of Sieneese banking and the fall of Napoleon serve as bleak fables, in which usury and corruption are brutally condemned. These desolate histories are Pound’s dark ground, against which two lyric meditations, XLVII and XLIX, shine bright.

*The Fifth Decad of Cantos*, published in 1937, is the fourth major instalment of the poem, and its themes reflect the increasing clarity and doctrinaire conviction of Pound’s socio-political theories. In consequence, critical accounts of this sequence of Cantos have

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Pearlman, *The Barb of Time: On the Unity of Ezra Pound’s Cantos* (New York: Oxford UP, 1969) 163.

<sup>6</sup> Pound’s essay “The Renaissance” was originally published in three instalments in *Poetry* 5.5 (February 1915), 5.6 (March 1915) and 6.2 (May 1915).

<sup>7</sup> See Adrian Stokes, “Painting, Giorgione and Barbaro”, *The Criterion*, IX (April 1930): 484-500. Pound was instrumental in persuading Eliot to publish Stokes’ early works *The Quattro Cento: A Different Conception of the Italian Renaissance* (1932) and *The Stones of Rimini* (1934).

<sup>8</sup> This innovation was adapted by Tintoretto, whose “Last Judgement”, which hangs in the Madonna dell’Orto in Venice, exemplifies the dynamic contrasts licensed by the “light on dark” technique.

often been weighted towards passages that illumine Pound's ominous political trajectory.<sup>9</sup> I have already discussed Canto XLV, "With Usura", as an example of Pound's unedifying bombast; but the righteous and vivid phrases certainly clarify his longstanding economic obsessions:

Usura rusteth the chisel  
 It rusteth the craft and the craftsman  
 It gnaweth the thread in the loom  
 None learneth to weave gold in her pattern (XLV/230)

Successive archaisms might now strike readers as a needless affectation, but their sonic distinctiveness accentuates and unites strands of verbal action, as Pound's own rendition of the poem reveals.<sup>10</sup> Though the morality advanced in these lines is firmly rooted in the Renaissance settings of Cantos XLII – XLIV, the diction courts comparison with figurative passages of the Old Testament: the *Psalms* or the *Song of Solomon*. Canto XLV expands the preoccupations of the preceding three cantos, as it finds usury not only an impediment to art and honest craft, but an affront to nature itself:

#### CONTRA NATURAM

They have brought whores for Eleusis  
 Corpses are set to banquet  
 At behest of usura. (XLV/230)

These forced associations reflect the holistic character of Pound's cultural and economic attitudes: history, art, religion, politics, economics and the rhythms of nature are indivisible entities; decidedly overlapping magisteria, to adapt Stephen Jay Gould.<sup>11</sup> Several sections of *The Fifth Decad* suffer from the coarse determinism of the connections forged between

<sup>9</sup> Several important studies of Pound, including *Pound's Cantos* by Peter Makin and Jean-Michel Rabaté's *Language, Sexuality and Ideology in Ezra Pound's Cantos*, pay strikingly little attention to Cantos XLVII and XLIX. This seems to me an oversight.

<sup>10</sup> Two recordings of Pound reading Canto XLV are available in the PENNSOUND archive on the University of Pennsylvania website. < <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Pound.php> >

<sup>11</sup> Gould characterises religion and science as essentially estranged in "Nonoverlapping Magisteria", *Natural History* 106 (March 1997): 16-22. Pound, in "The Renaissance", quoted above, argues an almost contrary view: "The arts and sciences hang together" (LE 225).

organic and economic processes, or historical and contemporary iniquities. Read against these unyielding matrices, the opening lines of Canto XLVII are bewitchingly opaque:

Who even dead, yet hath his mind entire!  
 This sound came in the dark  
 First must thou go the road  
 to hell (XLVII/236)

The actors in this foreboding scene are as yet unknown, unless one recalls the inclusion of this passage, in the original Greek, in canto XXXIX. In the earlier canto, the coupling of Circe and Odysseus was testament to the revivifying power of love: “honey at first and then acorns” (XXXIX/194). But now Circe’s duplicity casts a shade over the poem – “This sound came in the dark” – and complicates our response to sexual energies that had previously seemed benign. The following lines simultaneously clarify the identities of Odysseus and Circe, and contrast their dissolving passion with a more enduring myth of regeneration:

And to the bower of Ceres’ daughter Proserpine,  
 Through overhanging dark, to see Tiresias,  
 Eyeless that was, a shade, that is in hell.  
 [. . .]  
 Knowledge the shade of a shade,  
 Yet must thou sail after knowledge  
 Knowing less than drugged beasts. (XLVII/236)

The Proserpine legend has manifold significance. Its immediate effect is to conflate Odysseus’ descent into hell with the movement of the seasons, which connects the plight of the wanderer with the Adonic rites described later in the canto. But this communion also has implications for the overall progression of *The Cantos*, for the return to the Nekuia of Canto I effectively announces a new beginning for Pound, just as the emergence of Proserpine from the underworld heralds the return of spring.

At first Canto XLVII aligns itself with Circe’s perception. It is she who addresses Odysseus, and her opposition to his departure, like her earlier efforts to delay it, is subtly reflected in the metaphor that frames his quest: “Knowing less than drugged beasts”. But,



just as the poem moves fluidly between different myths, so the speaking voice shifts from Circe, to Tiresias to Odysseus/Pound. And even within the narrative ambit of each persona we find further variations of emphasis, perception and mood. Circe's personalised address is interrupted by a meditative observation that is distinctly Pound's own:

The small lamps drift in the bay  
And the sea's claw gathers them.  
Neptunus drinks after neap-tide.      (XLVII/236)

These lines recall the festival of the Madonna, at Rapallo, where Pound saw votive lights set afloat on the sea.<sup>12</sup> The fragility of these lamps, "small" against the "sea's claw", evokes Odysseus' vulnerability in his duty to "sail after knowledge", and perhaps also symbolises the poignant isolation of individual lives in a great expanse of time. In its unadorned clarity, this spectacle recalls Pound's early *Imagiste* poems, and illustrates a distinct advantage of his impersonal mode, which can conflate the empyrean import of myth and legend with the piquancy of personal experience. Pound occasionally suffers through the constant comparison with Stevens that this study demands. The unevenness of *The Cantos* seems somehow magnified by the remarkably sustained and unified achievements of Stevens' maturity. But in Canto XLVII Pound transfigures ancient myth, with an intensity arguably unmatched in Stevens' oeuvre, into a force vividly present and alive.<sup>13</sup> Though both poets refine an impersonal idiom that can fuse the particular with the general, Pound's assimilation of diverse themes and images rests on techniques that are distinctively his own.

P.H. Smith and A.E. Durant object to the confluence of myth and symbol in Canto XLVII, arguing that Pound "is here indulging in juxtapositions which are tendentiously reductive" and that "the particulars are led towards synonymy, all contributing to the same semantic nexus rather than being allowed to form multiplicity [sic] of meaning".<sup>14</sup> As Pound is most often criticised for the diffuseness and unevenness of his epic, objections to an excess of unity in *The Cantos* are at least novel. Smith and Durant frame their criticisms in semiotic terms, decrying the "mystical assumption that language can be made to be co-

<sup>12</sup> Pound alludes to the festival in "Statues of Gods" (*SP* 71).

<sup>13</sup> Though occasionally Stevens comes close to matching Pound's living histories, in poems such as "The Sail of Ulysses" (*CPP* 462-7).

<sup>14</sup> P.H. Smith and A.E. Durant, "Pound's Metonymy: Revisiting Canto 47", *Paideuma* 8.2 (Fall 1979): 327-33 (328-9).

extensive and co-operative with the natural world . . . chaining the signifier and then reducing the signified so that they become limited/limiting signs”.<sup>15</sup>

These arguments are pragmatically self-refuting: if the belief that language can successfully apprehend extra-linguistic experience, or refine the implications of that experience, is a “mystical assumption”, by what mysterious alchemy can the “particulars” of Canto 47 be “led towards synonymy”? Pound cannot be damned both for desiring an impossible aesthetic end and for achieving that end. This is not to absolve the poet of all charges. Had Smith and Durant levelled their criticisms at other sections of the Cantos – selected Chinese Cantos, the latter half of *Rock Drill*, or even the first three cantos of *The Fifth Decad* – elements of their argument might be more easily entertained. Pound, it is true, too often circumscribes the possible interpretations of his work. But the confluence of myths in Canto XLVII is not forced. Rather, the connections between past and present, image and symbol, and private and collective experience are enacted visually and musically:

And the small stars now fall from the olive branch,  
 Forked shadow falls dark on the terrace  
 More black than the floating martin  
     that has no care for your presence,  
 His wing-print is black on the roof tiles  
 And the print is gone with his cry.  
 So light is thy weight on Tellus  
 Thy notch no deeper indented  
 The weight less than the shadow  
 Yet hast thou gnawed through the mountain,  
     Scylla's white teeth less sharp.                      (XLVII, 237-8)

This passage is aligned with the spirit of Tiresias, and its measured surety offers an illuminating contrast with Canto I. There, Tiresias' fearsome prophecy – “Odysseus / “Shalt return through spiteful Neptune, over dark seas, / “Lose all companions” – is a fleeting rhetorical triumph, leading to anticlimax: “Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus” (I, 4-5). But here Pound is able to inhabit Tiresias' persona without apologia or

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

guiding speech marks. The result is not an isolated monologue, but an authentic voice in a sequence of voices, each of which adds depth to the presiding themes of the canto. The compression of the lines above attests to the extent of Pound's poetic development. Multiple implications attach to the "small stars": the Pleiades are re-imagined as the petals of an olive tree; a delicate image in which symbols of celestial permanence are made transient and local, and so drawn into accord with the poet's own mortality. Pearlman writes that "The relation of these short-lived spring flowers to the branch is like that between the brief existence of individual men and mankind", and this universal resonance, which runs parallel to the mythic associations embedded in the same chain of images, is indicative of the knotted interrelation of themes in Canto XLVII.<sup>16</sup> Peter Myers has revealed the prominence of a particular metrical pattern in the canto, - - v - ō, deriving from the phrase "splendour on splendour".<sup>17</sup> In the passage above, this repeating arrangement of stresses underscores the cyclical nature of existence, by forging a sonic connection between images that might otherwise seem estranged. So a sexual metaphor, "Thy notch no deeper indented", immediately softens into chthonic imagery, "Thy weight less than the shadow". Carnal desire for Tellus, goddess of the earth, is belied by the transience of the human form. These natural images are augural, and the concluding lines, promising success even against impossible odds, have a narrative application to Odysseus' voyage, an axiomatic import, and a symbolic connection to Pound's own poetic mission. Here Pound shares a favourite technique with Stevens, who is also fond of embedding his desire for creative renewal in suggestive natural imagery: "He sees that eagle float / For which the intricate Alps are a single nest" (*CPP* 195).<sup>18</sup> Few have cavilled at Stevens' ability to condense multiple thematic strands in a single image, so the extraordinary lyric achievement of Canto XLVII surely justifies the congruencies that Smith and Durant condemn. It is one thing to object to hectoring verse, which instructs the reader how to think. But if poets are not permitted to persuade by aesthetic means, what is poetry for?<sup>19</sup>

Pound's increasing mastery of the poetic persona has an obvious bearing on the impersonal character of his poetry. Borrowed but authentic voices, such as those of Circe and Tiresias, contribute to the subtlety and richness of *The Cantos*, allowing the poet to

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<sup>16</sup> Pearlman, *Barb of Time*, 186.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Myers, "The Metre of Canto XLVII", *Paideuma*, 11.1 (Spring 1982): 91-2.

<sup>18</sup> Although, elsewhere, Stevens discredits the conceit that art and civilisation accord with organic processes. See my discussion of "The Man with the Blue Guitar", XI.

<sup>19</sup> *Pace* Geoffrey Hill, whose later volumes are characterised by an anxiety that poets' powers of articulation may grant them unearned authority. Though Hill's meditations on the subject are acute, history records few instances of poets burdened by an excess of social or political influence.

inhabit multiple perspectives and to synthesise discontinuous themes. But the final section of Canto XLVII, which adopts a first-person address, is, perhaps unpredictably, the most significant in the development of Pound's impersonal mode. The "I" of the poem is still, in strictly narrative terms, Odysseus; but the conflation of Homeric wanderer and exilic American, which has been building throughout the canto, is now complete:

The light has entered the cave. Io! Io!  
 The light has gone down into the cave,  
 Splendour on splendour!  
 By prong have I entered these hills:  
 That the grass grow from my body,  
 That I hear the roots speaking together,  
 The air is new on my leaf,  
 The forked boughs shake with the wind.      (XLVII/238)

Canto XLVII begins in darkness, and one of its central images, of small lights floating upon water, captures the fragility of personal attempts to achieve knowledge. But here the poet has become the light of understanding that he seeks, as the limpid images of this passage confirm the canto's overall movement from "thou" to "I" as a movement from dark to light, and from ignorance to understanding. The final section of the poem repeats, in adapted formulations, the warnings of Circe and Tiresias, enfolding their insights into Odysseus' newly enlightened perspective, but also extending the possibilities that they had imagined. So a progenitive oneness with Tellus, which in the Tiresias section had seemed impossible, becomes an ecstatic reality: "The air is new on my leaf, / The forked boughs shake with the wind". The metaphorical implications of this passage are clear, aligning the poet's creative art with the redemptive organic processes it labours, like Odysseus, to apprehend. Canto XLVII is both a statement of, and compelling evidence for, Pound's belief that contemporary civilisation must be rooted in a holistic understanding of history and of eternal natural processes.

As I have already argued, Canto XLIX forms a diptych with Canto XLVII, and the two poems are the most persuasive vindication of Pound's original ambitions for his epic. The elemental images of Canto XLIX are charged with immemorial weight, and so embody the state of organic equilibrium envisioned in Canto XLVII:

Wild geese swoop to the sand-bar,  
 Clouds gather about the hole of the window  
 Broad water; geese line out with the autumn  
 Rooks clatter over the fishermen's lanthorns,  
 A light moves on the north sky line;  
 Where the young boys prod stones for shrimp. (XLIX/244-5)

It is difficult to reconcile these luminous details with the opacities of surrounding cantos; a disjunction that has long been problematic for critics attempting an overall assessment of the poem. Some, such as Leon Surette, argue that *The Cantos* must stand or fall as a complete work, that "it is as a failed epic that one must approach the *Cantos* if one is to understand their beauties and perversities".<sup>20</sup> Others are more inclined to praise the distinctive excellence of Pound's triumphs than to lament the fact that they are only intermittently achieved. M.L. Rosenthal argues that "[the poem's] successive groupings should be read as one reads successive volumes in the usual poetic career; naturally, some volumes are better than others and one finds the most supremely accomplished poems scattered here and there".<sup>21</sup> The supreme accomplishments of Canto XLVII and XLIX are founded on impersonal techniques that allow Pound to sublimate his creative energies in myth and landscape. Just as Stevens requires impersonal perspectives to make possible an accord between the imagination and reality, so the ethereal detachment of Pound's lyric mode is crucial in momentarily freeing his imagination from the chains of Usura. Pound will not reach these heights again until the *Pisan Cantos*, when the impersonal techniques refined over the course of a career allow him to confront, in verse, a personal tragedy that might otherwise have proven overwhelming.

### Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction

<sup>20</sup> Leon Surette, *A Light from Eleusis: A Study of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979) 10.

<sup>21</sup> M. L. Rosenthal, "Pound at His Best: Canto 47 as a Model of Poetic Thought", *Paideuma* 6.3 (Winter 1977): 309.

*She was no longer called upon to uphold with her childish might the broken end of the arch. Her father and mother now met to the span of the heavens, and she, the child, was free to play in the space beneath, between.*

D.H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*

“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” is the fulfilment of two decades of “fastidious thought”.<sup>22</sup> It extends a preoccupation with the irreducible play of the imagination that stretches back to *Harmonium*, and it attempts to resolve the pressures of reality that dominate Stevens’ poems of the nineteen-thirties. The convenient suggestions of the title, like those of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, are misleading. Many of Stevens’ earlier poems, from “Description Without Place” to “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War”, confidently invoke a central myth whose axioms seem impossible to sustain. By contrast, “Notes” progressively embodies the Fiction that it is reluctant to define. Of the imperatives that frame the poem’s three sections, “It Must Be Abstract”, “It Must Change”, and “It Must Give Pleasure”, the first is the most particular to Stevens’ art. It seems directly to contravene Pound’s monition that “the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol. Go in fear of abstractions” (*LE* 5, Pound’s italics). Indeed, in the *China and Adams Cantos*, Pound relies on the immediacy of imagist techniques and the irreducibility of historical details. He does not trouble to clarify the associations through which an aggregation of vital images and objects might cohere: the poem’s thesis is a skeleton, with no connective tissues. Hence the longstanding criticism of *The Cantos* that they present a surfeit of ideas but no *ideation*. Recurring objects, figures and myths become associable with particular concepts, but the concepts themselves are seldom developed, they are merely displayed. This could not be said of Stevens’ work:

Sometimes we think that a psychology of poetry has found its way to the center. We say that poetry is metamorphosis and we come to see in a few lines descriptive of an eye, a hand, a stick, the essence of the matter, and we see it so definitely that we say that if the philosopher comes to nothing because he fails, the poet may come to nothing because he succeeds. The philosopher fails to discover. Suppose the poet discovered and had the power thereafter at will and by intelligence to reconstruct us by his transformations. He

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<sup>22</sup> Stevens’ phrase, from “The Comedian as the Letter C” (*CPP* 30).

would also have the power to destroy us. If there was, or if we believed that there was, a center, it would be absurd to fear or to avoid its discovery (*CPP* 670).<sup>23</sup>

Stevens' preoccupation with the "center" of poetry – the elusive but unmistakable signal of achieved art, to which "all the variations of definition are peripheral" – reflects the emphasis, far greater than Pound's, that he places on the ontological focus of his work (*CPP* 670). Certain "discoveries" are possible only within the poem, and these insights, rather than the accumulation of extrinsic truths, allow the poet to "reconstruct us by his transformations". Furthermore, when Stevens refers to the "essence of the matter", he does not intend a representative distillation, in verse, of the qualities of a concrete object, but the isolation of a *particular element* of reality that survives and is given fresh life in the creative context of the poem. Accordingly, the registers of abstraction implied in the opening cantos of "Notes" have little in common with the thin and brittle concepts that Pound deprecates. Stevens' notion of the abstract certainly owes something to Plato's Theory of Forms, in that he associates abstract forms with purity, stability, and freedom from quotidian imperfections. But Plato's ideal forms are final. They represent an extreme of perfection, associable with the divine, for which artists can find only reduced facsimiles. Stevens' abstractions are not broached as final or perfected ideals. Rather, his avoidance of the concrete and the material is but one phase of a creative effort, allowing a transitory respite from "the malady of the quotidian", and licensing a restatement of first principles.<sup>24</sup> So the drive toward abstraction in the first section of "Notes" is not a permanent flight from sense and reference, but an escape from the muddying contingencies of the everyday, in order that the poet may return, refreshed, to the making of his supreme fiction, which occupies the shifting ground between idealised abstractions and mutable realities. In the first canto of "It Must Be Abstract", the exhortations to lustrated perception are pressing and direct:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea  
Of this invention, this invented world,  
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again

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<sup>23</sup> From "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet", first published in 1944.

<sup>24</sup> "The Man whose Pharynx was bad" (*CPP* 81).

And see the sun again with an ignorant eye  
 And see it clearly in the idea of it. (CPP 329)

Stevens' employment of "ephebe", in an address that conflates his readership with his remote muse, is one of strikingly few martial allusions in a poem composed in the middle years of WWII.<sup>25</sup> Even here, the image seems to refer less to the training of a GI than to the difficult apprenticeship that poets must serve, a difficulty reflected in the near-oxymoron of "perceiving . . . inconceivable", which trains an immediate focus on the subtle variations between *perceptions* and *conceptions* of the world. "Ignorant" is a curious word to employ for a state ostensibly desired, and is sufficiently close to "innocent" for the resonances of that unspoken half-rhyme to linger, perhaps as a token of the stale intuitions that Stevens wishes to subvert. "Notes" effectively begins by recapitulating, in an extended form, the resolution upon which "The Man with the Blue Guitar" had closed: "Throw away the lights, the definitions, / And say of what you see in the dark" (CPP 150). Poets should strive to apprehend that element of reality that is truly irreducible, the "essence of the matter" quoted above, and this ambition is reinforced at the close of canto I: "The sun / Must bear no name . . . but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be."

Cantos II and III extend and complicate the desire for originary meaning, by recognising the difficulty of apprehending, within the linguistic boundaries of poetry, an essentially pre-linguistic sensibility: "the first idea becomes / The hermit in a poet's metaphors" (CPP 330). Although such remote excogitations are characteristic of Stevens' impersonal mode, the opening cantos of "Notes" push their abstractions to a fresh extreme: the poem is testing not only the restrictions of selfhood, but also the more fundamental restrictions of language. In canto IV, a more familiar Stevensian trope reasserts itself, and offers parallels with Pound:

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.  
 There was a myth before the myth began,  
 Venerable and articulate and complete.

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place  
 That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves

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<sup>25</sup> The OED defines "ephebe" as "a young citizen from eighteen to twenty years of age . . . occupied chiefly with garrison duty".



And hard it is in spite of blazoned days. (CPP 331-2)

These lines suggest a faith, comparable to Pound's, in a tradition or natural order that will persist independently of the poet's powers of articulation. Pound apprehends this supervising order, whether embodied in the natural beauty of Lake Garda, or in the man-made subtleties of Malatesta's Tempio, as a benign and sustaining extacy, which is continually juxtaposed with political malfeasance and contemporary social decay. But the more abstruse "myth" that Stevens invokes is never exteriorised through a Poundian nexus of cultural references, nor is the awareness of such a myth, no matter how "Venerable and articulate and complete", an unalloyed comfort. One thematic constant in Stevens' *oeuvre*, from "The Comedian as the Letter C" to "The Auroras of Autumn", is that Nature can manifest an alienating and disorienting presence: "we live in a place / That is not our own". Man's inevitable separation from the natural order is reinforced in canto V:

The bear,  
The ponderous cinnamon, snarls in his mountain  
  
At summer thunder and sleeps through winter snow.  
But you, ephebe, look from your attic window,  
Your mansard with a rented piano. You lie  
  
In silence upon your bed. You clutch the corner  
Of the pillow in your hand. You writhe and press  
A bitter utterance from your writhing, dumb,  
  
Yet voluble of dumb violence. You look  
Across the roofs as sigil and as ward  
And in your centre mark them and are cowed . . . (CPP 332)

The snarling bear, like the roaring lion and blaring elephant described in previous lines, is able to respond immediately and forcefully to an immediate, forceful and inarticulate reality. By contrast, the embattled ephebe appears tortured by the mechanisms of communication, more subtle but more remote than primal cries, which surround him. The rented piano combines an illustration of the sophisticated self-expression that man has

achieved with an awareness that, for the ephebe at least, its chords are merely borrowed. Even speech, amounting only to a “bitter utterance”, seems inevitably estranged from elemental human experience. These afflictions have Promethean connotations, implying tragic consequences even in the advances of civilisation; and the subdued bitterness of this insight perhaps also owes a little to Caliban: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is I know how to curse”.<sup>26</sup> In any case, this and other cantos of “Notes” warn us against defining Stevens’ poetic project in conventional or reductive terms, as a frustrated but noble hunt for inspiration, or an attempt to reconcile the artist with society. Instead, symbols of restless, romantic creativity – the piano, the lonely garret – are associated with a failure to grasp the “first idea”, and with it the austere, impersonal voice that Stevens wishes to refine.

In cantos VI-VIII, Stevens temporarily recoils from the ascetic extremities of preceding lines, and questions whether renewed receptivity to private and particular experience might supply the key to a supreme fiction: “Perhaps there are moments of awakening, / Extreme, fortuitous, personal, / In which we more than awaken” (*CPP* 334). But these Romantic speculations ultimately reflect the perennial indulgences of the creative thinker, from which Stevens is attempting to escape – “the priest desires. The philosopher desires” – and in cantos IX and X, the poem returns to the impersonal sensibility embodied in the concept of “major man”. This figure, adequate to the looming eternities that daunted the ephebe, at first takes on a Blakean hue: “This foundling of the infected past, so bright, / So moving in the manner of his hand”. Although major man has the ability to see beyond fustian knowledge and myth, he himself becomes mythologized, as if in implicit recognition that abstract concepts, no matter how pellucid, must eventually be embodied if they are to endure. In the following canto, this and other insights from “It Must Be Abstract” are compellingly synthesised:

The major abstraction is the idea of man  
 And major man is its exponent, abler  
 In the abstract than in his singular,

More fecund as principle than particle,  
 Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force,

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<sup>26</sup> *The Tempest*, I, ii, 368-9.

In being more than an exception, part,

Though an heroic part, of the commonal.

(*CPP* 336)

A fresh integration of intuitions is enacted by the repetition of words in different grammatical contexts: “abstraction . . . abstract . . . fecund . . . fecundity”, and the alliterative fourth line, “More fecund as principle than particle”, is a fitting summary of the perspective finally achieved in “It Must Be Abstract”. Major man bridges a gulf between imagination and reality that religion can no longer span, not through substitute myths, but through the piecing clarity of his perceptions:

It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect

The final elegance, not to console

Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.

(*CPP* 336)

These foundational insights are not abandoned in the second and third sections of “Notes”, but they are substantially modified. “It Must Change” broadens the scope of the poem with rich anecdotes and exotic images that test the lofty intuitions of earlier cantos in more particular settings. Just as Stevens carefully discriminates between modes of abstraction, prizing essences over generalisations, so the first three cantos of *It Must Change* separate ersatz variations from that which is genuinely transformed. Canto I traces the perceptions of an “old seraph”, which title reduces the celestial being to a state of mortality, sullyng eternity with the prosaic indignities of age. The endlessly renewing seasons no longer offer beautiful compensations for the speaker’s own eventual demise. Rather, when observed over a sufficient span of time, even the tactile vitalities of spring and summer become wearisome, and leave no place for poetic sensitivities: “the booming is blunt, not broken in subtleties.” So an ostensibly vibrant landscape is drained of real significance, and the pigeons noted in the penultimate stanza offer a knowing contrast with the richer natural settings of Stevens’ earlier work: the “ambiguous undulations” of “Sunday Morning” – a gently melancholic extension of the poet’s own feelings – are replaced here by a rebarbative “clatter in the air”, at odds with the seraph’s sensibility. This sensibility is not bitter but resigned, and it anticipates an increasingly common trope in Stevens’ later poetry, in which an aged figure observes a bucolic setting with an air of wistful

detachment, honouring its beauty, but abstracting himself from its energies.<sup>27</sup> The second canto introduces the “President”, who “has apples on the table / And barefoot servants round him, who adjust / The curtains to a metaphysical t”. This material power, like the Seraph’s etiolated divinity, is finally remote from the true energies of change that Stevens desires. The statue of General Du Puy, introduced in the third canto, completes a trinity of inadequate figures. Its former dignity has ossified into absurdity, and the poem enacts this decline through a demotic slump:

Nothing had happened because nothing had changed.

Yet the General was rubbish in the end.

(*CPP* 338)

The personae of “Notes” could be advanced as representing a distinctive phase in the evolution of Stevens’ impersonal mode, in that they refine technical elements of the more detached sensibility of subsequent poems. But there is a distinction to be drawn between Stevens’ “major men”, who can properly be compared with Pound’s principal personae, and the secondary avatars that populate the individual cantos of “It Must Change”. The seraph, the President and General Du Puy are transparently schematic figures, facilitating the exploration of a particular mood or theme, but divorced from the poet’s controlling intelligence. Stevens manipulates these figures, he does not inhabit them. Ultimately, as the signal achievements of succeeding cantos confirm, the impersonal refinements of “Notes” are not tied to Stevens’ deployment of named personae; rather they concern the range and category of insights to which he believed the poet should legitimately aspire.

“Notes” poses a number of problems for the reader, and further problems for the aspirant critic. Its complex schema is disorienting, tempting readers prematurely to codify individual cantos, in an attempt to grapple with the shape of the poem entire. Likewise critics, in seeking to present a convincing account of Stevens’ processes of thought, are forced to suggest for his rich images and metaphors such fixed meanings as the poet has deliberately eschewed. As we have seen, Stevens maintained that poetry could realise insights that philosophy could not, an attitude comparable with Yeats’s belief that “man can embody truth, but he cannot know it”.<sup>28</sup> So our best hope of understanding “Notes” is to focus upon the poetic effects through which the poem’s essential truths are so singularly disclosed. After cantos I-III of “It Must Change”, whose insights, though lucid, are finally

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<sup>27</sup> “The Hermitage at the Center”, discussed in Chapter 6, is an especially poignant example.

<sup>28</sup> W.B. Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954) 922.

susceptible to paraphrase, the fourth canto observes a shift in register. The demotic tone cedes to a stylised and scopious diction, tied to a conceptual synthesis that the preceding local and anecdotal voices could not achieve:

This is the origin of change.  
 Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace  
 And forth the particulars of rapture come.

Music falls on the silence like a sense,  
 A passion that we feel, not understand.  
 Morning and afternoon are clasped together

And North and South are an intrinsic couple  
 And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers  
 That walk away as one in the greenest body.                    (*CPP* 339)

The repeated shifts from estrangement to reconciliation, enacted by successive images, are compounded through ingenious expressions, such as “particulars of rapture”, in which the precision of the first noun clashes with the exhilaration of the second, yet the unlikely combination produces a felicitous resonance. Even the stark opposition between music and silence is softened by sibilance, and contained in two matching lines of unalloyed pentameter, which contrast the more flexible scansion of surrounding lines, and so lend the auditory experience a particular acuity. Musical references form a muted but suggestive motif in “Notes”, symbolising a purity and irreducibility of meaning that Stevens seeks to replicate in language. This association of poetry and music obviously extends the themes of “The Man with the Blue Guitar”; but some of the guitarist’s confidence, his sense of total command over his art, has been lost. The “rhapsody of things as they are”, observed in the earlier poem, has become a “passion that we feel, not understand” (*CPP* 150). In embracing the pure music of abstractions anticipated in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and refined in the first section of “Notes”, Stevens must sacrifice the security of the familiar, a challenge presaged by Crispin’s genteel but limited endeavours in “The Comedian as the Letter C”: “Moonlight was an evasion, or, if not, / A minor meeting, facile, delicate” (*CPP* 28). So the panoptic perspective licensed by abstractions – an essential component of the impersonal mode – comes at a cost. It is no accident that “major

man” as a redemptive and omnipotent symbol falls away in Stevens’ later poems, even as these works attain ever greater meditative force. The renewed emphasis, in “Notes”, upon insights that are suggested through aesthetic effects, rather than heroic proclamations, is a preparation for the heightened impersonal style of “The Auroras of Autumn” and the poems of *The Rock*. Stevens explains the approach in his letters:

That a man’s work should remain indefinite is often intentional. For instance, in projecting a supreme fiction, I cannot imagine anything more fatal than to state it definitely and incautiously. For a long time, I have thought of adding other sections to the NOTES and one in particular: It Must Be Human. But I think that it would be wrong not to leave well enough alone . . . we are dealing with poetry, not with philosophy. The last thing in the world that I should want to do would be to formulate a system (*L* 863-4).

It is interesting that “It Must Be Human” was not a given for Stevens, and significant that he chose not to amplify this credo. This reticence may well be linked to the lament in *Adagia* that “life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble” (*OP* 158). Stevens’ apparent indifference to people has long been the cause of critical censure, ever since Percy Hutchison dubbed *Harmonium* “a glittering edifice of icicles”.<sup>29</sup> But, although Stevens is incapable of passing as an everyman, the concerns of his poetry are not private and exclusive ones. In the most crucial cantos of “Notes”, when Stevens tacitly writes *in propria persona*, his vatic and elevated voice often aligns itself not with the effortlessly transcendent artist, but with an audience in search of understanding:

Is the poem both peculiar and general?  
There’s a meditation there, in which there seems

To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended or  
Not apprehended well. Does the poet  
Evade us, as in a senseless element?

Evade, this hot, dependent orator,  
The spokesman at our bluntest barriers,

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<sup>29</sup> Percy Hutchison, “Pure Poetry and Mr. Wallace Stevens”, *The New York Times* (August 9, 1931).

Exponent by a form of speech, the speaker

Of a speech only a little of the tongue?

(*CPP* 343)

The “evasion” is at first a pejorative quality of the poem, a failure to clarify the tension between the “peculiar and [the] general”. But the active verb “evade”, applied twice to the poet, is more problematic. In the second instance, only a carefully placed comma implies, syntactically, that the poet and the “hot, dependant orator” are the same figure, else the lines would imply that Stevens himself were the “spokesman at our bluntest barriers”. The former reading associates the elusive poet with a form of primal utterance, while the latter reading suggests that “our bluntest barriers” are precisely what true poets will evade. Some ambiguity is surely intentional, as the interrogatives of “It Must Change”, canto II remind us that the unresolved tension between mind and world is ever present in Stevens. “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”, which appeared in the year before “Notes” was written, emphasises the poet’s transforming powers:

What makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (*CPP* 662)

“It Must Be Abstract” and “It Must Change” each attack inadequate forms of abstraction and change in their opening cantos. “It Must Give Pleasure” is more ambitious still, dismissing the empty solace of collective worship: “This is a facile exercise”. Fustian liturgy must be displaced by the individual’s capacity, defined later in the same canto, “to catch from that / / Irrational moment its unreasoning”. Here the enjambment, spanning a stanza break, accentuates the radicalism that the poet seeks. In light of this opening, it is intriguing that the most significant character in “It Must Give Pleasure” – whose intuitions more closely match Stevens’ own than do those of any secondary personae in “Notes” – is a religious figure, Canon Aspirin:

He had to choose. But it was not a choice

Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things

That in each other are included, the whole,  
 The complicate, the amassing harmony. (CPP 348)

At first glance, these lines seem amply to fulfil the criteria for poetic “evasion” laid down in the ninth canto of “It Must Change”. The irregular syntax, layered participle phrases and carefully weighted prepositions frustrate easy interpretation, and seem of a piece with the slightly sterile and over-intellectualised relationship between the Canon and his sister. But the grammatical precision of these lines gradually overwhelms their iterative lexis, and clarifies both the Canon’s dramatic refutation of evasion, and his sudden refusal to rest “between excluding things”. Previously, the poem has so overwhelmingly presented us with ineluctable choices – between change and permanence, or abstraction and reality – that the Canon’s sudden insistence on “the whole, / The complicate, the amassing harmony” alerts us to the fact that these totalities are central elements of the supreme fiction that the poem has been so reluctant to define. In the following canto, Stevens takes up the quest for a meaningful poetic with renewed urgency, as if having implicitly defined the fiction he desires has led him to distrust his capacity to achieve it:

But to impose is not  
 To discover. To discover an order as of  
 A season, to discover summer and know it,  
  
 To discover winter and know it well, to find  
 Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,  
 Out of nothing to have come on major weather,  
  
 It is possible, possible, possible. It must  
 Be possible. (CPP 349)

The urgency of “It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible” is an indication of how anxiously this questing spirit seeks the precise, defining image, not the knowledge that “imposes a pattern, and falsifies”, as Eliot has it in *Four Quartets*.<sup>30</sup> Hence the number of occasions in the third section of “Notes” when the rhythm comes to rest on a phrase for

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<sup>30</sup> Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 179.



which nothing has prepared us, yet which gives the argument a sudden, clinching emphasis: “Until merely going round is a final good, / The way wine comes at a table in a wood.”

In the final canto of “It Must Give Pleasure”, the accretion of heterodox insights reaches its peak. Stevens’ “fat girl” is a challenge to our literary pretensions. The playful irreverence with which she is presented is wholly at odds with the idealised but static muses that we have been trained to expect, after the models of Dante’s Beatrice, Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, or even Eliot’s Hyacinth Girl. Robert Graves offers a useful shorthand for the Western muse in *The White Goddess*: “The muse is a lovely, slender woman with a hooked nose, deathly pale face, lips red as rowan-berries, startlingly blue eyes and long fair hair”.<sup>31</sup> But it is Stevens’ mission to discard conventional thinking – “Throw away the lights, the definitions” – and so he gives himself to a vital and various subject: “Bent over work, anxious, content, alone, / You remain *the more than natural* figure [my italics]”. This subversion of expected form reflects Stevens’ need to find an idiom adequate both to reality and to the mind’s response to it: “the fiction that results from feeling”. And the idiosyncratic joy of this final canto demonstrates that Stevens’ impersonal mode is no barrier to emotional expression; rather, the energies of personal experience are assimilated into the illimitable abstractions of his mature style. So the final lines combine a universally intelligible paean to the fat girl with a twist that is wholly Stevens’ own:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.

We shall return at twilight from the lecture

Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,

I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.

You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber, 1961) 10. Graves’ thesis in “The Triple Muse”, chapter 22 of *The White Goddess*, “is that the language of poetic myth anciently current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse . . . and that this remains the language of true poetry” (x). It is interesting that Stevens’ unorthodox evocation of his muse in “Notes” is matched by the liberties he takes with the broader religious traditions that Graves describes.

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Stevens positioned “Notes” as the final poem in *Transport to Summer*, a decision more intelligible aesthetically than thematically. Though the major achievement of the volume, “Notes” deals, as I have argued, in projections as much as in conclusions. Other complex and indispensable works in *Transport to Summer* – including “Credences of Summer” and “Esthétique du Mal” – were written after “Notes”, and test and extend the insights accrued through its pursuit of a supreme fiction.

In the six years separating “Notes” (1942) from “The Auroras of Autumn” (1948) Stevens’ preoccupations changed. In some respects, the impersonal elements of his poetic, in particular its tendency toward abstraction, waxed. But Stevens’ taste for ineffable arbiters of truths – the “major men” who embody impersonal wisdom – began to wane. Some poems in *Transport to Summer*, including “Repetitions of a Young Captain” and “Sketch of the Ultimate Politician”, do preserve the fantasy of the redemptive hero outlined in the earlier war poems of *Parts of a World*, by imagining one who could provide “central responses to a central fear” (CPP 272). But these poems do little to enhance or qualify the achievement of the epilogue to “Notes”, in which poet and soldier are symbolically entwined. Even as the myth of major man is upheld, it accompanies a recognition that the poet and his hero exist in different tenses: “A dream interrupted out of the past, / From beside us, from where we have yet to live” (CPP 294). Perhaps, at the end of the war, Stevens had no further need for heroes. Or else he had simply exhausted the trope, as Bates implies: “major man perished in 1945 of terminal definition”.<sup>32</sup> In any case, the most memorable poems of *Transport to Summer* bear witness to the recalibration of Stevens’ ambitions.

“The Motive for Metaphor” raises a familiar opposition between the mind and the external world, but has prompted widely differing accounts of the implications of this contrast. Northrop Frye’s influential reading of the poem takes the “motive” it describes as essentially affirmative: “The motive for metaphor, according to Wallace Stevens, is a desire to associate, and finally to identify, the human mind with what goes on outside it, because the only genuine joy you can have is in those rare moments when you feel that although we may know in part, as Paul says, we are also a part of what we know”.<sup>33</sup> But this reading assumes that the perspective of the poem is unified, and that the states of mind

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<sup>32</sup> Bates, *Mythology of Self*, 268.

<sup>33</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination and Other Writings on Critical Theory 1933–1963: Volume 21*, ed. Germaine Warkentin (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006) 445-6.

it explores are all attributable to Stevens. The poem addresses an indistinct “you”, who could be the reader, but whom Vendler takes for Stevens’ “absolutist ‘Platonic’ self – that which believed, with all an acolyte’s sincerity, in religion, love, and art”.<sup>34</sup> Certainly there is little definitively to endorse the perceptions described in the first three stanzas, while their images and cadences do seem to ape the younger Stevens. The apprehension of “things that would never be quite expressed, / Where you yourself were never quite yourself”, recalls “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon”:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw  
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;  
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.      (*CPP* 51)

This declaration, characteristic of *Harmonium*, that the poet is arbiter of his own reality, reflects a metaphysical assurance on the part of the younger Stevens that the “you” of the later poem is implicitly attempting to reclaim. But such confidence is beyond the elder poet, and, accordingly, the initial impulses of “The Motive for Metaphor” are swiftly undercut. “[H]alf-colors” and “melting clouds”, supporting the most pathetic of fallacies, are banished by

The A B C of being,  
  
The ruddy temper, the hammer  
Of red and blue, the hard sound--  
Steel against intimation--the sharp flash,  
The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.                      (*CPP* 257)

An absence of verbal action in these final lines suggests that the poet’s capacities, like the grammar of the sentence, have been exhausted by the harsh and unavoidable encroachments of reality. But it is not quite true to claim, as Vendler does, that Stevens is offering “a submission to what one shrinks from: a brutal solar weight”.<sup>35</sup> The poem does not describe a defeat, but a jarring collision of sense and sensibility – “steel against intimation” – in which there is an implicit challenge that the poet must rise to meet. True,

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<sup>34</sup> Vendler, *Words Chosen*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

the exigencies of this confrontation belie the superficial “exhilarations of changes” described in preceding lines, and the obdurate tone of the final stanza recalls the intransigent, dominant and ineffable objects at the centre of early poems such as “Anecdote of the Jar”. But in eschewing shallow consolations and daring to expend the poet’s full expressive powers upon describing the very entity that threatens to overwhelm those powers – the “dominant X” – “The Motive for Metaphor” enacts in microcosm an important shift in Stevens’ central preoccupations.

Though it is unlikely that Stevens intended a contrast between his “A B C of being” and Pound’s *ABC of Reading*, the similar phrases imply strikingly different senses of elementary knowledge. Pound, whose tutelary impulse was more pronounced, or at least more self-conscious, than Stevens’, is describing a corpus of knowledge that everyone should master as a foundation for future insights. This essential knowledge arms one against the world: “fragments you have shelved (shored)” (VIII/28). But Stevens subverts the formative resonances of “A B C”, to suggest that elementary knowledge is not provisional but final, that the simplest truths are the most difficult to apprehend, in a recognition that leaves the poet once more uninitiate and disarmed. This stance anticipates the metaphysical cruxes of Stevens’ late poems. “The Motive for Metaphor” begins to refine the altered, impersonal idiom – less adorned and more direct – in which the poet might approach “a new knowledge of reality” (*CPP* 452). The poem is the embodiment of a challenge, not the exposition of a theory – an important distinction, too often overlooked:

“The Motive for Metaphor”, I would suggest, allows us to hear in its evocation of this motive, or motif, of “shrinking” the complex overtones of this poetic history-of the “half knowledge” of Keatsian Negative Capability (“when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason”) and its lack of “identity,” in contrast to the hard certainties, and resolute end-directedness, of Men of Power, in the pre-ference [sic] of the “you” in the poem’s first three stanzas for half-light and for avoidance of direct naming or distinct identity; or of Wordsworthian “intimations” in the last stanza’s “Steel against intimation,” a phrase itself suggestive of the split between objective and subjective, poetic and real that continues to govern so many of Stevens’ own versions of that split.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Patricia A. Parker, “The Motive for Metaphor: Stevens and Derrida”, *Wallace Stevens Journal*, VII, no. 3-4 (Fall 1983) 76-88. 81-2.

These flailing prolixities reveal a double misreading. First, the partial and diffident images of the opening three stanzas illustrate the limitations of a minor poet, whose sheltered certainties – motives for metaphor – are in fact the antitheses of “Keatsian Negative Capability”. Secondly, the aesthetic progress of the poem qualifies “the split between objective and subjective”, for though the poetic is threatened by the real, the facilities of language prove finally adequate to describe that reality. Steel and intimation are conjoined.

This renewed ambition to grasp reality dominates “Esthétique du Mal” and “Credences of Summer”, poems that complicate our understanding of Stevens’ *oeuvre*, just as “Motive for Metaphor” does. “Esthétique du Mal” began as an occasional poem, responding to the letter of a young soldier to *The Kenyon Review*. The letter confesses “a feeling of horror at the continuing preoccupation with Eliot in the pages of the *Review*” and levels a criticism that seems tailor-made for Stevens’ anxieties: “I find the poetry in *Kenyon Review* lamentable in many ways because it is cut off from pain. It is intellectual and it is fine, but it never reveals muscle and nerve”.<sup>37</sup> In the first canto of “Esthétique”, an aesthete’s lamentable estrangement from suffering is registered in a stinging bathos:

He tried to remember the phrases: pain  
Audible at noon, pain torturing itself,  
Pain killing pain on the very point of pain.  
The volcano trembled in another ether,  
As the body trembles at the end of life.

It was almost time for lunch.

(*CPP* 277)

These lines have contrasting semantic and aesthetic implications. The surface-meaning amounts to a defence of the poet’s autonomy, as he sits in the shadow of Vesuvius, weighing the crushing expanse of history against his own rôle as essential witness to it: “And yet, except for us, / The total past felt nothing when destroyed”. But the tone inculcates a form of bitter self-censure. The kernel of the soldier’s complaint, that poetry is “cut off from pain”, is cruelly alliterated into farce: “Pain killing pain on the very point of

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<sup>37</sup> John Crowe Ransom, “Artists, Soldiers, Positivists”, *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring, 1944) 276. Ransom quotes large sections of the soldier’s letter, and mounts a defence of the forms of poetry criticised therein.

pain”. This knowing and trivialising affront to genuine suffering is the poetic antithesis of Geoffrey Hill’s celebrated “September Song”:

As estimated, you died. Things marched,  
sufficient, to that end.  
Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented  
terror, so many routine cries.

(I have made  
an elegy for myself it  
is true)<sup>38</sup>

Hill’s unadorned diction seeks neither to disguise nor palliate his subject, whilst the awkward lineation upsets the natural rhythms of speech, and enacts the hesitancy of one who feels himself unequal to horrors that cannot be ignored. But Stevens does not show himself comparably chastened by war; rather, he is embarrassed by the ease with which his fluid artifice can be sustained.

Mild self-loathing is one of many evils in the poem, whose title invites comparison with Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal*. An “esthétique” implies a concern with both beauty and with form, although Stevens was not attempting to codify evil: “I am thinking of aesthetics as the equivalent of *apérçus* [sic], which seems to have been the original meaning. I don’t know what would happen if anyone tried to systematize the subject, but I haven’t tried” (*L* 469). “Esthétique” is not internally consistent, sometimes elevating the “gaiety of language”, elsewhere damning the artist’s presumptions: “Like a hunger that feeds on its own hungriness” (*CPP* 284). Yet in the later cantos of the poem, Stevens finds an antidote to evil in a renewed confrontation with the real:

The softest woman,  
Because she is as she was, reality,  
The gross, the fecund, proved him against the touch  
Of impersonal pain. Reality explained.  
It was the last nostalgia: that he

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<sup>38</sup> Lines 4-10. Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, 44.

Should understand. That he might suffer or that  
 He might die was the innocence of living, if life  
 Itself was innocent. To say that it was  
 Disentangled him from sleek ensolacings. (CPP 283)

These lines furnish important insights into the preoccupations that will dominate Stevens' final volumes. All that is vicariously experienced, like the war, or imperfectly imagined, like the false promises of "Motive for Metaphor", contributes to the "impersonal pain" against which the poet must contend. Although, in refining an impersonal mode, Stevens has been deliberately and progressively engaged in subduing personal experience in favour of more broadly intelligible abstractions, this has come at a cost. The imagination's fancy, when overindulged, tends toward "sleek ensolacings", which are a corruption of the pellucid distillations of reality that Stevens' impersonal insights had been calculated to achieve. In the final section of the poem, a remarkable sense of affirmation inheres in the variety and irreducibility of felt experience, which need not oppose the imagination, but furnishes the mind with renewed vitality:

And out of what one sees and hears and out  
 Of what one feels, who could have thought to make  
 So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,  
 As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming  
 With the metaphysical changes that occur  
 Merely in living as and where we live. (CPP 287)

"Esthétique du Mal" demonstrates Stevens' ongoing commitment to test and extend his own conceptions of poetry, and warns us against proposing too narrow explanations for his aesthetic. Given that the refinement of Stevens' impersonal mode is accompanied, in the later volumes, by an increasing tendency toward abstraction, there is a danger of presenting too simple an association between reality and the personal on the one hand, and the imagination and the impersonal on the other. The voice of "Credences of Summer" is as impersonal as any of Stevens' works, yet he claimed, in a letter to the young Charles Tomlinson: "At the time when that poem was written my feeling for the necessity of a final accord with reality was at its strongest: reality was the summer of the title of the book in which the poem appeared" (L 719). The latter assertion is intriguing, because Stevens

made “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” the final poem in the collection, *Transport to Summer*; and “Notes” seems a curious culmination for a volume seeking “a final accord with reality”. But the sequence of poems is less important than their thematic correlations. It is possible to read “Credences”, written in 1947, as a fulfilment of the state of mind approached in the final cantos of “It Must Give Pleasure”. There the adaptation of experience into achieved art had been tentative, provisional: “the fiction that comes from feeling” (*CPP* 351). Now the fusion of mind and world is compelling:

It is the visible rock, the audible,  
The brilliant mercy of a sure repose,  
On this present ground, the vividest repose,  
Things certain sustaining us in certainty.

It is the rock of summer, the extreme,  
A mountain luminous half-way in bloom  
And then half way in the extremest light  
Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,  
As if twelve princes sat before a king. (*CPP* 324-5)

These irreducible insights are not projected onto a remote and fictional sage. Instead, we witness Stevens inhabiting the rôle of “central man” that he had previously merely described. Quasi-biblical imagery, recalling “on Rock of Ages founded” and the twelve disciples, shows Stevens replacing theistic orthodoxies with a kind of secular mysticism. These lines embody in verse the famous statement of *Adagia*: “After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption” (*CPP* 900). The style of the passage compounds its sacramental overtones: its affected nominalisations – “vividest”, “extremest” – are suggestive of a renewed certitude. These emphatic finalities speak of a desire to fix and preserve transient experiences, a desire that recalls Louis MacNeice: “Let all these so ephemeral things / be somehow permanent like the swallow’s tangent wings.”<sup>39</sup> But whereas MacNeice’s phrase derives its poignancy from the “somehow”, from the eternal frustration of the poet’s desire to preserve beauty, Stevens is less preoccupied with the means of preservation than with the elevated state of mind required to apprehend “sapphires flashing from the central sky”.

<sup>39</sup> Louis MacNeice, “Eclogue to Christmas”, *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber, 2007) 7.



Stevens' evocation of oneness with the actual world, "the brilliant mercy of a sure repose", is rich and compelling; yet the injunctions to confront reality are transmitted in remote, symbolic, even magical terms. This paradox accords with Randall Jarrell's complaint that "Stevens is never more philosophical, abstract, rational, than when telling us to put our faith in nothing but immediate sensations, perceptions, aesthetic particulars".<sup>40</sup> Certainly, earlier poems, such as "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Owl's Clover", become too "philosophical, abstract" and "rational" in attempting to apprehend reality through an impersonal mode. Another common, and related, criticism of Stevens is that his work becomes increasingly distant from the real, a view represented by Yvor Winters, who argues that Stevens declines after *Harmonium* into "experience increasingly elusive and incomprehensible".<sup>41</sup> But though Jarrell's criticisms find their mark in Stevens' early work, Winters' contention is reductive. Stevens was increasingly aware of the dangers of static theorems, as we have seen, and it is notable that the abstractions of "Credences" are anything but dry and etiolated formulations. Though the images do not describe specific moments of perception, they preserve their originary energy and focus. The vitality of the experience foments the acuity of the principle:

Three times the concentrated self takes hold, three times  
 The thrice concentrated self, having possessed

The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,  
 Once to make captive, once to subjugate  
 Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim  
 The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,  
 Fully made, fully apparent, fully found. (CPP 325)

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In Cantos XLVII and XLIX, and in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", Pound and Stevens achieved the aesthetic ends to which their respective impersonal modes had been the means. Canto XLVII reduces the persistent theses of Pound's epic to their most plangent and elemental forms, while Canto XLIX both displays his enduring genius for

<sup>40</sup> Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (London: Faber, 1955) 132.

<sup>41</sup> Winters, *Defense of Reason*, 439.

free translation and vindicates the potential of his use of historical collages to generate subtle and integrated perceptions. “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”, along with the finest poems in *Parts of a World*, exploits the abstract, impersonal figure of the “possible poet” in order to synthesise multiple approaches to the complexities of human experience. Had either poet’s career ended in the early 1940s, the qualities of his impersonal mode might be more straightforwardly described, and the aesthetic success of his mature work more easily evaluated. But Pound and Stevens soon encountered crises in their work, in which the accommodations between art and reality that each had achieved seemed suddenly inadequate to fresh problems and anxieties. Clearly, Pound’s incarceration created its own exceptional pressures, whereas Stevens’ apprehensions are chiefly existential, but the ensuing implications for each poet’s impersonal voice reveal striking parallels. The dilemma’s faced in *The Pisan Cantos*, “The Auroras of Autumn” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” are wholly unlike the crises of technique that had earlier precipitated each poet’s mature style: the recognitions implicit in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and “The Man with the Blue Guitar” that fresh modes of expression were essential to confront a rapidly changing world. Now, despite the flexibility and range afforded by the impersonal mode, Pound and Stevens are forced to realise that their highest poetic ideals, of a paradiso terrestre or supreme fiction, may themselves be insufficient.

Pound’s infatuation with Fascism deepened in the late 1930s.<sup>42</sup> His essays and letters became increasingly vitriolic. He catastrophically aligned himself with the Axis powers in a series of broadcasts on Rome Radio; was consequently indicted for treason in absentia in July 1943; and, by May 1945, had been arrested and transferred to an American prison camp near Pisa. Robbed of his library, Pound was forced to abandon the documentary style of *Cantos 52-71*. So the *Pisan Cantos* record what he best remembered and most keenly valued: friendships, enduring art, classical and oriental myths, and the historical details he most closely associated with these tangled consolations. Pound’s incarceration provided the sternest test both of the sincerity and durability of his paradisaical vision, and of the impersonal techniques that give it resonance and form.

Stevens faced no external pressures on a par with Pound’s singular circumstances, but it is striking that he experienced, at almost the same time, a comparable bout of intense creative uncertainty. The series of lectures that Stevens produced from 1947 combine to reveal, retrospectively, that the settled accommodations of “Notes” – “How simply the

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<sup>42</sup> Here the difference between “fascism” in a general sense and “Fascism” in an Italian-specific sense is important. Pound does not accord Hitler quite the same credulous reverence as Mussolini.

fictive hero becomes the real” – had been as much a local, aesthetic and structural achievement as an intellectual one. “Three Academic Pieces” (1947), “Effects of Analogy” (1948) and “Imagination as Value” (1948) each contain clues to the crisis of perception and feeling recorded in “The Auroras of Autumn”, also published in 1948. Stevens’ “major men” – his projection, onto fictive heroes, of the qualities required to endure, encompass and transfigure reality – had seemed to be the chief focus of his work up to, and including, “Notes”. But, in subsequent poems, these redemptive figures fall away, and the supreme fiction that they embody, though still a source of solace for Stevens, is increasingly embattled. In “Imagination as Value”, the poet is no supreme maker:

The world may, certainly, be lost to the poet but it is not lost to the imagination. I speak of the poet because we think of him as the orator of the imagination. And I say that the world is lost to him, certainly, because, for one thing, the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written . . . One wants to consider the imagination on its most momentous scale. (*CPP* 730)

This sense of “momentous scale” underpins Stevens’ recrudescing uncertainty about the capacity of his poetry to atone for a vague but inescapable sense of loss, engendered by social change, war, and the decline of faith. The spiritual preoccupations of Stevens’ late poems are particularly intriguing, because the fictive heroes of earlier poems were central to a creative mechanism that he describes, in the same essay, as the “way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man” (*CPP* 736). Some of these insecurities, like Pound’s, have their roots in WWII, in the face of which Stevens’ elevation of the imagination over the physical world might begin to seem meretricious. In “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War”, the myth of major man is already becoming untenable: “After the hero, the familiar / Man makes the hero artificial”. But the many anxieties explored in “The Auroras” and “An Ordinary Evening” extend beyond contemporary political uncertainties, and return to a more longstanding concern, which Stevens describes in “Effects of Analogy”: “There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel”.

Both *The Pisan Cantos* and *The Auroras of Autumn* frustrate easy interpretation. There are different reasons for this. Though the building blocks of Pound’s poem, his layered nexus of allusions and ideograms, might themselves be opaque, the presiding themes and states of mind explored in the Pisan sequence are often rendered with a

startling clarity. In contrast, Stevens' poem is almost free of extrinsic reference: the uniformity of its ten sections, each of exactly twenty-four lines, creates an impression of ordered and cohesive progression wholly at odds with Pound's technique. But the concepts broached in Stevens' limpid style are themselves elusive. Earlier poems, such as "Asides on the Oboe", crystallised the self-sustaining vision of the poet as "central man", whose vatic power stems from an imagination no longer contingent on the physical world: "The glass man, without external reference" (*CPP* 227).<sup>43</sup> But, in *The Auroras of Autumn*, desiccated abstractions prove inadequate to the human spirit, so that, having finally achieved a passable facsimile of a wholly detached consciousness, the poet-figure is forced back into a chastening confrontation with an indefinable reality.

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" qualifies the epistemic uncertainties of the "Auroras" by inverting them. Rather than questioning the adequacy of art to the realities it would describe, Stevens investigates what stimulus modern suburban life might offer the imagination. He is conspicuously unimpressed with what he finds. The weary cynicism of the poem's first five cantos contrasts Pound's remarkable ability to preserve, even at his most desolate, the touching faith that "out of all this beauty something must come" (*LXXXIV/559*). Yet "An Ordinary Evening" represents one of the most unlikely triumphs of the impersonal mode. It pushes the poet's characteristic abstractions to so challenging and austere an extreme that the metaphysical conundrums with which Stevens is wrestling become somehow purified: his lexis has escaped the unruly complications of reality. The poem becomes an aesthetic rite of passage, refining the "strange rhetoric" of the imagination, until its last cantos finally enact the fragile consolations they describe:

The glass of the air becomes an element –

It was something imagined that has been washed away.

A clearness has returned. It stands restored.

(*CPP* 416)

As "An Ordinary Evening" reveals, Stevens' reaction to renewed creative anxiety closely mirrored Pound's, as each strove to return his poetry to its essential elements and ideals. Of course, this shared impulse did not precipitate shared poetic techniques. If anything, the major discrepancies in style between the two poets are magnified in this period. The *Pisan*

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<sup>43</sup> The dates at which Stevens chose to publish these poems are a little misleading. Though "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" finally appeared in 1947, it was written in 1942, the year in which "Asides on the Oboe" was published in *Parts of a World*.

*Cantos* are as dense with allusion as any of Pound's works, and Stevens' abstractions have never been more daunting. But, despite these differences, it is striking that neither Pound nor Stevens reacts to personal troubles by adopting a guileless or confessional idiom. Rather, the impersonal dimensions of their respective styles are pushed to even further extremes. So Pound's unfortunate fall is, in a creative sense, auspicious, forcing him to confront and validate the major themes of his epic, whereas before he had too often been content to reframe, albeit brilliantly, the discontinuous insights of his sources. And Stevens, in confronting epistemic questions previously delegated to his "major men", eschews the confident proclamations of earlier poems, in which reality could easily be redeemed by fictions. Now an older, more sombre poet can find in the imagination only a fragile and contingent recompense: "Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick" (*CPP* 363).

## Chapter 5: Pressures and Accommodations

### The *Pisan Cantos*

The *Pisan Cantos* are commonly adjudged the greatest section of Pound's epic. They are also the most overtly personal in theme, composed, for the most part, in an American "Disciplinary Training Centre" at Pisa, where Pound was held on a charge of treason from May 24<sup>th</sup> to November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945. The imprisonment, though disastrous for Pound's mental and physical health, also created the circumstances for his most focused work in decades. Torn from his library, Pound was forced to delve into memory for succour and inspiration. So the *Pisan Cantos* eschew the borrowed and often prosaic schema of the *China* and *Adams Cantos*, and are ordered instead according to examples of the art and history most deeply cherished by the poet in his extremity. Even so, the undoubted creative achievements of the sequence are unevenly distributed. D.H. Lawrence's monition "never trust the teller, trust the tale" is essential to an aesthetic understanding of the *Pisan* sequence, allowing us to attend those sections in which the "value[s] needed" naturally accrue, rather than being guided by the more didactic, and eccentric, of the poet's pronouncements.<sup>1</sup> But the task by now familiar to readers of Pound's epic, to mediate between passages of remarkable lyric energy on the one hand, and intricate, allusive, defiantly unbeautiful passages on the other, is further complicated in the *Pisan Cantos* by the intrusion of fascist sentiments. The sequence is sullied by flares of angry prejudice, most grievously in its opening and concluding cantos, LXXIV and LXXXIV. Pound would later condemn these prejudices, remarking that anti-Semitism in particular was a "stupid, suburban prejudice".<sup>2</sup> But even this belated revocation seems evasive: the phraseology tame, and inadequate to the bigotry that Pound promoted during the Second World War.

The prejudices embedded in the *Pisan Cantos* must be confronted. But this is a complex task. Contemporary literary criticism – especially of the historicist, feminist and post-colonial schools – sometimes proceeds as if the dominant mores of twenty-first-

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<sup>1</sup> See Pound's interview with Donald Hall in the *Paris Review*, vol.7, no.28, Summer-Fall 1962, reprinted in Cookson, *Guide to The Cantos*, xxviii.

<sup>2</sup> Pound made the remark in conversation with Allan Ginsberg in Venice in 1967. See Michael Reck, "A Conversation between Ezra Pound and Alan Ginsberg", *Evergreen Review* 55 [June 1968]: 29.

century liberalism were themselves unimpeachable. This fallacy is to be avoided, but it is also obvious that Pound's actions during the war years are not mere transgressions against modern good taste (as we might describe, for instance, Conrad's tropes for "othering" the Congo in *Heart of Darkness*). To broadcast racist vitriol on Rome Radio, as the calculated extermination of an entire people was taking place, was, and is, an unforgivable enormity. Though this chapter focuses on the aesthetic, thematic and impersonal dimensions of the *Pisan Cantos*, these poetic considerations are not isolable from the prejudices that frame and stain the sequence. In such circumstances, an *a priori* focus on the context of the poem might be invidious, prompting us always to speculate, as *psychologues-manqués*, about the root of Pound's motivations, and potentially clouding the subtleties of the literary text itself. I hope to avoid these pitfalls by acknowledging the aesthetic potential of Pound's poem to "climb / Clear of its wrong beginnings", while also providing the context necessary to clarify the extent to which the *Pisan Cantos* are coloured by their author's lingering fascist sympathies.<sup>3</sup>

Fascist precepts may be entwined with the dominant themes of the *Pisan Cantos*, but they are not always central to these themes. In several crucial respects, the sequence remains true to the tenets of Pound's impersonal mode. This is not a poetry that demands sympathy: it seeks to foment understanding, and in doing so it remains faithful to Pound's Imagist principles. Through lucid images, thematic contrasts and layered associations, the oblique descriptions of the poet's personal tragedy become generalised into a meditation on suffering and sacrifice. Pound strives, consciously and deliberately, to invest even details particular to his own surroundings with universal implications – an endeavour encapsulated in the closing lines of the sequence: "If the hoar frost grip thy tent / Thou wilt give thanks when night is spent" (LXXXIV/560). Here Pound adopts a detached perspective, as if looking down on his own experience, which allows the essential details of his singular predicament to speak for themselves. By contrast, the explicitly fascistic elements of the poem constitute a violation of Pound's own artistic values: they tell the reader what to think, revealing the poet's finger on the scales. The most poignant sections of the *Pisan Cantos*, comprising fond memories of time spent in Italy and literary London, preserve Pound's sense of the individual poet as a mere vessel or conduit, through which the intensity of lived experience is translated into the grammar of civilisation.

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<sup>3</sup> Larkin, "Aubade", *Collected Poems*, 208.

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**March 15, 1942, “England”** – You let in the Jew and the Jew rotted your empire, and you yourselves out-jewed the Jew. Your allies in your victimized holdings are the bunyah, you stand for NOTHING but usury. (“*Ezra Pound Speaking*” 59)

**May 22, 1943, “In the Woodshed”** – And when I cite “Liberty is not a right but a duty,” as I did the other day to a young undersecretary, he opened up; he had been wondering what sort of an animal he had in front of him. And he said: “Yes, THAT is the real Mussolini”. (*ibid.* 316)

Pound’s broadcasts for Rome Radio are saturated with the prejudices that have most sullied his reputation: anti-Semitism, cantankerous economics and an unsettling reverence for Mussolini, based on the delusion that Il Duce, like some anachronistic Caesar, would spark a recrudescence of European civilisation. Famously, some US intelligence officials found these broadcasts so incoherent that they imagined Pound was actually trying to help the allies, by relaying military information in some bizarre code. But Pound’s infatuation with Italian Fascism was painfully sincere, and, as a result of his broadcasts, he was indicted for treason in absentia by a US court on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1943. Pound was finally arrested by Italian partisans on May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1945, and released shortly afterwards, whereupon he voluntarily surrendered himself into American custody. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of May he was transferred to a prison camp near Pisa, and placed initially in one of the camp’s “death cells”, a six-foot by six-foot outdoor cage. He was held there for three weeks. Throughout this period Pound remained convinced, however perversely, that the possibility for renewed civilisation had been lost, and this sense of an opportunity spurned is starkly evoked at the outset of the *Pisan Cantos*:

The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant’s bent  
 shoulders  
 Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,  
 Thus Ben and la Clara *a Milano*  
 by the heels at Milano





inauspicious beginning.<sup>5</sup> Instead, they witness Pound conflating his own dream of cultural rebirth with the shattered designs of the fascist state, and so our appreciation of this and other paradisaical sections of the poem, which are not explicitly fascistic in themselves, become tainted by our awareness of their place in Pound's overall conceptual schema – as tokens of the fascist ideal.

The most overtly political sections of the *Pisan Cantos* are found in Cantos 74 and 84, which open and close the sequence. Pound's worst impulses effectively frame the entire sequence, which is deeply problematic for a critical account geared to emphasise the more humane elements of the *Pisan Cantos*. It is especially dispiriting to learn that Pound added much of this political material belatedly, including the opening elegy to Mussolini, and the whole of Canto 84. According to Ronald Bush, by October 1945, Pound had settled on a draft of ten cantos, when a letter from his wife informed him of the death of J.P. Angold, a correspondent of Pound's, a promising poet, and a man sympathetic to many of Pound's ideals.<sup>6</sup> Pound's preoccupations in the sequence had been with minute details of the prison camp and its surrounding landscape, and a sense of stoic isolation that owed as much to Odysseus and François Villon as to Fascism. But now, distressed and angered by his friend's death, Pound wrought substantial changes. As Bush observes: "In a surge of defensiveness, he imposed a polemical framework on the poem, which gave it a force and colouring that often contradicted what he had recently written".<sup>7</sup> This is amply borne out by Canto LXXIV, in which Mussolini and the Nazi collaborators Pierre Laval and Vidkun Quisling are explicitly associated with "men full of humanitas (manhood) / or jên" – the latter a Chinese symbol one might translate as "compassion" or "humane love".

Even if one allows that Pound was not aware of the full extent of Mussolini's crimes, his presentations of Il Duce are simply absurd. The impression is of an almost wilful delusion, and the defiantly assertive tone of the political passages is out of key with the rest of the sequence. Indeed, if the opening and closing sections of the *Pisan Cantos* could be excised, one would be left with a very different work, for there are numerous intimations of regret:

J'ai eu pitié des autres

probablement pas assez, and at moments that suited my own convenience

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<sup>5</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 474.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Bush, "Modernism, Fascism, and the Composition of Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*", *Modernism/Modernity*, vol.2, no.3 (September 1995): 69-72.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

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

[I have had pity for others / probably not enough . . . paradise is not artificial / hell isn't either.]

Les larmes que j'ai créés m'inondent  
Tard, très tard, je t'ai connue, la Tristesse,  
I have been hard as youth sixty years (LXXX/533)

[The tears I have made flood over me / late, very late, I know you, Sadness]

Pound confesses a great deal in these lines: to a lack of pity, to obstinacy, figuratively embodied in “hard as youth sixty years”, and to the awareness that his present troubles are largely self-inflicted. Characteristically, Pound contrives a means to distance himself from a personal or confessional idiom, here moving into French, as if the admissions he wishes to make are too painful to be couched in his native tongue. These passages are, nonetheless, affecting, but they do not begin to compensate for the visceral prejudice encountered elsewhere in the sequence. Tempting as it might be, one cannot construct an ethically viable text simply by ignoring the morally unpalatable sections of the poem. Nor, however, should one assume that bigotry saturates the whole work. Whereas fascist allusions frame the *Pisan Cantos*, Pound's anti-Semitism, so lamentably prominent in his radio broadcasts, is a comparatively diminished force. As Wendy Flory remarks, “in this eleven-canto sequence of over 3,800 lines, there are three anti-Semitic passages, totalling thirteen lines”.<sup>8</sup> This, of course, is thirteen lines too many, but anti-Semitism is not thematically integral to the *Pisan Cantos*. Rather the prejudice arrives in short, vituperative bursts:

Meyer Anselm [Rothschild], a rromance, yes, yes, certainly  
but more fool you if you fall for it two centuries later

...

from their seats the blond bastards, and cast 'em.  
the yidd is a stimulant, and the goyim are cattle

<sup>8</sup> Wendy Stallard Flory, “Pound and Anti-Semitism”, *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 291.

in gt/ proportion and go to saleable slaughter  
with the maximum of docility. (LXXIV/459)

and the goyim are undoubtedly in great numbers cattle  
whereas a jew will receive information  
he will gather up information  
faute de . . . something more solid  
but not in all cases (LXXIV/463)

Pétain defended Verdun while Blum  
was defending a bidet (LXXX/514)

One response to such passages would be to invoke the radical autonomist principles of Clive Bell or Oscar Wilde, each of whom maintained that aesthetic value is wholly independent of ethical concerns. In Wilde's terms: "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all".<sup>9</sup> This is a bracing stance, and it would be immensely helpful for scholars of Pound if they could simply disregard his bigotry, on the basis that art and morality do not overlap. But in practice, at least in Pound's case, the doctrine of neo-aestheticism is difficult to sustain. For one thing, to attempt to extrude aesthetic value from the overtly racist passages above would be absurd. To approve, say, the sibilant association of "docility" with "saleable slaughter", a phrase unintentionally appropriate for the Nazis' final solution, would be obscene. In any case, whether or not immoral content should detract from an evaluation of the poem, it certainly seems contiguous with the blunting of Pound's creative sensibilities. Whereas his approach to memory and the natural world is characterised, as we shall see, by lyricism and metaphorical subtlety, in the anti-Semitic passages above Pound revisits the hectoring tone of the radio broadcasts. In consequence, and in spite of their repellent content, the violence of such utterances seems unintentionally gauche – witness the plosive "blond bastards" – or else, like the repeated associations of the "goyim" with cattle, forced, predictable and inert.

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<sup>9</sup> Oscar Wilde, "Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 3.

In truth, Wilde's aestheticism is rarely subjected to literal-minded exposition. The term corresponds more readily to a principle than to a critical practice. Nonetheless, when the *Pisan Cantos* first appeared, several writers were prepared to invoke aesthetic and formalist principles in defence of the poem's merits. Conversely, many of those who condemned the *Pisan Cantos* felt that they were required to react not only against Pound's troubling beliefs, but also against the undue influence on American letters of New Criticism, with T.S. Eliot the offender-in-chief.

Eliot was chair of the committee of poets who voted controversially to award Pound the inaugural Bollingen Prize for poetry in 1949. Other members of the committee included W.H. Auden, Robert Lowell and Karl Shapiro, and their collective statement in support of their decision was an unambiguous assertion of aesthetic autonomy:

To permit other considerations than that of poetic achievement to sway the decision would destroy the significance of the award and would in principle deny the validity of that objective perception of value on which civilised society must rest.<sup>10</sup>

This statement provoked considerable ire, much of it aimed directly at T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden. To some extent this is understandable, for both figures had previously expressed strong views on the artist's immunity from public expectation.<sup>11</sup> In his 1943 lecture "The Social Function of Poetry", Eliot opined that a poet's duty "is only indirectly to the people: his direct duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve." Auden, for his part, made his most famous comments on the social responsibilities of the poet in his elegy for Yeats:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its making . . .<sup>12</sup>                      ("In Memory of W.B. Yeats", 36-7)

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Makin, ed., *Ezra Pound's Cantos: A Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 44-6.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, Eliot's complex views on art and morality could occupy an entire thesis in themselves. In *After Strange Gods*, for instance, he values the "heretics" of literature for their "exceptionally acute perception, or profound insight, of some part of the truth; an insight more important often than the inferences of those who are aware of more but less acutely aware of anything" (24).

<sup>12</sup> W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1976) 197.

Auden seems confident that art creates its own rules, and its own criteria for judgement. But others discerned in this stance a gross evasion of moral responsibility. For Robert Hillyer and Peter Viereck, both Pulitzer-Prize-Winning poets, the Bollingen Committee's position effectively licensed immorality, by prizing the formal ingenuity of a literary work for its own sake, and eschewing all other concerns. As Viereck argued, Pound's poetry could not be aesthetically successful because "beauty is banished by the moral ugliness basic to the contents".<sup>13</sup> Both poets published censorious articles on Pound in the *Saturday Review*, whose editors argued that "art cannot be separated from life and attain true greatness". Others were inclined to defend the Bollingen committee. Much of the critical anxiety over Pound's treason was, so far as Malcolm Cowley was concerned, an appeal "under false colors to the great hostile empire of the Philistines".<sup>14</sup> And the importance of separating politics and art was robustly defended by William Carlos Williams: "Give him the prize and hang him if you like, but give him the prize".<sup>15</sup>

On balance, the New Critics held sway in the Bollingen debates; but, as Robert Corrigan has observed, a groundswell of dissent against formalist precepts was already in evidence, and the Bollingen controversy might well have marked the high point for the dominance of aesthetic criticism in the English-speaking world.

If Pound's prejudices, intrinsically personal and aesthetically limiting, are problematic even for an autonomist approach to the *Pisan Cantos*, then it goes almost without saying that radical moralism, at the opposite critical extreme, is inimical to any positive assessment of the poem. Tolstoy, the most famous exponent of the radical moralist position, writes, in his exposition of the philosophy of Schelling, that "Art is the uniting of the subjective with the objective, of nature with reason, of the unconscious with the conscious, and therefore art is the highest means of knowledge", rendering it "indispensable for the life and progress towards well-being of individuals and humanity".<sup>16</sup> One might anticipate a host of objections in introducing Tolstoy, master of the realist novel, as a yardstick for Pound's intractable, impersonal, quintessentially modernist poem. But it is difficult simply to dismiss Tolstoy's ethical scruples, for, in his early prose, Pound also insists on the responsible and tutelary function of art:

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Viereck, "My Kind of Poetry," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 27 August 1949.

<sup>14</sup> Homberger, *Critical Heritage*, 411.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>16</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhansky (London: Penguin, 1995) 22.

Good art however "immoral" is wholly a thing of virtue. Good art can NOT be immoral. By good art I mean art that bears true witness, I mean the art that is most precise.<sup>17</sup> (*LE* 44)

This statement is typical of Pound: an emphatically worded declaration that is, in fact, ambiguous. "Good art can NOT be immoral" might be taken as an endorsement of Oscar Wilde's simple aestheticism, but the following sentence suggests that Pound intends an Aristotelian sense of virtue: art must deal with the true nature of the world, and the world itself is sometimes immoral. Whatever the emphasis, there is a clear gulf between Pound's early idealism and his subsequent tales of fascist supremacy and Jewish conspiracy, which do not in any sense "bear true witness". It is worth noting, however, that Tolstoy's concept of art as the transmission of humane impulses does correspond with other sections of the *Pisan Cantos*, in particular the poet's reflections on love and friendship. The first extended reference to Pound's London years achieves a touching humanity, even as it resists the insidious pull of nostalgia:

Lordly men are to the earth o'ergiven  
                   these the companions:  
 Fordie that wrote of giants  
                   and William who dreamed of nobility  
                   and Jim the comedian singing:                 (LXXIV/452-3)

The first line, borrowed from Pound's own translation of "The Seafarer", enfolds Ford, Yeats and Joyce in a single party, as guardians of the same "live tradition". The trio's unity is enhanced by their respective epithets, "wrote of giants", "dreamed of nobility", "comedian singing" – each of which is surely transferable to the protean Pound, who seems, perhaps unconsciously, to be projecting aspects of his own poetic struggle onto his departed friends. Subsequent lines preserve a light-hearted tone through playful rhymes, "Jepson lover of jade ... / Newbolt who looked half-bathed", and irreverent imagery: "Mr James shielding himself with Mrs Hawkesby / as it were a bowl shielding itself with a walking stick" (LXXIV/453). But the overall effect of the passage is neither whimsical,

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<sup>17</sup> "The Serious Artist" was first published in 1913.

nor simply affirmative. As Daniel Pearlman observes, these lines are also a self-conscious fulfilment of Tiresias' prophecy in Canto I:<sup>18</sup>

“Odysseus

“Shalt return through spiteful Neptune, over dark seas,

“Lose all companions.” (I/5)

Pound, like Odysseus, has “lost all companions”, and this isolation is compounded, in succeeding cantos, by the seeming futility of his sacrifices in retrospect, “with the shadow of the gibbets attendant” (LXXVII/486). Furthermore, the destruction of the poet's political ideals becomes conflated with a sense of creative failure, and there is a specific sense, shared with Stevens, of a reality too various to be contained within a single poem:

“I am noman, my name is noman”

but Wanjina is, shall we say, Ouan Jin

or the man with an education

and whose mouth was removed by his father

because he made too many *things* (LXXIV/446-7, Pound's italics)

The first line perhaps conveys a belated desire for obscurity (or at least greater cunning) that might have allowed Pound to evade punishment, just as Odysseus evades the Cyclops. But the sense of the poet as an active “maker” of things once again intrudes. The legend of Ouan Jin is doubly symbolic, not only suggesting the suffering inherent in any attempt to create art, but also capturing Pound's particular penance: “whose mouth was removed”. However, even in an opening canto suffused with regret, Pound's attitudes are not wholly curtailed by solipsism. Though the immediate possibilities for cultural renewal have been spurned, the means to enact such a renewal remain accessible: “and with one day's reading a man may have the key in his hands” (LXXIV/447). As the canto progresses, an important disjunction arises between an impersonal tradition, steadfast and permanent, and the failings or occluded potentialities of individual artists. A few pages on, Pound quotes Aubrey Beardsley's riposte – “Beauty is difficult” – to Yeats, who asked Beardsley why he “drew horrors” (LXXIV/464). The phrase becomes a deadening refrain, Beardsley's

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<sup>18</sup>Pearlman, *Barb of Time*, 247.





Stevens in this regard – reality is conditioned by the imagination. This willingness to countenance the subjectivity of perception, in which the poet’s grasp of reality, despite the rigour of his ideogrammic method, is knowingly partial, becomes a distinctive feature of the *Pisan Cantos*. It differentiates the sequence from those that preceded it, *The Adams Cantos* and *The Italian Cantos*, and, as a tacit consequence of Pound’s increasing vulnerability, the trope is arguably as moving as any of his more overt regrets. A self-conscious elevation of the imaginary over the real is most strikingly manifest in the varying descriptions of “Mt. Taishan”:

in principio verbum  
 paraclete or the verbum perfectum: sinceritas  
 from the death cells in sight of Mt. Taishan @ Pisa (LXXVI/447)

Zeus lies in Ceres’ bosom  
 Taishan is attended of loves  
 under Cythera, before sunrise (LXXXI/537)

A fat moon rises lop-sided over the mountain  
 The eyes, this time my world,  
 But pass and look *from* mine  
 between my lids  
 sea, sky and pool  
 alternate  
 pool, sky, sea, (LXXXIII/555)

Mt. Taishan is a sacred mountain in the Shandong province of China, festooned with shrines, and associated with sunrise, birth and renewal. Pound transfers the name and qualities of Taishan to a cone-shaped peak visible from the DTC, one of the Garfagnana mountains. Therefore “Mt. Taishan @ Pisa” performs a syncretic function, allowing past and present, tradition and sense-perception, to be symbolically conjoined. The real object, as is so often the case in Stevens’ verse, is merely a starting point, licensing the free play of the imagination. But Pound’s symbolic transpositions remain charged by the reality that underpins them, because the reader is acutely aware of the setting for the poet’s reverie: peering through the wire mesh of his compound at the hills beyond. The first quotation

infuses lines from John's Gospel – “In the beginning was the word” – with Confucian overtones. “Sincerity” (“Sinceritas” above) is glossed in Pound's *Confucius*, as “The precise definition of the word”, which inaugurates an association of Taishan with purity of insight that runs throughout the sequence.<sup>21</sup> But the spatial emphasis, “from the death cells *in sight of* Mt. Taishan”, is most intriguing, emphasising that, even if the poet can be held captive, the imagination cannot. By the beginning of Canto LXXXI, one is so attuned to the confluence of real and imagined visions at Taishan that the mythical associations through which Pound escapes the present, “attended of loves / under Cythera”, reflect back upon that present, capturing the incongruous tranquillity of the DTC before dawn. The reader is immediately enfolded in the pattern of the poet's thought, with Taishan as its central node. In the final quotation, from Canto LXXXI, the mountain witnesses the conflation of sight and *insight*, as these two modes of perception collide in the ambit of the poet's eye, and in the chiasmic inversion of three etiolated monosyllables: “sea, sky and pool . . . pool, sky, sea”.

The conflation of enduring art with the best of the modern world is the dominant motif of Canto LXXVI. Thus Lake Garda, the fondly remembered setting for “Jim's [Joyce's] veneration of thunder”, is dubbed “the haunt of Catullus”, which annexes the lustre of the Roman poet for Pound and his circle (LXXVI/476). In one sense, this determination to read personal experience through the prism of cultural history risks diminishing the force of Pound's reminiscences, by placing them in a lineage that can sometimes seem pompous or contrived. But the corollary of this technique is that when Pound's immediate troubles are finally and explicitly acknowledged, they become magnified by the generalising tendency of his impersonal mode, and seem to threaten not only the poet, but also the tradition that he wishes to preserve:

As a lone ant from a broken ant-hill  
from the wreckage of Europe, ego scriptor. (LXXVI/478)

The image of the “lone ant” accords with Jean Cocteau's description of Pound as “a rower on the river of the dead” (“le rameur sur le fleuve des morts”).<sup>22</sup> Despair is never wholly banished from these cantos, and sometimes even Pound's most cherished visions fail to

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<sup>21</sup> Pound, Ezra, *Confucius, and Ernest Fenollosa, Confucius: the Unwobbling Pivot & the Great Digest* (London: Peter Owen, 1952) 20.

<sup>22</sup> The somewhat uncertain origins of this quotation are discussed in Hugh Kenner, *Historical Fictions* (San Francisco: North Point P, 1990) 55.

palliate his personal troubles, instead throwing them into sharper relief: “Le paradis n’est pas artificiel, / l’enfer non plus” (LXXVI/480). But these sardonic interludes are an interruption of the overall progress of Canto LXXVI, which gradually amasses restorative insights. Towards the end of the canto, Pound begins to dream, as Stevens does, of a paradise shaped by the mind: “bricks thought into being ex nihil / suave in the cavity of the rock la concha” (LXXVI/482).

In the following canto, the concept of a cosmic order is amplified, as the natural processes celebrated in Canto LXXVI are conflated with Pound’s theories of ideal government and Confucian law. To this end, the canto is scattered with Chinese ideograms, intended, perhaps, to lend Pound’s pronouncements a timeless authenticity:

know what precedes
and what follows
To

先

多

will assist yr/ comprehension of process (LXXVII/485)

Pound employs these symbols with an obvious reverence for the intellectual tradition whence they arose, although, in this canto, the symbols usually anticipate or succeed their equivalent English translations, and are largely superfluous to the grammar of Pound’s verse. A sceptic might be forgiven for questioning whether the symbols serve any poetic purpose, beyond their exotic appearance on the page. But Pound, perhaps anticipating such a judgement, swiftly undercuts any suggestion of portentousness:

Bright dawn
明
on the sht house

next day

with the shadow of the gibbets attendant
(LXXVII/486)

Here Pound deliberately sullies the association of light with renewal that earlier cantos have laboured to refine. The poetic effect replicates the harsh encroachment of reality upon Pound’s wandering reflections, and reinforces his remoteness, despite the allure of

Taishan, from emblems of the tradition he wishes to preserve. Indeed, the scatological reference above, and a winking allusion to “the telluric mass of Miss Lowell”, contrast with a weary and almost prim distaste for the coarseness of Pound’s fellow prisoners: “one phrase sexless that is / used as sort of pronoun / from a watchman’s club to a vamp or fair lady” (LXXVII/491).

Canto LXXVIII opens with a belittling account of the Potsdam Conference, “40 geese are assembled”, before charting the fall of Rome to allied forces, and Pound’s subsequent journey, on foot, to his daughter in the Tyrol. Set against this litany of defeat are the surviving achievements of Mussolini, who “Put down the slave trade, made the desert to yield / and menaced the loan swine” (LXXVIII/499). The renewed focus of Canto LXXVIII upon the political and economic dimensions of Pound’s vision is likely once again to strain the patience of the modern reader, as he is enjoined to accept Mussolini’s dubious achievements as of a piece with the natural order more compellingly outlined in Cantos LXXIV and LXXVI. A.D. Moody makes large claims for the coherent integration of the *Pisan Cantos*, claims which are also of moment for Pound’s preservation of an impersonal voice:

Our advanced intellectual practice subsumes details into generalizations and generalizations into theory; but the method of *The Cantos* is designed to escape generalization and theory while being intelligent about things in particular, and while arranging the perceptions of them into an order which will yield their full relations or harmonies. It is not an escape from intelligence, only from the tendency to abstraction. But minds trained to think in abstractions and to take their stand on theories may well feel overwhelmed when offered the plenitude of intelligently perceived particularity.<sup>23</sup>

Moody’s summation of a trend towards generalisation in contemporary criticism, a trend inimical to the appreciation of Pound’s partite formulations, is penetrating. But his generous presentation of a wholly integrated poem, revealing “an order which will yield [Pound’s perceptions] their full relations or harmonies”, is more contentious. As we have seen, several critics, including Noel Stock and Leon Surette, have argued that many of the alleged structural congruities of Pound’s *Cantos* are chimerical, and that it is all too easy for sympathetic critics to confect ingenious schema that Pound himself never envisaged.

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<sup>23</sup> A.D. Moody, “Ezra Pound: *The Pisan Cantos*”, *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Neil Roberts (London: Blackwell, 2003) 470.

The debate over the overall coherence of the collected *Cantos* may never be resolved, because their sheer variety and scale provides a wealth of evidence for supporters and sceptics alike. But the *Pisan Cantos* are a particular case, and Moody is right to remark the energies amassed by the aggregation of particular details:

The shadow of the tent's peak treads on its corner peg  
marking the hour. The moon split, no cloud nearer than Lucca.

In the spring and autumn

In "The Spring and Autumn"

there

are

no

righteous

wars

(LXXVIII/503)

In these lines, the progression of the thought traces exactly the lifting of the poet's gaze, from the intimate detail of the tent peg, to the clouds over Lucca, to the endless cycle of the seasons. "The Spring and Autumn" refers to the last of Confucius' *Five Classics*, which, in James Legge's translation, contains the line "there are no righteous wars".<sup>24</sup> The preceding line extends the force of that concluding insight, suggesting that the very forces of the seasons, of flux and renewal, are opposed to the brutality of war. Only in Canto LXXIX does the present carnage in Europe recede, as Pound's willed, terrestrial Elysium begins truly to outstrip the shadow of his imprisonment:

O Lynx, guard this orchard,  
Keep from Demeter's furrow

This fruit has a fire within it,

Pamona, Pamona

No glass is clearer than are the globes of this flame

what sea is clearer than the pomegranate body

holding the flame?

(LXXIX/510)

<sup>24</sup> Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2:478.

Here the verse enacts the enlightenment it describes: after the momentary stasis of “Pamona, Pamona” the punctuation evaporates, just as the constraints on poetic perception are removed by the transparent and illuminating flame. These lines are testament to Pound’s belief that a store of knowledge, allied to the creative impulse, can confound the barb of time. But, as ever, it is questionable whether these visionary passages would retain their full force, were they not offset either by economics and history, or, later in the sequence, by Pound’s memories of time spent in England and Italy. In this sense, the more personal and intimate recollections are the Aristotelian *logos* to the *pathos* of Pound’s Italianate visions; they offer a reserve of felt experience that licenses his faith in the creative imagination. Canto LXXX provides a compelling example of Pound’s capacity for finding general pertinence in personal experience:

To watch a while from the tower  
   where dead flies lie thick over the old charter  
 forgotten, oh quite forgotten  
 but confirming John’s first one,  
 and still there if you climb over attic rafters;  
 to look at the fields; are they tilled?  
 is the old terrace alive as it might be  
 with a whole colony  
   if money be free again?       (LXXX/534)

A visceral image of debasement – Magna Charta festooned with dead flies – carries an echo of the vituperative “Hell Cantos”. But, whereas Cantos XIV and XV suffer from excessive and unvarying bombast, here a single macabre image is more than adequate to convey the poet’s dejection; a mood swiftly tempered by what follows. Pound, an expatriate American, attaches a curious importance to Magna Charta, perhaps taking it as an archetype for the US constitution. Though “forgotten”, that is to say, disregarded by a bovine populace, Magna Charta is still accessible, as a repository of ordered dignity, to those prepared to “climb over attic rafters”, a compelling analogy for the sacrifices artists must make. Furthermore, the plain lexis, plangent long vowels and subtle alliteration of ‘t’s and ‘l’s throughout this passage imbue the verse with a tactile quality, reflecting both the poet’s scramble over rooftops, and the vitality of the agrarian vista that stretches beneath

him. The understated allure of this landscape is enhanced by the consonance of “fields” and “tilled”, “old” and “alive”. What is wished for is a symbolic descent into the earth, a sublimation in organic processes that recalls the stone staircase of Canto XVI, and anticipates the funereal theme of Canto LXXXII.

The final line of the Magna Charta passage, “if money be free again”, heralds a bathetic shift from arcadia to urban iniquity. Canto LXXX proceeds to recollections of G.K. Chesterton and Charles Talbot, representatives of an aristocratic order whose time has passed, brought to heel by the modern tax system: “rust, ruin, death duties and mortgages” (LXXX/535). There is no obvious hostility in these lines towards the old England of “has-been and why-not”, but its mores and certitudes are clearly inadequate to the exigencies of the modern world, and this implicit recognition thrusts Pound back into the present reality of his imprisonment: “[Only shadows enter my tent / as men pass between me and the sunset]” (LXXX/535). The phrase is doubly poignant. It captures Pound’s fundamental isolation at the DTC, where the guards were forbidden even to speak to him, but also evokes figures from the past who flash before the mind’s eye, as the poet foresees his own inevitable sunset. Typically, this momentary introversion is swiftly dispelled, first by the appearance, “beyond the eastern barbed wire”, of a sow as “matronly as any duchess at Claridge’s”; then by the ephemeral gaiety of Christmas at Maurice Hewlett’s (LXXX/535). But this nexus of metropolitan associations eventually leads Pound to a more enduring register, in the famous twelve-line passage inspired by Fitzgerald:

Tudor indeed is gone and every rose,  
 Blood-red, blanch-white that in the sunset glows  
 Cries: “Blood, Blood, Blood!” against the gothic stone  
 Of England, as the Howard or Boleyn knows.           (LXXX/536)

An enormous weight of history is condensed into a mere four words, “Blood-red, blanch-white”, as we are projected back into the medieval world of the Wars of the Roses. In that heraldic age, we infer, the precepts of Magna Charta were still of moment, and the martial imagery also recalls the brutal nobility of the earlier “Malatesta” Cantos. Pound never conflates his persona with the medieval Malatesta as fully as with the classical Odysseus, but in the third stanza of the Fitzgerald sequence it appears that the poet *is* effecting a form of dramatic self-projection into the medieval world:



Or if a rational soul should stir, perchance,  
 Within the stem or summer shoot to advance  
 Contrition's utmost throw, seeking in thee  
 But oblivion, not thy forgiveness, FRANCE. (LXXX/536)

Pound's own "rational soul" was hardly conspicuous during the war years, which witnessed the iniquitous radio broadcasts. But introspection, enforced by captive solitude, may well prompt Pound towards "contrition's utmost throw", albeit the personal reference, if intended, is heavily and characteristically disguised. Earlier in Canto 80, Pound slipped into French in order to record emotions that might otherwise strike a note of self-indulgence. Now, at the close of the canto, the regular metre and archaisms of Victorian pastiche arguably compose a similar distancing technique. They allow Pound to voice covertly a desire for conciliation, without exposing his destructive atavisms. He achieves a tacit expiation by projecting his personal thirst for redemption into the historical conflicts between two nation states.

Canto LXXX contains many borrowed voices – Hugh Kenner recognises Browning and Bertran de Born in addition to Fitzgerald – but these assumed registers are continually interrupted by Pound's ideogrammic asides, recording minutely observed details from the camp.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, Victorian metrical order is immediately displaced by an impressionistic scene: "as the young lizard extends his leopard spots / along the grass blade seeking the green midge", before the poem shifts back into a visionary mode (LXXX/536):

and the Serpentine will look just the same  
 and the gulls be as neat on the pond  
 and the sunken garden unchanged  
 and God knows what else is left of our London  
 my London, your London (LXXX/536)

The delicate half-rhymes of "same/unchanged" . . . "pond/London" achieve a stylistic median between the formal order of the Fitzgerald passage and the free verse idiom in which the lizard is apprehended. This device reinforces the reader's burgeoning impression

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<sup>25</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 488-9.

of the London years as a necessary period of transition, observing a battle between a settled but sterile Victorian sensibility and the challenging modernity that displaced it. Pound paints an ostensibly irenic scene, but the repeated conjunctions, as of a chant or incantation, highlight a triune sequence, “Serpentine” . . . “same” . . . “sunken”, that creates a dying fall; an effect underscored by the unpunctuated erotesis – “what else is left”. Layered possessive pronouns – “our”, “my”, “your” – slowly and deliberately entwine the poet’s regrets with those of his readers, inviting us to project our own desires onto the idealised but inaccessible landscape of Pound’s remembered London.

The opening of Canto LXXXI, linking Zeus, Ceres and Taishan, is in keeping with the irenic closing lines of the preceding canto, but this elevated mood is swiftly tinged with fresh regrets. Specific acts of kindness – of a peasant woman, “you can sleep here for a peseta”, of a fellow inmate who fashioned Pound a makeshift table – merely punctuate a descent into misery:

AOI!

a leaf in the current

at my grates no Althea (LXXXI/539)

Readers of *The Cantos* are by now inured to abrupt shifts in register and tone, and this emotional nadir is followed by just such a movement from desolation to hope:

----- Yet

*libretto* Ere the season died a-cold

----- Borne upon a zephyr's shoulder

I rose through the aureate sky

*Lawes and Jenkyns guard thy rest*

*Dolmetsch ever be thy guest,*

[ . . . . ]

Hast 'ou fashioned so airy a mood

To draw up leaf from the root?

Hast 'ou found a cloud so light

As seemed neither mist nor shade?

Then resolve me tell me aright  
If Waller sang or Dowland played.

Your eyen two wol sleye me sodenly  
I may the beauté of hem nat susteyne

And for 180 years almost nothing. (LXXXI/539-40)

One hundred and eighty years separate Henry Lawes and John Jenkins from Arnold Dolmetsch. During that period, in Pound's eyes, the true harmony of words and music that each composer achieved was lost.<sup>26</sup> Once again, we are reminded that Pound's conception of history is not progressive, but cyclical, and shaped by exceptional individuals: with Dolmetsch, ancient forms of music were brought back to life. The arresting qualities of Pound's own "libretto" have encouraged certain critics to wax nebulous about its implications: "the lyric's stylistic virtuosity, its prominence in the text as aesthetic gesture, establishes a certain distance between the poet and the mystery he is evoking, just as it distances the reader's response as well . . . The artful rhetoric, and then the sudden change of tone, have the effect of establishing a remoteness from the religious wholeness craved".<sup>27</sup> This is a misreading. The technical hallmarks of Pound's impersonal mode often distance the poet from the immediate subjects of his verse. But, as we have seen, the confluence of these same techniques with the particular emotional pressures of the *Pisan Cantos* has a markedly different effect. Intensities of feeling are not veiled, but generalised, as the poet seeks artistic cognates and historical analogues for his own experience. Thus the "stylistic virtuosity" of the organic imagery and Chaucerian idioms above do not suggest remoteness from "religious wholeness". Rather, they witness Pound actively positioning himself *within* the tradition of Chaucer, Waller and Dowland, with a self-conscious elevation of perception and mood ("I rose through the aureate sky") which is essential to the revelation that follows:

Ed ascoltando al leggier mormorio

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<sup>26</sup> In his short essay on Dolmetsch in the *Literary Essays*, Pound praises the composer's receptivity to the beauty of "ancient music": "He has found that the beauty was untranslatable with modern instruments; he has repaired and has entirely remade 'ancient instruments'" (LE 434). Dolmetsch is celebrated above all for his reverence for the past, an attitude extended by Pound in Canto 81.

<sup>27</sup> Anthony Woodward, *Ezra Pound and The Pisan Cantos* (London: Routledge, 1980) 91.

there came new subtlety of eyes into my tent,  
 whether of spirit or hypostasis,  
     but what the blindfold hides  
 or at carnival  
                 nor any pair showed anger  
 Saw but the eyes and stance between the eyes,  
 colour, diastasis,  
     careless or unaware it had not the  
 whole tent's room  
 nor was place for the full Εἶδος  
 interpass, penetrate  
     casting but shade beyond the other lights  
         sky's clear  
         night's sea  
         green of the mountain pool  
         shone from the unmasked eyes in half-mask's space.         (LXXXI/540)

Aphrodite, introduced here both as an exemplar of heightened perception and as the vision perceived, presents the poet with “a new subtlety of eyes”. This line deliberately parallels the lament of the preceding canto, “only shadows enter my tent”, when the poet’s attempt to find succour in the past seemed destined to fail. Now, in the hieratic mood introduced by the “libretto”, the physical world seems somehow less real than a world imagined. Pound’s vision does not transcend his present troubles, but is fundamentally alien to them, provoking a sensibility “careless or unaware it had not the / whole tent's room”. The poet’s perception is at once metaphysically liberated, yet still physically constrained: “the unmasked eyes in half-mask's space”. In other words, despite the confines of the DTC, Pound is experiencing a glimpse of “the full Εἶδος”, which Cookson glosses as “knowing and seeing conjoined”, to which the entire Pisan sequence has slowly been building.<sup>28</sup>

Daniel Pearlman draws an instructive contrast between Pound’s senses of “time as subjectively experienced (in memory) and time as objectively experienced (in nature)”, commenting that these temporal strands are unified in Canto LXXXI by the moon, “the

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<sup>28</sup> Cookson, *Guide to the Cantos*, 159.

major symbol of organic time”.<sup>29</sup> Canto LXXX concluded with an image of nature as “grand couturier”, and Canto LXXXI returns to this metaphor, to chastise those artists, Pound implicitly included, whose ambitions have led them to forget their status as lesser creators, merely imitating the perfection of the natural order:

The ant’s a centaur in his dragon world.  
 Pull down thy vanity, it is not man  
 Made courage, or made order, or made grace,  
       Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.  
 Learn of the green world what can be thy place  
 In scaled invention or true artistry,  
 Pull down thy vanity,  
                           Paquin pull down!  
 The green casque has outdone your elegance.       (LXXXI/541)

Pound abandons himself in these lines to an almost Romantic conception of the poet, who is not the maker of courage, order or grace, but remains uniquely sensitive to their presence: he “learn[s] of the green world”. Sterile and falsifying artistry, that fails to bear true witness, is embodied in the figure of Paquin, a Parisian couturier, who is denied the dignifying archaism “thy”, his elegance diminished by the simple ‘your’ that precedes it.

Donald Davie has commented on the combination of Romantic and Enlightenment influences in Canto LXXXI, observing “an attitude of humility about the place of the human in relation to the non-human creation”, and remarking that “it was the shock of Pound’s appalling predicament . . . that restored him to this humility, after the steady crescendo of raucous arrogance through the Chinese history and American history cantos”.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, Pound’s vision presents all life as essentially interconnected, in that humanity’s salving myths and fond delusions are no different from those of the ant. This is a far cry from, for instance, Canto XLI, in which Mussolini is praised for draining the marsh lands of Circeo. Such a mechanised endeavour, pitting human intransigence against the natural world, seems at odds with the ethos of the *Pisan Cantos*. But even Pound’s renewed reverence for the external world is not easily aligned with the conception of nature in Stevens’ verse, which, despite variations in emphasis throughout the latter’s

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<sup>29</sup> Pearlman, *Barb of Time*, 284.

<sup>30</sup> Davie, *Studies in Ezra Pound*, 147.

career, places far greater stress on the primacy of the imagination: “Thou art not August unless I make thee so”.<sup>31</sup> Only intermittently, as we have seen in Canto LXXVI, does Pound admit the rôle of the imagination in moulding that which is perceived, so preserving the artist’s position as shaping spirit. Elsewhere he is almost a supplicant to organic processes, which are themselves tokens of an inviolable wisdom. Admittedly, to cavil at the ontological consistency of the *Pisan Cantos* is arguably to miss the point, ignoring James’s dictum that “we must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donné*: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it”.<sup>32</sup> Pound fashions a moving lyric to condemn artistic hubris, and the generalised monition is surely indivisible from the personal recriminations that swell its emotional force. The anguish is acute, yet, at the close of the canto, regret cedes to reconciliation:

To have, with decency, knocked  
That a Blunt should open  
          To have gathered from the air a live tradition  
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame  
This is not vanity.  
          Here error is all in the not done,  
all in the diffidence that faltered . . .           (LXXXI/542)

Pound visited Wilfred Scawen Blunt as one of a committee of poets in 1914, in recognition of Blunt’s status as “the last of the great Victorians”.<sup>33</sup> Dorothy Pound, in conversation with Hugh Kenner, makes clear her belief that the “fine old eye” is also a reference to Blunt, rather than Yeats, placing the elder poet at the centre of the “live tradition” Pound seeks to apprehend.<sup>34</sup> As if in homage to Blunt, Pound tempers the rhetorical vigour of the canto in its closing lines: of his many tropes for wresting meaning from the past, the phrase “to have, with decency, knocked” is one of his most demure. Intriguingly, a similar construction is employed in Canto VII, to evoke the diminished riches of post-war Paris: “Knocking at empty rooms, seeking for buried beauty” (VII/25). The parallel suggests that,

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<sup>31</sup> “Asides on the Oboe” (CPP 227).

<sup>32</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction”, *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1987) 198.

<sup>33</sup> Carpenter, *Serious Character*, 228.

<sup>34</sup> Hugh Kenner, “D. P. Remembered,” *Paideuma* 2.3 (Winter 1973) 492.

for all the Jamesian allure of continental Europe, it did not benefit the young poet so readily as London did.

In Cantos LXXX and LXXXI, which pay homage to the English verse tradition, and find succour in natural processes, Pound seems gradually to reconcile himself with past errors and present injustices. But, in keeping with the see-saw progression of the Pisan sequence, the opening of Canto LXXXII immediately undercuts this progressive softening. “Swinburne my only miss” bemoans an instance of the very faltering diffidence condemned but a few lines before. And a nexus of associations is introduced in the account of Swinburne’s rescue by “french fishermen”, which recalls Odysseus being saved by Leucothea in Book 5 of the *Odyssey* (LXXXII/543):

What I suggest, thy wisdom will perform:  
 Forsake thy float, and leave it to the storm;  
 Strip off thy garments; Neptune’s fury brave  
 With naked strength, and plunge into the wave.<sup>35</sup>

These images of shipwreck are surely associated in turn with Pound’s earlier allusion to mental breakdown, in Canto LXXX, “when the raft broke and the waters went over me” (LXXX/533). So a clear thematic chain links squandered opportunities in England with Pound’s moment of greatest psychological peril. In a verse letter to his lawyer, Julien Cornell, written from a cell at St. Elizabeth’s, Pound later lamented the “futility of might have been” and the more oblique personal references of Canto LXXXII certainly conform to that profound sense of regret (*Letters in Captivity* 251). The canto proceeds via penurious printers and minor poets, emblems of Pound’s fruitless labours in London, to Ford Madox Ford, who “never dented an idea for a phrase’s sake” (LXXXII/545). Ford, whom Pound described as “the best critic in England” in 1914, was instrumental in guiding the young poet’s development. In other words, he saved Pound time, a pregnant consideration in this canto, for succeeding lines train an eerie focus on transience and death:

Where I lie let the thyme rise  
 and basilicum

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<sup>35</sup> Pope, *Odyssey* V, 434-7.

let the herbs rise in April abundant. (LXXXII/546)

The pun on *thyme* further integrates the poet's sense of time with organic processes, and these lines make explicit the veiled desire for sublimation in nature which infuses the Magna Charta passage of Canto LXXXII. In a similar vein, Stevens, in "The Auroras of Autumn", is finally reconciled to forces of nature that had threatened to overwhelm his avatar, the "scholar of one candle". It is not surprising that broad preoccupations with artistic failure and death should be shared between the ageing Stevens and the ageing, incarcerated Pound. But Canto LXXXII also reveals a more specific and perhaps more unexpected parallel, connecting Pound's late work to the ethos of Stevens' early verse. "Sunday Morning" introduced the concept that the natural world is compelling because of its very transience, that "Death is the mother of beauty". The prospect of Pound's own demise is similarly palliated by an awareness of the endlessly renewing cycle of life and death, and images which betoken this cycle become part of Pound's "periplum", his voyage of the mind:

three solemn half notes

their white downy chests black-rimmed

on the middle wire

periplum

(LXXXII/547)

Canto LXXXII, moving from futile endeavour, via examples of authentic fellowship, to the daunting reciprocity of death and regeneration, re-enacts in miniature the progression of the Pisan sequence. Though the canto concludes on a note of near-despair, in which Pound admits "the loneliness of death came upon me", in Canto LXXXIII he rises, phoenix-like, from this extremity (LXXXII/547). The *Pisan Cantos* are scattered with accounts of the failure of artists – of Bunting, of Allen Upward, of Pound himself – to influence their public, but this litany of defeat is ruptured at the outset of Canto LXXXIII by Yeats's masterful assertion that "Nothing affects these people / Except our conversation" (LXXXIII/548). The meditations and reminiscences of Canto LXXXIII are distinctive, often taking on more complete and elaborated forms than we find elsewhere in the sequence. The syntax, for instance, tends not to produce flashes of insight, but instead traces the gradual unfolding of truths grounded in experience:





tense “shall sing”, enacts a poignant progress from reality to myth and from impression to imagination. Pound’s association of a humble wasp with Odysseus’ voyage after knowledge has such compelling power because the conceptual connections between the local and the literal elements of these lines are grammatically reinforced, and replicate the progression of the poet’s thought in full. The syntactical integration of the passage is central both to the acuity of Pound’s initial sense-impressions, and to the coherence of the mystical vision he evolves from them. However, Pound is not always keen to elaborate his thinking, and, toward the close of the canto, conventional syntax is displaced:

A fat moon rises lop-sided over the mountain

The eyes, this time my world,

But pass and look from mine

between my lids

sea, sky, and pool

alternate

pool, sky, sea,

morning moon against sunrise

like a bit of the best antient greek coinage

(LXXXIII/555)

The erosion of syntax in these lines, which contract from a complete clause to a sequence of one-word images, corresponds more easily with our view of Pound as arch experimentalist. But, even here, the arrangements of words cannot simply be called musical. Pound is continuing to court the reader’s desire for grammatical order. If this were not the case, then the elliptical and disruptive arrangements of the second and third lines would not be so striking in their aberrance. On one level, the conflation of subject and object in these lines suggests the inadequacy of conventional modes of thinking to the poet’s plight, which recognition paves the way for a moment of hieratic insight, recalling the apprehension of a Platonic “hypostasis” in Canto LXXXI, when “there came new subtlety of eyes into my tent”. But here the residual grammatical connections between the poet and the strange spirit-presence, though strained, are essential to the generation of meaning, allowing the beautifully placed phrase “between my lids” to do its work. “Between” combines prepositional and adverbial functions, so that its immediate sense of physical separation is tempered by the word’s other common application to that which is

shared or mutually understood. Both connotations are relevant to this alien and mystical vision: the spiritual insight attained by the poet is experienced as both a blessed communion and an eerie transfiguration.

In this canto, Pound is seemingly driven by the very extremity of his plight into a state of heightened receptivity, “as he was standing below the altars / of the spirits of rain”, condensing the visionary sensibility of Canto LXXIX into a sequence of charged images (LXXXIII/549). And just as Pound’s lyric evocations of natural order reach a climax in this poem, recalling the neo-platonic schema of *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, so the time spent with Yeats at Stone Cottage emerges as the true pinnacle of the poet’s voyage into memory:

made a great peacock  
in the proide of his oyee

proide ov his oy-ee  
as indeed he had, and perdurable

a great peacock aere perennius (LXXXIII/554)

These affectionate recollections are accorded classical dignity, they are “aere perennius”, “more enduring than bronze”. Here, at the emotional crux of the *Pisan Cantos*, an enduring friendship, in its particularity and essential humanitas, has expanded to occlude bad economics, selective histories and cloying personal resentments. Even Yeats’s ludicrous pomposity, “who would not eat ham for dinner / because peasants eat ham for dinner”, is downplayed by trochaic line endings, mimicking the cadence of an offhand remark (LXXXIII/554). The detail is less a criticism than a reflection of Pound’s generous commitment to present the full human subject. “The rest”, as is observed in Canto LXXXI, “is dross” (LXXXI/541).

### **“The Auroras of Autumn” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”**

“The Auroras of Autumn”, first published in 1948, is roughly contemporaneous with Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*. There are striking similarities between the two works. Pound’s

volume is obviously a response in part to extreme and particular pressures, but Stevens is also responding to urgent fears – Harold Bloom is justified in calling the “Auroras” “a crisis-poem” – and both poets struggle to retain a grammatical and lexical detachment in these poems, even as they probe an intensely personal sense of loss.<sup>36</sup> Pound responds to this challenge by generalising personal experience through analogy and extended metaphor. He preserves an impersonal mode, conflating aspects of his own plight with the travails of historical and mythic figures and thus extending the significance of his experience without obliterating its emotional genesis. Stevens pursues a very different model of allusion: his references are chiefly internal, recalling images and tropes explored in his early poetry, and contributing to the development of a private and reciprocal frame of reference in the ten cantos of the “Auroras”. The avoidance of external literary and historical references in the poem is no accident, for a major source of the poet’s terror is his sense that the resources of the past have failed – that the aurora must be faced alone. It is important to acknowledge the gulf between Pound and Stevens in this regard. The least successful sections of the later Cantos are marred by Pound’s apparent urge to weave into his poem everything he considered of worth, as if his intention were to create a poetic enchiridion of essential knowledge. Stevens embraces the opposite extreme, offering no history, no context and no teleology for the disorienting images he presents. His poem surveys the heavens from one man’s perspective on a beach, and explores the mysteries of time from the confines of the present tense.

The private symbolism of the “Auroras” is not its only source of difficulty: it is also, in Pound’s terms, “charged with meaning” to a degree unprecedented in Stevens’ oeuvre. But the compression of sense in the “Auroras” differs from the economy of, say, “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, in which a fragmentary syntax and restrictive lexis create an oddly contrived polysemy. Stevens’ later poem conforms far more readily to the grammatical expectations of the basic English sentence, the subject-verb-object pattern, but this stylistic concession to intelligibility is more than offset by the sheer conceptual complexity of the poem. Indeed, the comparative grammatical congruence of the “Auroras” is striking precisely because one is forced to attend to the exact syntactic relations between the poem’s subjects in order to make any sense of them. Form and meaning are inseparable, to the extent that at times our responses are governed less by sense than by sound – only a saccharine euphony underscores one’s aversion to being

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<sup>36</sup> Bloom, *Poems of Our Climate*, 254.

“fattened as on a decorous honeycomb”. Not only does the poem extend what Susan B. Weston calls Stevens’ “indeterminacy of reference”, by juxtaposing objects and images with no context to clarify their relations: it also begins with an artistic misgiving, as the poet hesitates to separate reality from illusion:<sup>37</sup>

Or is this another wriggling out of the egg,  
 Another image at the end of the cave,  
 Another bodiless for the body’s slough?                    (*CPP* 355)

These lines, mixing the germinal with the ethereal, connote bodily decay and fear of death in addition to their primary function, which is to convey the sheer unintelligibility of the serpent, mocking the poet’s powers of description. For the aurora seemingly gestures to something beyond itself, or, rather, the poet projects onto the aurora his own thirst for transcendence:

This is form gulping after formlessness,  
 Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances  
 And the serpent body flashing without the skin.                    (*CPP* 355)

It would be easy to find biblical or classical resonances in Stevens’ serpent – to read the poem through a prism of associations. But the austere clarity of the verse somehow precludes this critical sleight of hand. The speaker himself is tempted by analogy in canto IV, but finds the device inadequate to the majesty of the aurora: “What company, / In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?” And the lexis of the poem’s opening canto further undermines the speaker’s spiritual impulses, by grounding us in an immediate present. As Helen Vendler comments, “the eye is not allowed to stray, but is kept tightly bound by the repetitive ‘this’ and ‘here’ of successive lines”:<sup>38</sup>

This is where the serpent lives . . . (l.7)

This is form gulping after formlessness . . . (l.10)

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<sup>37</sup> Susan B. Weston, *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia UP, 1977) 119.

<sup>38</sup> Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, 231.

This is the height emerging . . . (l.13)

The recurrent pattern creates the impression of a religious intonation, but the flickering spectacle eludes these reiterated demonstratives. It is as if the speaker, like Chaucer's Pardoner, were deceived by his own rhetoric. He attributes to the aurora transcendent and redemptive qualities at odds with its fierce and untameable essence. This delusion culminates in the fifth and sixth stanzas, which envision "another nest", where the serpent is "relentlessly in possession of happiness", a phrase whose deadening consonance seems calculated to undermine its beatitude. The spell is conclusively broken in the final six lines, in which the experiential "this" cedes to the perceived "that":

This is his poison: that we should disbelieve  
 Even that. His meditations in the ferns,  
 When he moved so slightly to make sure of sun,

Made us no less as sure. We saw in his head,  
 Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal,  
 The moving grass, the Indian in his glade. (CPP 355)

These images, vivid and transient, see the serpent as an agent of change in the natural world, but leave the source of its power uncertain. Though the "flecked animal" and "moving grass" seem affirmative, their juxtaposition with the serpent's head, "Black beaded", creates an ominous undertone – *Et in Arcadia ego* – which presages the menacing symbolism of the aurora in later cantos. "We saw in his head" is also troublingly ambiguous, meaning either that we, the onlookers, associate the serpent's head with animal, grass and glade, or, alternatively, that these images are imagined *by* the serpent, who conditions our perception of the world.

In cantos III, IV and V, the change wrought by the aurora becomes increasingly destructive, displacing memories of childhood and adolescence, in which a nameless "mother" and "father" offered stable points of reference in a threatening world. In canto III, the order and security of childhood passed under the mother's watchful eye are swept away: "A wind will spread its windy grandeurs round / And knock like a rifle butt against the door" (CPP 357). And Stevens records the deadening passing of the years through a brilliant evocation of a once-tender gesture become meaningless: "The soft hands are a

motion not a touch". The mother-figure is, at this juncture in the poem, predominantly passive, but, in the following canto, the father becomes, within his own limited dimension, an agent of change. This trope underpins one of the most remarkable aspects of the poem: that Stevens achieves a secular distillation of the religious *agon* that distinguishes the work of Donne and Herbert. As I have already suggested, for the Metaphysicals, poetry, born out of dissatisfaction with the world, is in some sense a challenge to God, as if the poet were claiming that he could better re-imagine God's creation: "I was entangled in the world of strife, / Before I had the power to change my life".<sup>39</sup> Stevens evokes a comparable sense of awed subjection before the aurora, so that the father's dramatic proclivities, and by extension the poet's creative endeavours, are recast as transgressions against an ineffable, supervising power:

He measures the velocities of change.  
 He leaps from heaven to heaven more rapidly  
 Than bad angels leap from heaven to hell in flames.                    (CPP 357)

The half-rhyme of "change" / "flames" reinforces our sense of change-as-destruction, for these are the flames of hell, not phoenix-like renewal. And the father is revealed as a sympathetic but finally defeated figure, who "measures the velocities of change", but is powerless to affect them. In *Paradise Lost*, the fallen angels are convinced that they rise from bondage "by their own recovered strength, / Not by the sufferance of supernal power", and Stevens confronts a parallel delusion in a godless world: that human creativity might adequately confront reality:<sup>40</sup>

Among these the musicians strike the instinctive poem.  
 The father fetches his unherded herds,  
 Of barbarous tongue, slavered and panting halves  
  
 Of breath, obedient to his trumpet's touch.  
 This then is Chatillon or as you please.  
 We stand in the tumult of a festival.    (CPP 358)

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<sup>39</sup> George Herbert, "Affliction (I)", *The Complete English Poems*, 42.

<sup>40</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, 240-41, ed. Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1997) 75.

“Chatillon” is the only reference in Stevens’ poem that might be dubbed Poundian; that is to say, obtrusive, difficult and unapologetically obscure. Gaspard de Châtillon was a Protestant leader in the internal religious wars of seventeenth-century France. Once again, the intemperate artistry of the father, refracted through the historical reference, is presented as a gesture of quasi-religious defiance. For all human attempts to construct a supreme fiction fade into oblivion: “There is no play. / Or, the persons act one merely by being here” (*CPP* 359).

The evocative opening phrase repeated in cantos II – IV, “Farewell to an idea”, suggests that the methods of understanding deployed in Stevens’ earlier poetry are inadequate to his present extremity, and, in canto VI, the encroaching power of the aurora strips the poet even of language, leaving him utterly defenceless:

This is nothing until in a single man contained,  
Nothing until this named thing nameless is  
And is destroyed. He opens the door of his house

On flames. The scholar of one candle sees  
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame  
Of everything he is. And he feels afraid. (*CPP* 359)

“This” – the aurora – is nothing, the poet claims, until embodied in the vital and pre-linguistic experience of a single man. Language has become a barrier to understanding, luring the poet into an attempt to define experience before he has fully embraced it. This stance affords an important contrast with Pound, who, as we have seen, believes that the simple naming of something cannot fail to transmit a flavour of its essence. But here the speaker’s attempt to embrace experience forces him to confront the limitations of his own imagination as the “scholar of one candle”, whose wan glow is utterly outshone by the alien flare of the northern lights. The poem pivots on this scene: the comforts and complacencies of the past, outlined in the first five cantos, are banished in an instant, and the speaker must either be destroyed by his revelation, or begin anew. It is the poem’s central triumph that it traces the latter undertaking. Accordingly, in the following canto, the speaker is moved, even in the midst of his terror, to interrogate the alien flares:

Is there an imagination that sits enthroned



As grim as it is benevolent, the just  
 And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops

To imagine winter? (*CPP* 360)

This is not a religious question; or, rather, it is a question whose full import can only be realised after the decline of religious consolation. For in being forced to ask, effectively, “what being could have created this vision”, the poet exposes a lacuna, a lack of order and supervising reason in the world, for which, in his own verse, he must struggle to atone. Yet, just when it appears that the intimidating and undirected majesty of reality will finally overwhelm the speaker, he remembers that no spectacle or imagined demiurge is of any consequence until given form and frame by the human imagination: “But it dare not leap by chance in its own dark. / It must change from destiny to slight caprice” (*CPP* 360). Canto VIII extends this notion that the perceiver is as crucial to the generation of feeling as what is perceived, so that, for an innocent observer, the aurora becomes “An innocence of the earth and no false sign / Or symbol of malice” (*CPP* 361). Such an emphatic reassertion of the individual imagination might be interpreted as an obvious overture for the poet’s own recrudescence of power. But Stevens is no innocent observer: no longer concerned with the provenance of the auroras, he is now deeply troubled by what they might signify:

Shall we be hanging in the trees next spring?  
 Of what disaster is this the imminence:  
 Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt? (*CPP* 362)

Here is a knowing pessimism, co-opting a pseudo-pagan superstition to evoke, obliquely, the speaker’s own troubled past. As we have seen before, in “Domination of Black”, Stevens favours a style of pathetic fallacy more arch and subtle than that characteristically employed by his Romantic forbears. Thus his emotive descriptions of landscape are not so much attempts to communicate heightened feeling as experimental gestures, allowing Stevens to test different modes of perception, or to speak on both sides of a poem’s internal dialogue. Such flexibility contributes, in turn, to our sense of an impersonal idiom – a voice not limited to one emotion, perspective, or dimension of experience. As so often in Stevens’ verse, the synthesis of perceptions at the close of the poem is imagined on behalf



“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” forms a thematic diptych with “The Auroras of Autumn”. In the “Auroras”, Stevens’ shrinking avatar, the “scholar of one candle”, is overwhelmed by a spectacle beyond his understanding; but, in “An Ordinary Evening”, the challenge to the human spirit comes not from alien beauty but from the oppressive encroachment of the everyday. Several of Stevens’ statements about the latter poem recall his explications of “Owl’s Clover”: “my interest is to try to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get” (*L* 636).<sup>41</sup> Such assertions imply a renewed concern with reality as the ineluctable foundation of lived experience, and therefore of art. But “An Ordinary Evening” does not herald a return to the misguided sense of public accountability that constrained Stevens’ voice in certain of his thirties poems. Rather, the poem pursues a new way to reconcile mind and world. In “Owl’s Clover”, Stevens had adapted his verse to the exigencies of its social and political moment, severely compromising its aesthetic qualities in the process. “An Ordinary Evening” records an inverse process, as the poet labours to extrude from the material world fit subjects for poetry, adapting reality to the needs of the imagination.

This new focus liberates Stevens from the pull of contemporary events, but it does not make for a more limpid or assured poetic voice. Instead, kaleidoscopic meditations on space and time are matched, in “An Ordinary Evening”, by a commitment to abstraction and impersonality so austere that it precludes any sense of narrative continuity, or even implied *telos*. Stevens’ earlier long poems, though often deliberately repetitive, such as “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, or susceptible to internal rearrangement, such as “Sunday Morning” and “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”, tend to trace a progression (however tentative or embattled) to thematic resolution or aesthetic compensation. These loose closures are rooted, in turn, in Stevens’ unspoken desire to defend the artist – as amorist, voyager or guitarist – from the predations of the everyday and the looming indifference of eternity. Of course, Stevens’ own emotional investment in these figures is continually veiled, though not expunged, by theoretical curlicues, disorienting abstractions and an habitual avoidance of the lyric “I”, the central elements of his impersonal mode. But, in “An Ordinary Evening”, these familiar evasions are so compounded that the speaker seems scarcely alive; he is fatally detached. Indeed, as Helen Vendler has commented, the poem is distinct

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<sup>41</sup> Compare this statement on “Owl’s Clover”: “The truth is that, when the imagination no longer partakes to the degree that it should of the real, we reject it and restore ourselves in the hum-drum” (*L* 374). See also Stevens’ aside on “Owl’s Clover” as a title for a volume: “Very well, let’s stick to Owl’s Clover . . . The point of this group in any case is to try to make poetry out of commonplaces: the day’s news; and that surely is owl’s clover” (*L* 311*n*).

from Stevens' other long works in that "impotence is not preceded by human effort. It pre-exists everything else, and prevents any acts except the occasional skull-like speaking of the mask".<sup>42</sup>

The temporally explicit title offers an intriguing contrast with "Sunday Morning". In that poem, the gauche and gaudy paraphernalia of the modern world – late coffee and oranges, a cockatoo upon a rug – are symbolic antitheses for the religious sacrifice upon which the poem comes to meditate. Now, in the fading light of evening, ordinary objects are themselves infused with melancholy premonitions:

A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room,  
A glassy ocean lying at the door,

A great town hanging pendent in a shade,  
An enormous nation happy in a style,  
Everything as unreal as real can be,

In the inexact eye. (CPP 399)

The mirror, glassy lake and shaded town represent "Reality as a thing seen by the mind" (CPP 399), and their ethereal mystery is a rebuke to the prosaic scenes afforded by the "inexact eye". But these early achievements of the imagination, static and distant, are themselves disquieting, like the too-perfect paradise that Stevens deprecates in "Sunday Morning". The poet has not yet found a sustaining response to the everyday; rather, the mind has "searched out such mystery as it could find" (CPP 400). These lines are a summation of the anxiety of the opening five cantos, which struggle to find an adequate and final account for the landscape of New Haven, whose houses, streets and "difficult objects" become shifting nodes in a ceaseless intellection: "we cannot tell apart / The idea and the bearer-being of the idea" (CPP 398).

Set against this uncertainty, the opening of Canto VI, reads as a restatement of principle: "Reality is the beginning not the end, / Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega". Alpha and Omega – even the avatars are abstractions – represent two realms of experience, and concomitant modes of perception, that Stevens, throughout the succeeding

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<sup>42</sup> Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, 274.

cantos, labours to reconcile. Alpha corresponds to the external world, elemental and ordinary, but finally insufficient. Omega is the sense of the world achieved in the mind; elusive, complex and endlessly fascinating. Only the latter can be a source of consolation for the poet, because whereas “Alpha continues to begin. / Omega is refreshed at every end” (*CPP* 400). There is a temptation to turn the latter, nascent theory on the poem itself: is its invention “refreshed at every end”, or does the speaker, naked in his turn, merely “labour to begin”? It is likely that Charles Tomlinson has “An Ordinary Evening” in mind when he refers, in passing, to Stevens’ “excessively circular syntax of cogitation in . . . his later ‘philosophical’ poems”.<sup>43</sup> Certainly, the poem’s lack of obvious progression has to be accounted for in aesthetic terms. The cliché beloved by apologists for the avant-garde, that a disordered art is the only sincere response to a disordered reality, is misattributed to a poet of Stevens’ quality: he may lament his insecurities, but they are never twisted into a cause for self-congratulation. Indeed, “An Ordinary Evening” unambiguously acknowledges a thirst for order: “We fling ourselves, constantly longing, on this form. / We descend to the streets and inhale a health of air / To our sepulchral hollows” (*CPP* 401). It is only when close attention is paid to this dimension of the poem – the speaker’s need, constantly thwarted, to make it all cohere – that the poem’s emotional kernel, so heavily disguised, emerges. In light of this, Stevens’ thematic iterations read not as indulgences, but as muted indications of tragedy; not remote, epistemic exercises, but records of an incomplete search for consolation. This search is mirrored in the *Pisan Cantos*:

I don’t know how humanity stands it  
                   with a painted paradise at the end of it  
                   without a painted paradise at the end of it  
 the dwarf morning-glory twines round the grass blade  
 magna NOX animae   with Barabbas and 2 thieves beside me   (LXXIV/456)

Like Stevens, Pound abandons conventional thinking, “a painted paradise”, in search of the flawed vitality of the immediate present: “dwarf morning-glory twines round the grass blade”. But, whereas Pound’s incarceration has jolted him into a sequence of explicitly personal meditations, whose emotional force rests upon particular details, Stevens’ muted

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Tomlinson, *Making It New: American Essays* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001) x.

desolation is a poignant adjunct to mankind's shared and perpetual struggle for understanding – “We keep coming back and coming back / To the real” (*CPP* 402):

We seek  
 Nothing beyond reality. Within it,  
  
 Everything, the spirit's alchemicana  
 Included, the spirit that goes roundabout  
 And through included, not merely the visible,  
  
 The solid, but the movable, the moment,  
 The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,  
 The pattern of the heavens and high, night air. (*CPP* 402)

These lines concentrate a desire already latent in preceding cantos: to rise from shallow certainties to mystic possibilities. An expanding conception of reality at first outstrips “merely the visible / The solid”, before moving beyond even familiar tokens of spiritualism, the saints and the heavens, to a more immediate referent: the “high, night air”, whose pointed assonance connotes Stevens' apprehension of a direct and unmediated experience – “the moment” – that summons his creative enterprise.

The poem affords many such “moments” – when aesthetic force temporarily outweighs the intellectual barriers to understanding – but their innate transience, “refreshed at every end”, forces the speaker to continue his search for an enduring approach to the real. The sequential cantos form a litany of experiences, emotions and modes of perception too various to be indexed or unified, and this provokes in the speaker the same frustrated desire to encapsulate and quantify reality as the “scholar of one candle” in the “Auroras”: “This is nothing until in a single man contained, / Nothing until this named thing nameless is / And is destroyed” (*CPP* 359). It is as if Stevens, in the opening canto, proposed a riddle, followed by thirty logically discontinuous responses – the same number as Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. And it is tempting to read these cantos in a harmonic sense, as thirty variations on an original theme, achieving coherence only at the level of aesthetic form. But the subjective freedom implied by such an approach – reminiscent of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” – is precisely what Stevens, in his late poetry, is battling to overcome. Bach's sequence concludes by repeating its opening Aria, and Stevens cannot

replicate that perfect circular unity, because his verse, though it sometimes appeals to the abstraction of music, is ultimately referential – tied to a shifting present – in a way that music cannot be.<sup>44</sup> So the poet remains mired in an uncertainty punctuated only by occasional flashes of insight, until the poem’s penultimate canto, in which the elusive chord of heightened perception is suddenly, miraculously, sustained:

The barrenness that appears is an exposing.  
It is not part of what is absent, a halt  
For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances.

It is a coming on and a coming forth.  
The pines that were fans and fragrances emerge,  
Staked solidly in a gusty grappling with rocks.

The glass of the air becomes an element –  
It was something imagined that has been washed away.  
A clearness has returned. It stands restored.

It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.  
It is a visibility of thought,  
In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once.       (CPP 416)

These lines are a vindication, hard-won, of the unclouded perception attributed to characters in the volume’s shorter lyrics – the Orphic figure of “Large Red Man Reading”, the “dauntless master” of “Puella Parvula” – but never previously *achieved*. The “bareness” described is not a source of anxiety, like the “Nothing that is not there” of the “The Snow Man”, but the prelude to “a visibility of thought”. Whereas much of Pound’s work aligns with William Carlos Williams’ mantra “no ideas but in things”, Stevens, in “An Ordinary Evening”, pursues “no ideas but in abstractions”, to achieve the “one mind” in which the disorienting varieties of perception, reflected in the poem’s endless turnings, will finally be reconciled.<sup>45</sup> It is remarkable that two such opposed poetic stances should both permit so effectively the projection of private emotions into a universal sphere. Just as

<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, my discussion of canto V of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” in Chapter 3.

<sup>45</sup> Williams coined the phrase in his poem “A Sort of a Song”, and it is repeated several times in *Paterson*.

Stevens draws strength from his evocations of a central, elevated realm of knowledge, so Pound finds analogues for his own struggles in figures from history; his *Women of Trachis*, for instance, emphasises Herakles' achievement of understanding in the midst of great suffering: "what / SPLENDOUR, / IT ALL COHERES" (*PT* 1108).<sup>46</sup> Even so, neither poet, in his late works, seems fully to participate in the intellectual consolations that he so compellingly describes. Stevens' central man is a fiction, the ideal of the vatic and impersonal poet, whose example is impossible wholly to fulfil. At the close of "An Ordinary Evening", this lingering sense of incompleteness is hauntingly evoked:

These are the edgings and inchings of final form,  
 The swarming activities of the formulae  
 Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at,

Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,  
 A philosopher practicing scales on his piano,  
 A woman writing a note and tearing it up.

It is not in the premise that reality  
 Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses  
 A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (CPP 417)

"[E]dgings and inchings" seem a diminishment of the artist's craft when set against the "bread of faithful speech" from "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", though diminished metaphysical confidence should not be equated with poetic failure. Lucy Beckett argues that Stevens "was not . . . in any sense backing down from the high ambitions of 'Notes', but, rather, was for the moment deliberately concentrating on one aspect of them: the cleaned vision of the world which now in his old age he had renewed in himself".<sup>47</sup> Certainly, the possibility of a "cleaned vision" is emphasised, yet there are indications at the close of "An Ordinary Evening" that, whilst Stevens' creative ambition remains undimmed, its putative ends are more elusive. The penultimate tercet presents three activities that gesture towards, but fall short of, a "final form": the evening is only beautiful as a proxy for the "spectrum of violet"; the philosopher dutifully practises his

<sup>46</sup> In a footnote to these lines, Pound claims that "This is the key phrase, for which the play exists".

<sup>47</sup> Beckett, *Wallace Stevens*, 182.



scales, but misses the “piercing chord” struck by the poet in “Mozart 1935”; and the woman’s shredded note, however valuable, is irretrievably destroyed (the poet’s discarded papers in “Le Monocle”, merely “crumpled”, could be recovered). Conversely, even if the possibility for enduring art seems more embattled than in previous poems, Stevens’ development of an aureate, impersonal style is markedly more assured. Beckett is more persuasive when she argues that “There is a suggestion of a separate existence from the poet’s, of an ‘otherness’, about ‘the central poem’, the ‘force that traverses a shade’ . . . that the supreme fiction never, except in the prologue, had in ‘Notes’ itself”.<sup>48</sup> This “otherness” certainly outstrips “The Auroras of Autumn”, in which the intensity of emotion at least allows us to sense the individual poet at work behind his distancing facades. And the minimal compensations afforded the artist in the “Auroras” are even more uncertain in “An Ordinary Evening”: even in the latter poem’s closing lines, the “force” of reality, like the poet’s true persona, is almost impossible to reach; a mere adjunct to a shade that is itself an adjunct to mere dust. It is open to question whether Stevens in this poem takes the abstract and dispassionate facets of his impersonal mode to an injurious extreme, just as Pound, in the *Thrones* and *Rock-Drill* sections of the *Cantos*, pushes his elliptical and referential style almost into self-parody. Stevens’ late style is certainly difficult, and “An Ordinary Evening” is arguably as close as he comes to courting the charge so often aimed at Pound, that the obscurity of the verse makes illegitimate demands of the reader. But, as the wonderful closing cantos of the poem show, its difficulty is a sincere response to intractable pressures, which Stevens is striving ultimately not to obscure, but to clarify.

\* \* \*

Both the *Pisan Cantos* and “The Auroras of Autumn” are animated, as I have argued, by a sense of present or impending crisis: a crisis that each poem enacts symbolically, and to which each responds aesthetically. Pound revisits his psychological nadir in the persona of Odysseus, “when the raft broke and the waters went over me”, whilst Stevens invests his own uncertainties in the plight of imagined avatars: “There is no play. / Or, the persons act one merely by being here” (LXXX/533; *CPP* 359). Though the technical facets of each poet’s impersonal mode are preserved, and sometimes extended, in these complex works,

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

the effect of subduing intense personal feelings to the strictures of aesthetic principle is sometimes, paradoxically, to enhance the poignancy of those very emotions that are being partially denied. This dynamic is the antithesis of confessional poetry, which, as M.L. Rosenthal had it, “removes the mask”.<sup>49</sup> Instead, the measures that Pound and Stevens take to subdue their personal troubles to the impersonal rhythms of myth and symbol generalise and extend the force of their experiences. Each poet evolves a frame of reference – Pound’s dense allusions, Stevens’ evocative abstractions – in which the charged emotional states that he explores transcend their autobiographical genesis. But the kernel of personal feeling is never entirely forsaken, as sometimes we respond more readily to the poignancy of what is left unsaid.

The impersonal expression of personal feeling remains a fundamental characteristic of Pound’s and Stevens’ final works. But some of the urgencies that so animate the *Pisan Cantos* and “The Auroras” are left behind. An eerie calm pervades the poems of *The Rock* and many of the later *Cantos*, as the increasing awareness of age and ebbing creative power brings each poet up against fundamental questions about the nature of art: does it provide a “momentary stay against confusion”, or a “sad and angry consolation”, or a “new knowledge of reality”?

After the *Pisan Cantos*, Pound occupied himself with translations from Sophocles and Confucius, only returning to his epic in the later months of 1953. So it is natural that *Rock-Drill* should seek to reset the compass of the poem, by restoring certain strands of historical detail that had been omitted from the Pisan Sequence. Cantos LXXXV-LXXXIX are the most typographically arresting of all the cantos, featuring long chains of Chinese characters that function as touchstones of irreducible meaning, around which historical analogies can be woven. These cantos offer few lyric or imagistic passages to leaven their didactic overtones, but the tone of the sequence shifts radically in Canto XC, which offers lambent and visionary passages that begin to build upon the dry historiographies of the preceding cantos. As Cookson remarks, “LXXXV-LXXXIX provide an historical basis for XC-XCV. They form different sides of the same reality”.<sup>50</sup> These different sides demonstrate both the possibilities and perils of Pound’s impersonal mode. The poet’s rôle as a disinterested conduit for the lessons of history becomes wearing in cantos LXXXV-LXXXIX, which at times resemble a crossword puzzle as much as a poem. But cantos XC-XCV show that when Pound cared to amplify his convictions, as opposed merely to

<sup>49</sup> M.L. Rosenthal, “Poetry as Confession”, *The Nation*, September 19, 1959.

<sup>50</sup> Cookson, *Guide to the Cantos*, 168.

itemising the sources that fomented them, the aesthetic force of his epic moves us in ways that its eccentric ideologies alone cannot.

In *Thrones*, the paradisaical visions fleetingly achieved in the latter cantos of *Rock-Drill* are still more elusive. Pound's language becomes so economical that the resultant tone seems merely utilitarian, and the ideas suggested by seriatim allusions are never properly developed, but are advanced for the reader's unquestioning acceptance, not his consideration. Cantos CV and CVI do present more developed and intelligible patterns, and offer intriguing moments of self-awareness, as Pound implicitly acknowledges that elements of the impersonal tradition he wishes to apprehend will inevitably reflect his own arbitrary design. In the dutiful figure of St. Anselm, Canto CV also finds a rich and fruitful analogue for the figure of the poet, whose example is appropriate to the self-conscious stoicism of the late Pound, just as Malatesta had answered the rebellious ethos of the younger poet.

It is arguable that *Thrones* and *Rock-Drill* push elements of Pound's impersonal mode – in particular his taste for abstruse and discontinuous references – to a deleterious extreme. But in the *Drafts and Fragments*, these trademark qualities are finally laid to one side. Pound abandons the mantle of detached speaker, and permits himself open and unadorned confessions: “That I lost my center, /fighting the world”. But though the local qualities of Pound's impersonal voice are now subdued, the broader impersonal vision that they had always sustained, of aesthetic orders and historical verities that endure independently of individual artists' powers of articulation, remain his chief consolation: “the light sings eternal”.

Stevens' late poetry, like Pound's, combines impersonal techniques with tokens of personal feeling. In “To an Old Philosopher in Rome”, a private affection for Santayana is self-evident, and intimate details about his life give the poem an unusually solid frame of reference. But the ethos that the poem finally evokes is decidedly impersonal, as it pursues a reconciliation with timeless and cosmic forces that necessarily involves the abandonment of the private, transient and physical realms. The techniques of Stevens' shorter lyrics also reflect private experiences. “The Hermitage at the Centre” makes tangible scenes and objects the bases for its generalised perceptions, a notable feature of several poems in *The Rock*. In the title poem of that volume, an abstract meditation on age is interrupted by lines whose spatio-temporal precision suggest an oblique reference to the poet's first sexual awakening:

The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like

An invention, an embrace between one desperate clod

And another in a fantastic consciousness,

In a queer assertion of humanity: (CPP 445)

These lines are a rare example of a specific detail from Stevens' life entering his work. But this and other examples of felt experience in the late poems should not lead us to the simplistic assumption that impersonal techniques are always opposed to the expression of emotion. The abstractions of "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour", for instance, provoke empathy:

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,

We make a dwelling in the evening air,

In which being there together is enough. (CPP 444)

Though Stevens never approaches the openness of *Drafts and Fragments*, there is a definite sense in his later work that the poet has an obligation to bear true witness:

Individual poets, whatever their imperfections may be, are driven all their lives by that inner companion of the conscience which is, after all, the genius of poetry in their hearts and minds. I speak of a companion of the conscience because to every faithful poet, the faithful poem is an act of conscience. (CPP 834)

Stevens' late poems, increasingly abstract and austere, nonetheless reveal delicate emotional states through their subtle and elliptical idioms. The poet's private anxieties are effectively transformed, through his impersonal mode, into common meditations. Pound does not preserve a detached persona with the same discipline as Stevens, but he retains to the end a belief in the elevated tradition that he had attempted to apprehend: "It coheres alright / even if my notes do not cohere" (CXVI/817). For both poets, the impersonal mode does not, finally, involve the suppression of feeling. It allows them to pass from feeling to meaning.

## Chapter 6: Reckonings

### Rock-Drill and Thrones

In his *Lectures on Literature*, Vladimir Nabokov argues that a striking proportion of great works align with the following sequence: “magic, story, lesson”.<sup>1</sup> Pound’s later poetry effectively reverses this design. Although it might be an exaggeration to suggest that *Rock-Drill*, *Thrones* and *Drafts & Fragments* conform exactly to “lesson”, “story” and “magic” respectively, the progression of Pound’s thought within these sequences, and even within individual cantos, precisely contradicts the Nabokovian thesis. A poet must diagnose squalor and disorder before he can transcend them: the lesson licences the magic. This pattern also has implications for Pound’s impersonal voice, as the lyric mode most closely associated with the poet’s emotional self and his imagined paradise is frequently withheld. On the one hand, the thematic “impersonality” of the later *Cantos* is often stretched to extremes, as the reader is presented with long sequences of abstractions and recondite historical allusions. Yet the sole unifying factor between these disparate threads is that they have a deeply personal resonance for Pound, and it is a paradox of his later poetry that the coherence of its large claims about the ideal order of society is wholly contingent upon the reader’s tolerance for Pound’s own idiosyncrasies.

After the *Pisan Cantos*, Pound laid aside his epic for some years, to focus on translations from Sophocles and Confucius. He took up *The Cantos* again in the latter half of 1953, and it was perhaps natural, after so long a gap, that these new cantos should seek to reset the compass of the poem, drawing its disparate threads into accord. Pound had been impressed, years before, by Jacob Epstein’s sculpture “The Rock-Drill” (c. 1913-15), and Epstein’s mechanised human figure, at once threatening and vulnerable, is an apt symbol for the violence of the creative act; or, as Pound put it, “the necessary resistance in getting a certain main thesis across – hammering”.<sup>2</sup> The first five cantos of *Rock-Drill* are the most visually arresting of Pound’s epic, featuring chains of Chinese characters that

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers, introd. John Updike (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980) 6.

<sup>2</sup> See Carpenter, *Serious Character*, 813.

function as nodes of irreducible meaning, a bedrock of certainty above which the individual poetic character may assert itself:

Alexander paid the debts of his troops.  
Not serendipity  
but to spread

德

tê thru the people.<sup>3</sup> (LXXXV/568)

These lines are typical of the *Rock-Drill* cantos, which continually present snippets of historical detail that either dramatize or challenge the spirit of a particular Chinese character. Here Alexander the Great's resolve to ease the lot of his troops, a recurrent trope in the later Cantos, is held up as a quintessential example of "tê" – "virtue". This model of thematic parataxis can effect rewarding patterns, particularly if one diligently traces the etymology of the ideograms invoked, and has a care for Pound's personal sense of their significance as suggested in his *Confucius* and translation of the *Analects*. These are heavy demands to place upon the reader, but in Canto 85, at least, the symbols and historical monads seem to cohere:

The sun under it all:  
Justice, d'urbanité, de prudence  
wei heou                      Σοφία  
the sheltered grass hopes, chueh, cohere.  
(No, that is *not* philological)  
Not led of lusting, not of contriving  
but is as the grass and tree (LXXXV/564)

When one has all the supporting afflatus in place (Terrell, Couvreur and so forth), the prevailing ethos of Canto LXXXV begins to emerge from these lines.<sup>4</sup> The first recalls the

<sup>3</sup> "Tê" – "Virtue". In his *Confucius*, Pound glosses "tê" as "the 'know thyself' carried into action" (23).

Chinese symbol 智, meaning “wisdom”, in which the sun radical is the base element, signifying that all human insight is effectively an adjunct to a more enduring natural order. This nexus is reinforced by the triune principles of the succeeding line, “Justice, d’urbanité, de prudence”, before “wei heou” (“only ruler”) is juxtaposed with “Σοφία” (“wisdom”), casting the latter as indispensable to the former. These abstractions are finally resolved into the essential images of “the grass and tree”, indicating the disinterested purity of being to which all men should aspire. So far so good, but one cannot escape the feeling that these lines too readily corroborate Bunting’s cutting remark that “the cantos relate, they do not show”. Certainly, Pound seems unconscious of any requirement to embellish the abstractions he invokes. And if the reader’s scepticism has already been provoked, what is he to make of this?

There be thy mirroure in men.

出

中

旦 Tán

日 iue

配 p’ei

堂 houâng

XIII, 9

k’i p’eng

其

朋

Odysseus “to no man” (LXXXV/574)

Recourse to the guides of Carroll Terrell or William Cookson tells us that these symbols are from a speech by Tan, the Duke of Chou, who was one of Confucius’s heroes, and, in

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<sup>4</sup> Pound’s two main sources in *Rock-Drill* are Séraphin Couvreur’s translation of the *Shu King* (Book of History), the oldest Chinese classic, and Thomas Hart Benton’s *Thirty Years View: Or A History of the American Government for Thirty Years From 1820–1850* (New York: D. Appleton, 1854-1856).

combination, the first six mean “in the earth’s centre . . . Tan said . . . would become the companion of Heaven”.<sup>5</sup> The second two symbols, an extract from that same speech, signify “his friends/companions”, helping to clarify the following “Odysseus ‘to no man’”, as the Duke is warning his son against partiality. Once again, the enabling knowledge of a crib fails to reveal an obviously poetic dimension in these exotic references; and even those sections of the next four cantos that are more obviously intelligible fall prey to didacticism:

Treasury wd/ pay one hundred Cents on the \$  
 for what cd/ be had for odd 60.  
 As Indian silver in our time  
 21 but the suckers paid 75.  
 Catron (I think it was) had shown horse-sense.  
 If our government must

必

sell monopolies!  
 sd/ Andy Jackson

70 million,  
 mehercule ventum!  
 with bowie knives  
 pre- not ex-officio. (LXXXIX/612)

At best, one could argue that the unmusical tone of these lines reflects their tawdry subject, that the inelegant contractions and coarse stress patterns – “21 but the suckers paid 75” – reflect an incipient violence in the realms of politics and finance that should be stylistically enacted and that conforms with the anti-romantic dimension of Pound’s impersonal mode. But this is surely to stretch the case for these utilitarian idioms to its extremes. For this sequence of condensed allusions – to America’s revolutionary war debt, the price of silver and the travails of President Andrew Jackson – is really no more than the sum of its parts. Why should we be particularly moved by these lines? To whom do they relate, what “felt life”, in Jamesian terms, do they evoke? Perhaps the opaque style is in part an attempt by Pound to restrict his readership to those true disciples prepared to dig for meaning in every gnomic phrase. But the critic should not be a hagiographer, and he is under no constraint to study the poem as one would study a crossword puzzle, dutifully filling in the gaps. At his

<sup>5</sup> Cookson, *Guide to the Cantos*, 176.





Donald Davie has observed, the prosaic, potted histories of cantos LXXXV-LXXXIX offer an essential contrast with the myths that supersede them; the transcendent visions must have something to transcend, Pound merely “got the proportions between them wrong” (177).<sup>6</sup> But, even allowing for the necessity of this contrast, it must be acknowledged that the later cantos are far more strenuous and less immediately rewarding than Stevens’ *The Rock*. For instance, no reader is likely, without the most spirited commitment, to commit an entire canto of *Rock-Drill* to memory, as he might easily so possess Stevens’ “Song of Fixed Accord” or “The Plain Sense of Things”. Rather, one recalls isolated clauses, or the small clusters of lines in which Pound has achieved an essential insight, by making his borrowed *sententiae* seem inevitably phrased:

Lay me by Aurelie, at the east end of Stonehenge  
   where lie my kindred  
 Over harm  
 Over hate  
   overflowing, light over light  
 And yilden he gon rere (XCI/633)

Here the acoustic serenity of the repeated “over” is contradicted by the typographical arrangement of these lines, which evokes the serried dead stacked deep in ancestral graves. Such images are certainly memorable, and they serve to restore the faith in Pound’s lyric gifts that may have ebbed earlier in the sequence. But it is arguable that the way we experience the cantos – our actual process of reading – serves to heighten their impersonal dimension, because the most moving sections of the poem can seem somehow disembodied. We remember the flashes of insight, but less of the intellectual convolutions that brought the poet to his conclusion. In contrast, in *The Rock* Stevens produces arguably the most intellectually stringent poetry of his career, and the reader of that volume is always acutely aware of “A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous, / Within its vital boundary, in the mind” (*CPP* 444).

In juxtaposing Pound’s later poetry with Stevens’, one must make allowances for the fundamental differences between the demands of the short lyric and the epic form. It would be unreasonable to expect Pound always to match the thematic integration that

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<sup>6</sup> Davie, *Studies in Ezra Pound*, 177.

characterises most poems in *The Rock*. But it should be acknowledged that *Rock-Drill* showcases both the advantages and the perils of Pound's impersonal voice. The notion of the poet as a disinterested conduit for a greater "tradition" becomes burdensome in Cantos LXXXV-LXXXIX, which present details of Chinese and Western history that seem almost arbitrary to the ingénue, and only become intelligible after a significant investment of effort and time. On the other hand, the lyric abstractions of Canto XC reveal the extraordinary potential of Pound's detached perspective, as he transcends the bitter, parochial mind-set that foments his cantankerous economics and anti-Semitic vitriol, and the form of the poem moves us in a way that its ideology cannot. Yet we have always to remember that lesson, story and magic are closely connected in Pound's own mind:

πόλις, πολιτική  
 reproducteur,  
 contribuable. Paradis peint  
 but πολεύω meaning to plough  
 πολύγλωσσος (XCV/663)

A nimble play on the shared stem of "πόλις", "city", and "πολεύω", "to plough", signifies that a society must have its taproot in organic rhythms in order to survive and flourish. Canto XCV rounds out the *Rock-Drill* sequence by reiterating Pound's veneration of a timeless, elemental order beyond the fickle operations of the human psyche. There are indications, at the close of XCV, that the poet feels that his Nabokovian "lesson" has been properly discharged, and he may proceed to sunnier uplands with renewed confidence. The *Pisan Cantos* observed Pound's psychological nadir, "when the raft broke and the waters closed over me", recalling Odysseus' shipwreck in Book V of the *Odyssey* (LXXX/533). This motif is repeated at the close of *Rock-Drill*, but what was a dark similitude is now cause for hope, for here the fragment is completed, and Pound/Odysseus is saved:

That the wave crashed, whirling the raft, then  
 Tearing the oar from his hand,  
 broke mast and yard-arm  
 And he was drawn down under wave,  
 The wind tossing,  
 Notus, Boreas,

as it were thistle-down.  
 Then Leucothea had pity,  
   “mortal once  
 Who now is a sea-god:  
   νόστου  
 γαίης Φαιήχων, . . .”<sup>7</sup>  (XCV, 667)

\*        \*        \*

Pound commented directly on the impersonal character of *Thrones*, suggesting that the sequence explores a transcendence of individual concerns essential to civilisation. In his 1960 interview with Donald Hall in the *Paris Review*, he observes:

I have made the division between people dominated by emotion, people struggling upwards, and those who have some part of the divine vision. The thrones in Dante’s *Paradiso* are for the spirits of the people who have been responsible for good government. The thrones in the Cantos are an attempt to move out from egoism and to establish some definition of an order possible or at any rate conceivable on earth . . . *Thrones* concerns the states of mind of people responsible for something more than their personal conduct.<sup>8</sup>

Certain phrases in Pound’s précis – “responsible for good government” is one – might put the reader on his guard, for anyone who has just completed *Rock-Drill* is unlikely to welcome a recrudescence of moral didacticism in *Thrones*. The parallels with Dante are more promising, however, for the Thrones of the *Paradiso* appear as mirrors that reflect both beauty and justice, an amalgamation of qualities to which Pound’s later cantos continually aspire:

“ . . . Above us there are mirrors, Thrones you call them,  
 From which shines out on us God Judicant,

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<sup>7</sup> “to reach the land of the Phaeacians.”

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Cookson, *Guide to the Cantos*, xxix-xxx.



“Till the blue grass turn yellow / and the yellow leaves float in air”. Gradually, the sequence becomes more lucid, a lucidity due in part to the greater prominence of the poet-figure. Canto C returns to Odysseus, recalling the moment in the *Odyssey* when the hero, having reached the safety of the shore, returns Leucothea’s enchanted veil which had brought him to safety: “and he dropped the scarf in the tide-rips / KREDEMNON / that it should float back to the sea” (C/737). There are more personal references in *Thrones* than in *Rock-Drill*, and they see Pound once again mythologize himself, adopting the rôle of martyred apostate – the only artist to have truly understood the lessons of history:

But the lot of 'em, Yeats, Possum, Old Wyndham  
 had no ground to stand on  
 Black shawls still worn for Demeter  
 in Venice,  
 in my time,  
 my young time (CII/748)

It is certainly an arresting move to dismiss so briefly Yeats, Eliot and Wyndham Lewis, although the affectionate “Possum” and “Old Wyndham” perhaps save these lines from excessive bravado. But whilst Pound’s indefatigable certainties can become wearing, they are tempered, in *Thrones*, by a burgeoning self-awareness. For although the sequence has a tutelary agenda as forceful as any volume of *The Cantos*, it also contains unusually frank acknowledgements by Pound that the content of his poem does not always correspond to a template mandated by hieratic tradition, but is sometimes a function of personal whim:

Fragmentary:  
 (Maverick repeating this query dogmatically.  
 mosaic? any mosaic.  
 You cannot leave these things out. (CV/770)

The latter line might raise a wry smile, but in Canto CV Pound’s syncretic method comes into its own. The example of St. Anselm, who was first introduced in Canto XCVIII, allows Pound to embody figuratively the ideal relationship between reason and the spirit, two forces often wrongly assumed to be in opposition. Anselm adduces the essential



decadent fall of Rome. But despite their thematic acuties, these cantos never return to the extended lyricism of CVI, and the concluding canto of *Thrones* fairly reflects the uneasy interplay of poetic and prosaic elements throughout the sequence:

One fifth of all oares Gold and Silver

23rd April, Westminster

HOWARD

Wing like feldspar

and the foot-grip firm to hold balance

Green yellow the sunlight, more rapid,

Azaleas by snow slope.

(CIX/793)

W.D. Snodgrass, in his review of *Thrones*, argued that “Pound’s phrase-flash technique . . . never permits us to have thoughts – only to memorize a certain number of incidents as examples of a pre-fixed meaning”.<sup>10</sup> The inflexibility of these cantos is their greatest weakness, and a sign that Pound had stretched certain tenets of the impersonal mode beyond advantage. His syncretic technique, which employs parataxis and abridged allusions to condense meaning into small clusters of words, is routinely overemployed, so that the hyper-economical language assumes a utilitarian tone, and concepts lack the room to develop. The limitations of Pound’s apparent conviction that by referring to another great work, however obliquely, he caused some of the lustre of that work automatically to infuse *The Cantos*, is confirmed in the final line of *Thrones*, with its parenthetical mention of a “piccioletta”, “little boat”. Prompted by that single word, we are expected to adduce the meaning of six lines of Dante:

O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,  
 desiderosi d’ascoltar, seguiti  
 dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,  
 tornate a riveder li vostri liti:  
 non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,

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<sup>10</sup> Betsy Erkkila, *Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011) 379.



perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.<sup>11</sup> (Paradiso II. 1-6)

The meaning may now be shared, but the beauty belongs to Dante, not to Pound.

### Drafts and Fragments, CX – CXVII

*In me that were without when the painting stops scraps of an ancient voice in me not mine.*

Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*

Pound's final cantos, collected as *Drafts and Fragments*, complicate both the thematic unity of his epic and the development of his impersonal mode. These late, great achievements do not accord with the resolution originally intended for *The Cantos*, and the circumstances of their publication were troubled. Most of the verses that now compose *Drafts and Fragments* had been written by 1959. But, increasingly beset by depression and ill-health, Pound evinced a diminishing inclination to forge these fragments into a paradisaical finale for *The Cantos*. He was persuaded to take them once more in hand by the encouragement of Donald Hall, who interviewed Pound for the *Paris Review* in February 1960, and to whom Pound read some of his manuscripts for the last cantos. Hall hoped eventually to publish a definitive final volume of cantos, but, in 1967, a provisional manuscript fell into the hands of Ed Sanders at the aptly monikered *Fuck You Press*, and a pirated copy began to circulate. Pound's daughter, Mary, along with the publisher James Laughlin, strove to persuade Pound that an authorized version of *Drafts and Fragments*, ordered according to the poet's own design, was essential. Eventually, Pound agreed, and the *New Directions* edition was published in 1969, though further fragments have been added to the poem since Pound's death in 1972.<sup>12</sup>

Pound's reticence over *Drafts and Fragments* should caution us against reading the volume under the sign of the young poet's intention to "bust through from quotidian into

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<sup>11</sup> In Longfellow's translation these lines read: "O Ye, who in some pretty little boat, / Eager to listen, have been following / Behind my ship, that singing sails along, / Turn back to look again upon your shores; / Do not put out to sea, lest peradventure, / In losing me, you might yourselves be lost." (II. 1-6).

<sup>12</sup> For an extended account of the publication history of *Drafts and Fragments*, see Peter Stoicheff, "The Composition and Publication History of Ezra Pound's *Drafts & Fragments*", *Twentieth Century Literature* 32.1 (Spring 1986): 78-94, and Ronald Bush, "'Unstill, Ever Turning': The Composition of Ezra Pound's *Drafts & Fragments*", *Text*. Vol. 7 (1994): 397-422.



reality and the poet's perception of reality become almost co-extensive. His "poetry of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice", embracing the subjectivity of consciousness, is at odds with Pound's faith in "the gold thread in the pattern", an elemental order that exists independently of the poet's powers of articulation (*CPP* 218; CXVI/817).

It may be possible to overstate this contrast, which could be cast as a mere difference in emphasis. But it is striking that, whilst Stevens avers a faith in the transfigured experience embodied *in* his verse, Pound celebrates the hieratic condition that his verse describes. This is not, perhaps, a distinction that would long detain reader-response theorists, because the only way we, as readers, experience Pound's paradise is through his descriptions of it, which are every bit as subjective as Stevens' transfigured images. Nor do the traditional tenets of New Criticism, affording minimal consideration of authorial intention, easily accommodate the differences in outlook between Pound and Stevens in their later works. But to consider the impersonal dimension of the two poets' differing conceptions of reality is potentially illuminating. As I have argued, Pound and Stevens develop comparable impersonal modes in their mature poems, which are characterised by the suppression of overtly personal or sentimental subjects. However, in *Drafts and Fragments*, Pound finally abandons any semblance of emotional detachment. The language of the volume is deliberately personal, and some passages might even be called confessional: "That I lost my center, / fighting the world" (CXVII/822). Yet even in emotional extremis, Pound retains a commitment to "tradition" in Eliot's sense of the term. He continues to invoke the impersonal verities of history and cultural inheritance, lamenting not the paucity of these legacies, but rather his inability wholly to embody them. In contrast, Stevens shows little concern for tradition, posterity, or indeed any reality independent of the individual imagination. The themes of his last poems are intimate, involving memory, friendship, age and death. But, whereas Pound lays bare his feelings, Stevens' language evolves to a new pitch of abstraction, so that the personal aspects, even of intensely felt emotions, are heavily disguised:

The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like

An invention, an embrace between one desperate clod

And another in a fantastic consciousness,

In a queer assertion of humanity

(*CPP* 445)

These lines derive their poignancy from the speaker's estrangement from his own experience. His memory "seems like / An invention", and the romantic encounter (what other "meetings" take place at the edges of fields?) is rendered in gloomily unromantic terms: "one desperate clod / And another". While Stevens' laments the fragility of personal memories, and seeks his own creative remedy, Pound more confidently invokes the memory of the race, and laments only his own insufficiencies as a witness to eternal truths. The two poets are approaching the same dialectic, between light and dark, order and chaos. But, whereas the distillations of Stevens' late verse embody the triumph of the imagination he divined years before in "Of Modern Poetry" – "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" – Pound still conceives of his poetry as joining threads in the broader tapestry of essential knowledge: "A little light, like a rushlight / to lead back to splendour" (CXVI/817).

Pound has rarely been troubled by a definitive absence of meaning, the "nothingness" that troubles Stevens throughout *The Rock*. The scholar-poet always has some detail upon which to draw. In *Drafts and Fragments* the most important of these strands of borrowed wisdom is Joseph F. Rock's record of the spiritual traditions of the Na-khi. In Canto CX, these traditions, including the ceremony of Mùan bpö, in which trees are symbolic of the relationship between earth and heaven, return the poem to the elemental order of the *Pisan Cantos*, and inscribe an organic basis for inspiration: "can you see with eyes of coral or turquoise / or walk with the oak's root?" (CX/797). Pound returns to Rock's endeavours later in the sequence, as a condensed allegory for how one man's struggle can meaningfully contribute to the preservation of a culture: "Rock's world that he saved us for memory / a thin trace in high air" (CXIII/806). Once again, Pound finds unexpectedly personal implications in the exploration of a recondite historical exemplum, whereas Stevens veils subjective experience in strikingly impersonal language.

Of course, the pleasing symmetry of the contrast outlined above is schematic. The two poets are responding to similar emotional and intellectual pressures in their final volumes, and their respective creative responses to these pressures have a good deal in common. Stevens may not share Pound's penchant for radical politics and historical arcana, but he does acknowledge a sense of involvement in creative forces beyond the compass of the self:

[The poet] comes to feel that his imagination is not wholly his own but that it may be part of a much larger, much more potent imagination, which it is his affair to try to get at. (*CPP* 712)

In this connection we recall the poet-figure of “The Auroras of Autumn”, who is chastened by the awesome creative force of nature, embodied by the aurora borealis in the likeness of a serpent: “the master of the maze / Of body and air and forms and images, / Relentlessly in possession of happiness” (*CPP* 355). A similar awed subjection – not before God, but before that which the imagination supplies in His stead – pervades *The Rock*:

We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,  
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous,

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.

We say God and the imagination are one . . .

How high that highest candle lights the dark. (*CPP* 444)

Stevens’ “supreme fiction” differs from Pound’s paradise in that it is wholly an achievement of the mind, “Within its vital boundary”. But, like Pound, Stevens seems conscious of a supervising agency, “that which arranged the rendezvous”. The poet does not possess his talent, rather it possesses him – as Beckett says, a voice “in me not mine” – a revelation that invests even Pound’s impersonal imagery with a distinctly personal pathos:

A blown husk that is finished  
but the light sings eternal  
a pale flare over marshes  
where the salt hay whispers to tide’s change (*CXV/814*)

The poet’s blessing is his sensitivity to beauty: his curse is the transience of that beauty. And the image of “a blown husk”, drained and helpless, would be acutely desolate, if not for the succeeding promise that “the light sings eternal”. Of course, this embattled faith in the enduring qualities of art matches exactly the preoccupations of the late Stevens in “Madame La Fleurie”, “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” and the seasonal imagery of “The

World as Meditation". This congruence of subject and mood is compounded by Pound's unusually prominent reflections on the nature of the creative act – obviously an obsessive concern for Stevens – which are more noticeable and numerous in *Drafts and Fragments* than perhaps in any poem since *Homage to Sextus Propertius*. The following lines, from Canto CXIII, enact typographically the trajectory of the poet's art, from lambent inspiration to imperfect achievement:

That the body is inside the soul –  
                   the lifting and folding brightness  
                   the darkness shattered,  
                   the fragment.                   (CXIII/808-9)

An artistic accomplishment reflects but a fraction of the effort and inspiration that fomented it. And the fragility of even this diminished achievement is reemphasized: "fragment", ostensibly a fragment of "lifting and folding brightness", forms a subject rhyme with shattered darkness, licensing a secondary implication that Pound's ambitions have been "shattered" too.

*Drafts and Fragments* contains only four complete cantos (CX, CXIII, CXIV and CXVI), which raises questions about how the remaining material should best be critically approached. For instance, Fred Moramarco has pointed out that the typically Poundian themes of CXI "are little more than listed here (as they should be in a set of notes) not poeticized" and that "[the canto's] interest is essentially historical rather than esthetic".<sup>16</sup> Still, even here there are wonderful lines, which embody the enduring insights that Pound's histories are intended to provide: "Soul melts into air, / anima into aura, / Serenitas" (CXI 803). Charged fragments of this kind imply that Pound had reached the late 1950s armed with shards of limpid verse that had no obvious place in his epic, but with which he could not bear to part. The concentration of these powerful but discontinuous insights is unnerving. Whereas *Thrones* comprises one hundred and twenty-three pages of verse, the *New Directions* text of *Drafts and Fragments* spans a mere twenty-seven pages. But there is more poetry in the latter volume than in the whole of *Thrones*. It is difficult, and perhaps misleading, to assign an overall character to Pound's last work, but one important feature of the verse is its fresh emphasis on the sacredness of the real:

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<sup>16</sup> Fred Moramarco. "Concluding an Epic: The Drafts and Fragments of The Cantos," *American Literature* 49(3) (November 1977): 315.

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. (CXVII/822)

These lines attest to an apprehension of forms independent of the poet's imagination, and they return to the idealism of Pound's early career, recorded in his *Religio: or a Child's Guide to Knowledge*: "By what characteristic may we know the divine forms? / By beauty" (*Pavannes and Divisions* 23). The encomium for Olga that concludes the text at present is undoubtedly affecting. But, having allowed that Pound's true intentions for his final volume are unknowable, it is hard to look beyond the following lines from CXIII as a fitting coda to the Cantos:

And in thy mind beauty, O Artemis

Daphne afoot in vain speed.

When the Syrian onyx is broken.

Out of dark, thou, Father Helios, leadest,  
but the mind as Ixion, unstill, ever turning. (CXIII/810)

Writing a *Paradiso* was beyond Pound, as it was beyond any twentieth-century poet, because the metaphysical certitudes that had licensed Dante's epic vision were no longer tenable. When Pound lamented that "I can no longer get at the essence of my thought in words", he was also, implicitly, lamenting the impossibility of constructing a language that could unite, and so preserve, the emblems of civilisation he held most dear. *Drafts and Fragments*, like the *Pisan Cantos*, presents an impersonal mode complicated by personal doubts and limitations, creating a troubling *aporia* between ambition and achievement that is also, paradoxically, a source of poetic power.

## *The Rock*

*I could give all to Time except – except  
What I myself have held. But why declare  
The things forbidden that while the Customs slept  
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There,  
And what I would not part with I have kept.*

Robert Frost, “I Could Give All to Time”

Rachmaninoff’s symphonic poem “Isle of the Dead” evokes an intensity of feeling in the face of oblivion. A dynamic but repeating motif sets motion against stasis, and the uneven time signature – 5/8 – evokes both the mortal breaths of the condemned and the ominous rhythm of Charon’s oars against the Styx. The music holds the listener in a state of suspended anxiety, perpetually on the threshold of revelation. Stevens’ last volume, *The Rock*, explores precisely this dynamic. There are fewer evocations of tactile sensory experience in this volume than in Stevens’ earlier work, but, conversely, the poet’s abstractions now seem to carry a more obviously personal charge. They dramatise the condition defined by Heidegger as a state of “being towards death”, in which an apprehension of life at its most vivid and beautiful is contingent upon a sense of finitude. This dimension of *The Rock* refines and extends a preoccupation in Stevens’ *oeuvre* that stretches as far back as “Sunday Morning”, namely his exploration of the paradox that ecstasy can only exist in contrast to encroaching despair. There can be no joy without sadness, no growth without decay, and no light without the lengthening shadows of age and loss. This paradox is realised with breathtaking acuity in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome”:

How easily the blown banners change to wings . . .  
Things dark on the horizons of perception,  
Become accompaniments of fortune, but  
Of the fortune of the spirit, behind the eye,  
Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,



The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,  
 The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme  
 Of the unknown. The newsboys' muttering  
 Becomes another murmuring, the smell  
 Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled . . . (CPP 432)

The “Old Philosopher” of the title is George Santayana, whom Stevens met at Harvard, and whose writings, in particular *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), greatly influenced the poet's own attitude to the imagination.<sup>17</sup> Here the images of a religious procession outside Santayana's window provoke a transformative vision: “the blown banners change to wings”. The vision is fragile, for impressions only partially understood, “dark on the horizons of perception”, become “accompaniments of fortune”, but it licenses heightened perception. The “extreme of the known” evokes a concentration of self-scrutiny and recollection on the eve of death, whilst the “extreme / Of the unknown” is the complex of fear and curiosity with which we anticipate the state, if any, beyond the grave. For the poet of *Harmonium*, the material and metaphysical realms were more obviously opposed, and so the afterlife could only be evoked through an idealised yet sterile conception of earthly experience: “do the boughs / Hang always heavy in that perfect sky?” But, fired by the spirit of Santayana, Stevens now describes an ascent not of the soul, but of the mind, as the imagination affords the philosopher a celestial perspective:

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street  
 Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement  
 Of men growing small in the distances of space (CPP 432)

Alliteration and sibilance are combined to haunting effect, evoking a mind slipping from the present, as man's “majestic movement” is displaced by the “distances of space”. Stevens imagines Santayana as pausing, explicitly, on a “threshold”, the point at which “two parallels become one”. But, even in this ethereal state, details of the philosopher's surroundings, “the bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns”, remain on the surface of his consciousness. These humble objects – symbols of a plain, contemplative life – are

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<sup>17</sup> The poem was first published shortly before Santayana's death in 1952. For an account of Stevens' contact with Santayana at Harvard, see Bates, *Mythology of Self*, 20-25.

redolent of Santayana's desire for hieratic understanding, for, like the early "Domination of Black", the poem observes a shift from the local to the celestial:

A light on the candle tearing against the wick  
 To join a hovering excellence, to escape  
 From fire and be part only of that of which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible. (CPP 433)

A forceful and suggestive image, of a flame tearing against the wick, recasts Santayana's slow decline as a struggle towards enlightenment. In his essay "The Imagination as Value", Stevens defends this solitary struggle: "We have only to think of this present phase of it, in which, in his [Santayana's] old age, he dwells in the head of the world . . . there can be lives in which the value of the imagination is the same as its value in arts and letters" (NA 148). Despite his seclusion, therefore, the philosopher remains an active force in the collective consciousness. The characterisation is distinct from, for instance, Robert Lowell's tribute, "For George Santayana", in which the philosopher's ascetic principles are given a flavour of self-denial: "you died / near ninety, / still unbelieving, unconfessed, and unreceived". Stevens' more subtle thesis contrasts resistance to one realm of experience with receptivity to the unknown:

Your dozing in the depths of wakefulness,  
 In the warmth of your bed, at the edge of your chair, alive  
 Yet living in two worlds, impenitent  
 As to one, and, as to one, most penitent (CPP 433)

"Penitent" has a specifically Catholic connotation, to confess one's sins to a priest and follow the resultant penance. Here Santayana – who, as B.J. Leggett records, described himself as "Catholic in everything but faith" – is placed "in two worlds", but with a real care only for one.<sup>18</sup> He is, ironically, impenitent in the physical realm of the convent, but anxious to achieve "the grandeur that you need"; metaphysical insights that must, implicitly, be suffered for. And the expansion of his perception runs parallel with the

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<sup>18</sup> Leggett, *Early Stevens*, 76-7.

gradual annihilation of the philosopher's physical self, now merely the "shadow of a shape / In a confusion on bed". The ineluctable "poverty" of this demise is acknowledged even as the imagination triumphs. Quotidian details are not forgotten, but they are drawn into accord with an elevated vision that projects onto them fresh significance:

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,  
 With every visible thing enlarged and yet  
 No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns            (CPP 434)

Perhaps faith in the imagination is easier to express in this case because the transformative faculties are ostensibly Santayana's, not Stevens', and the philosopher has already articulated a vision by which the poet may prosper, "As if the design of all his words takes form / And frame from thinking and is realized" (CPP 434).

Like many poems in *The Rock*, "To an Old Philosopher" conflates personal and impersonal modes. On the one hand, the intimate details of Santayana's life are undoubtedly affecting, and only an extraordinary person, it is clear, would be capable of so projecting his particular experience into general significance. But the poem's ethos is *impersonal* in the sense that this reconciliation with the cosmos involves the abandonment of the private, transient and physical realms. Indeed, the philosopher's self-sacrifice has messianic overtones: "so that each of us / Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice / in yours". The genius of the poem is that Stevens achieves, in his depiction of Santayana, a persuasive vision of the projection of one mind into the common consciousness, in a transcendence of local concerns. The poet grants his mentor a reconciliation to the cares of solitude and age that he desires for himself, but that has proved impossible to imagine on his own account.

It would be perfectly possible, albeit partial, to read almost every poem in *The Rock* as striving toward Santayana's redemptive vision, seeking an impersonal perspective that ameliorates approaching death. But, in order to apprehend the "unknown", Stevens must first confront the "extremes" of his own experience. For instance, the moving conclusion of "The Hermitage at the Center" collapses an entire life-span into a single moment of perception:

And yet this end and this beginning are one,  
 And one last look at the ducks is a look

At lucent children round her in a ring. (CPP 430)

Helen Vendler refers to the poet's "binocular gaze" in these lines, as Stevens seeks to apprehend both his own "expected dissolution" and the spring scene before him.<sup>19</sup> Yet there is also a trace of absurdity in the sonic patterning of "look" . . . "ducks" . . . "look", which preserves an echo of the brash quacking that accompanies the poet's reverie, a token of the un pitying realities of age. So the vision, idealised and remote, of children dancing in a circle around their mother is both poignant, as an experience that has been lost, and restorative, as a fond memory that palliates the poet's decline. But the desiccated experience of age is not always alleviated by remembered pleasures. In "An Old Man Asleep", the first poem of *The Rock*, the mind aligns its own weariness with the world's languor:

The two worlds are asleep, are sleeping, now.  
A dumb sense possesses them in a kind of solemnity. (CPP 427)

This poem, the antithesis of Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night", witnesses the poet calmly abandoning his senses to senescence, lulled by "the drowsy motion of the river R". It is as if a mood of comfortable resignation, wholly at odds with the austere meditations of the following poems, is a temptation that must be acknowledged before it is renounced. "An Old Man Asleep" temporarily subdues Stevens' anxieties over the uncertain correlation between mind and world, the very theme that dominates more complex poems in the volume. In "The Plain Sense of Things", for instance, even the title resists the very certainty it promises: a "plain" thing might be "evident" or merely "unadorned", whilst "sense" can refer both to sensation and to logic, hinting at the estrangement between the physical and intellectual realms that the poet hopes to resolve. The first stanza equates understanding – the apprehension of "a plain sense" – with loss and emptiness, a paradox that recalls the "The Snowman":

After the leaves have fallen, we return  
To a plain sense of things. It is as if  
We had come to an end of the imagination,

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<sup>19</sup> Helen Vendler, *Last Looks, Last Books: Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, Merrill* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010) 4.

Inanimate in an inert savoir.

(*CPP* 428)

These fallen leaves have none of the energy of the leaves in “Domination of Black”, which, “Turning in the wind”, symbolised a vital and intractable reality. They speak instead of a forlorn state, “inanimate in an inert savoir”, the phonetic difficulty reflecting the conceptual difficulties faced by the poet. Yet the importance of the unassuming phrase “as if” should not be overlooked: it merely appears that “the imagination” is at an end, and subsequent lines challenge this assumption. In the second stanza, the anxieties of the inclusive “we” assume a meta-poetic dimension:

It is difficult even to choose the adjective

For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.

The great structure has become a minor house.

No turban walks across the lessened floors. (*CPP* 428)

In a desolate pun, the first “difficult . . . adjective” chosen is “blank”. Language has been overwhelmed, and the shift from a “great structure” to a “minor house” initially suggests a contraction of the poet’s ambition. But the malaise is collective, not personal, and the following stanza charts, though not explicitly, the decline of faith: “The greenhouse never so badly needed paint. / The chimney is fifty years old, and slants to one side”. These images are surely corruptions of a church and its spire, so that the following admission has daunting spiritual implications: “A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition / In a repetitiousness of men and flies”. This crisis of feeling recalls King Lear’s desolation – “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods” – and invites us to read the “fantastic effort” as a reference chiefly to Stevens’ own verse, making the poem a personal and pessimistic lament.<sup>20</sup> But this reading ignores the insights of the concluding stanzas, in which the tone shifts markedly:

Yet the absence of the imagination had

Itself to be imagined. The great pond,

The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,

Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

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<sup>20</sup> *King Lear*, IV, i, 36.

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,  
 The great pond and its waste of the lilies, all this  
 Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,  
 Required, as a necessity requires. (CPP 428)

Now the mind's shaping power is reasserted, for "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined". The triumph is not unalloyed. In order to attain an exact impression of the "great pond" of life, one must adopt the perspective of the rat: a "human" perspective – looking down upon the water – produces a vision clouded by "reflections", a rich word in which the senses of "illusion" and "contemplation" are combined. The "plain sense", therefore, is a partial, provisional and elemental knowledge – the base from which the imagination springs, but not the final vision it seeks to apprehend. Like Santayana's bed, chair and moving nuns, the great pond's "leaves, mud" and "water like dirty glass" are tokens of ineluctable truth, which cannot be wished away. Yet in his very ability to conceive of fantastic effort and total failure, of the great pond and the silence of a rat, Stevens asserts the sufficiency of poetry, even as the legacies of religion and culture fall away. His ambition is not to transcend reality but to transform it; to find, as Santayana found, "What will suffice".

The distinction between transformation and transcendence is important to these late poems. Several early, influential critics of Stevens' work find the consolations of his later volumes too nebulous and too contrived. Randall Jarrell laments their "monumental wastes; transcendental, all too transcendental, études".<sup>21</sup> And Roy Harvey Pearce chastises Stevens for a lack of vitality:

Stevens' quest for an ultimate humanism (for that surely is what it is) leads him toward a curious dehumanization. It urges (or forces) him in the end to purify his poems until they are hardly the poems of a man who lives, loves, hates, creates, dies. Rather, they are the poems of a man who does nothing but make poems; who "abstracts" living, loving, hating, creating, dying from his poems, in the hope that what will be left will be not so much poetry but the possibility of poetry.<sup>22</sup> (413)

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<sup>21</sup> Randall Jarrell, *The Third Book of Criticism* (London: Faber, 1975) 64.

<sup>22</sup> Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961) 413.

As an analysis of weaker poems, such as “One of the Inhabitants of the West” or “Song of Fixed Accord”, these criticisms are just. Like any poet’s, Stevens’ “misses” are easily read as mere intellectual exercises, which mistake an idealised “possibility of poetry” for the real thing. But, to adapt Matthew Arnold, it is surely the critic’s duty both to recognize what is good and to explain *why* it is good.<sup>23</sup> Pearce’s diagnosis of “a curious dehumanization” is at odds with the remarkable poignancy and resonance of Stevens’ most powerful late works. It is not true to say, simply because the particular details of the poet’s own experience have been disguised, that “living, loving, hating, creating” and “dying” have been abstracted from poems in which these subjects are, in fact, urgent concerns. The oblique disclosure of emotional pressures, which strain against the impersonal surface of individual poems, is anything but dehumanising. Helen Vendler’s approach to the late poems is at the opposite extreme from Jarrell and Pearce. Vendler is the most acute critic of later Stevens, but, in her efforts to defend the poet from charges that he leaves his humanity behind, she is sometimes too eager to read his work in purely autobiographical terms:

We can understand why Stevens, sitting in evening solitude in a narrow upstairs room in Hartford, composing in his mind the poems that he would soon write, invented an inner muse that would assure him of the supreme value of that “intensest rendezvous” between poet and paramour-muse.<sup>24</sup>

Stevens is certainly seeking personal consolation in his verse, but the “intensest rendezvous” defined in “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” is not merely an affectation designed to palliate the poet’s own creative insecurities. Rather, “It is in that thought that we collect ourselves, / Out of all the indifferences, into one thing”. Vendler is convinced that the grand visions of the Romantics are not available to Stevens, and that the scope of his ambitions, in consequence, is inevitably curtailed: “he cannot use the dramatic terms of his great predecessors.”<sup>25</sup> Many of Stevens’ earlier poems are undoubtedly marked by a sense that certain spiritual consolations are no longer tenable. But Stevens’ supreme fiction, like Pound’s *paradiso terrestre*, is explicitly conceived as a remedy for the

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<sup>23</sup> Arnold emphasises the recognition: “it is the critic’s first duty – prior even to his duty of stigmatizing the bad – to welcome everything that is good”. Matthew Arnold, “On Translating Homer”, *On The Classical Tradition*, ed. R.H. Super (Michigan: U of Michigan P, 1960) 97-216.

<sup>24</sup> Vendler, *Last Looks, Last Books*, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, 270.

epistemic and spiritual uncertainties of the modern age. Even in his austere, late work, Stevens has not abandoned hope that poetry has the capacity to enshrine truths beyond the limitations of philosophical logic or personal experience. He is guided, as is Pound, by the sense of a cosmic order which it is the artist's duty to apprehend. This order is described in "A Collect of Philosophy":

Certainly a sense of the infinity of the world is a sense of something cosmic. It is cosmic poetry because it makes us realize in the same way in which an escape from all our limitations would make us realize that we are creatures, not of a part, which is our every day limitation, but of a whole for which, for the most part, we have as yet no language. This sudden change of a lesser life for a greater one is like a change of winter for spring or any other transmutation of poetry . . . A realization of the infinity of the world is equally a perception of philosophy and a typical metamorphosis of poetry. (*CPP* 856)

"The Auroras of Autumn" precipitates the central concern of Stevens' late work when it registers the shocking "infinity of the world" in the disorienting flare of the aurora borealis. The implications of this realization, "a typical metamorphosis of poetry", are extended in *The Rock*, in poems that exceed a personal realm of experience, "our every day limitation", to approach "a whole for which . . . we have as yet no language". This urge somehow to confront the ineffable centre of things is exemplified in the volume's title poem. "The Rock" begins despairingly, "It is an illusion that we were ever alive", and recalls the bleakness of "The Plain Sense of Things" in its desolate imagery: "The houses still stand, / Though they are rigid in rigid emptiness". Not only is the transforming imagination, upon which all future possibilities rely, absent from these scenes, but even the speaker's memories, grown dim, seem inadequate to his present extremity:

Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.  
The lives these lived in the mind are at an end.  
They never were . . . The sounds of the guitar

Were not and are not. Absurd. The words spoken  
Were not and are not. It is not to be believed. (*CPP* 445)



Here the speaker's remoteness from his own experience does not involve the suppression of human feeling; it is the source of that feeling. To identify with this progressive estrangement from the past is an inevitable function of being alive, and the final estrangement of us, the living, from those we have lost is condensed into the blunt contrast between two pronouns: "our shadows, their shadows". An insight into Stevens' private concerns adds piquancy to these ubiquitous themes, but, typically, the insight is not biographical but intra-textual: "The sounds of the guitar / Were not and are not". So the blue guitarist's capacities were mere illusion, and this account of creative failure is punctuated by asides – "Absurd", "It is not to be believed" – which create the impression of an uneasy dialogue, as if the speaker were searching for reasons to distrust the inevitability of his own diagnosis. "The Plain Sense of Things" escapes total despair through an unflinching confrontation with reality. But "The Rock" at first explores a very different remedy:

As if nothing contained a métier,  
 A vital assumption, an impermanence  
 In its permanent cold, an illusion so desired

That the green leaves came and covered the high rock,  
 That the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness cleaned,  
 Exclaiming bright sight, as it was satisfied,

In a birth of sight.

(*CPP* 445)

In his "Introduction" to *The Necessary Angel* (1951), Stevens describes poetry as "an illumination of a surface, the movement of a self in the rock" (*NA* viii). But these lines trade illumination for disguise. From the unresolved paradox of "impermanence . . . permanent", to the tritely rhymed "bright sight", the crucial elements of the redeeming vision, though alluring, seem too slick, too effortlessly achieved. This is the easy ecstasy of a younger man, recalling the artifices of *Harmonium*, which delights in gaudy and fictive "coverings" of all kinds. Now the wished-for transcendence is deliberately undercut. It stems from "an illusion so desired", and the visual metaphor is further compromised: "like a blindness cleaned". This remarkable phrase holds two meanings in apposition: "cleaned away", as if the blindness were simply removed, and "refreshed", as if the hard truths that

had impinged upon a state of innocence have been cleansed, and a blissful delusion restored. The latter, more ominous reading is extended in the following section, “The Poem as Icon”:

It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.  
 We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground  
 Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure

Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness. (CPP 446)

A cure for what? In the third and final section of the poem, the rock is finally defined. But whereas in “Credences of Summer” the rock as symbol had offered “The brilliant mercy of a sure repose” – the sufficiency of the world to life in its prime – here it is reduced to “the grey particular of man’s life”. But if such deadening particulars cannot be redeemed by fictive coverings, or by the simple, aesthetic pleasures that poetry affords, what resolution can Stevens have in mind? These lines imply that minor art affords only distractions to palliate the awful fact of death. It becomes clear that this poem is itself an enquiry into the limitations of poetry: the “leaves”, which are also “pages in a book”, associate the poet’s own work with other inadequate “cures” for the limitations of existence. A more enduring remedy, “beyond forgetfulness”, is required. In his *Adagia*, Stevens writes that “Poetry is a cure of the mind” (*OP* 176). “The Rock” gradually shifts its focus from the limits of the material world to that compass of the mind:

These leaves are the poem, the icon and the man.  
 These are a cure of the ground and of ourselves,

In the predicate that there is nothing else.  
 They bud and bloom and bear their fruit without change.

They are more than leaves that cover the barren rock (CPP 446)

“Predicate”, an element of grammar *and* of logic, is a typically Stevensian word, clinical, yet still partial and provisional. It appears four other times in his oeuvre, in “Description Without Place”, in “The Auroras of Autumn”, and, twice, in “An Ordinary Evening in New

Haven”, in which “the predicate of bright origin” is at odds with the “daily sense” of “cold and earliness” (*CPP* 410-11). “An Ordinary Evening” labours to recapture that numinous “bright origin” of experience, which is at odds with the mundane. But even this ambition seems temporarily beyond the speaker in “The Rock”, who is driven finally to affirm that the leaves that “bud and bloom” “are a cure . . . of ourselves” only “In the predicate that there is nothing else”. This phrase recalls the fine distinction offered in “The Snow Man” between “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (*CPP* 8). The projections of the mind must be made adequate to the emotional need they supply because the alternative blankness is intolerable, and so poetry is elevated into a redemptive rôle *faute de mieux*. But, in succeeding lines, the speaker’s gloom is displaced, as the quickening of his imagination invests the rock with “such mixed motion and such imagery / That its barrenness becomes a thousand things / And so exists no more” (*CPP* 447). This triumph of the imagination over the “barrenness” of experience is hard-won, and the poem’s main philosophical argument ends here, at the close of the second section. But Stevens adds a third part, “Forms of the Rock in a Night-Hymn”, which embodies the transfiguration of experience that section two only describes. In this final meditation, the poet honours the solemnity of the physical universe that confronts him, even as he asserts his own creative powers:

It is the rock where tranquil must adduce  
Its tranquil self, the main of things, the mind,

The starting point of the human and the end,  
That in which space itself is contained, the gate  
To the enclosure, day, the things illumined

By day, night and that which night illumines,  
Night and its midnight-minting fragrances,  
Night’s hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep. (*CPP* 447)

In order fully to appreciate the ambition of these closing lines, we must remember where the poem began: “It is an illusion that we were ever alive”. T.S. Eliot’s *Choruses from “The Rock”* rises from a comparable sense of desolation: “Where is the Life we have lost

in living?”<sup>26</sup> And Eliot, at times, attempts a Stevensian evocation of a dour reality transformed by poetry: “Out of the meaningless practical shapes of all that is living or lifeless / Joined with the artist’s eye, new life, new form, new colour”.<sup>27</sup> But Eliot’s new forms and colours are not finally adequate to the human spirit: they are merely adjuncts to the ineffable salvation that the poet craves, but which, by definition, he cannot describe. Affirmations of the creative intelligence are vitiated by the subjugation of that intelligence to the religious impulse: “And when we have built an altar to the Invisible Light, we may set thereon the little lights for which our bodily vision is made”.<sup>28</sup> In “The Rock”, Stevens, not content with “little lights”, rejects Eliot’s separation of mere “bodily vision” from hieratic understanding by bringing the imagination and the external world into a unity: “the main of things, the mind, / The starting point of the human and the end”. The following juxtaposition of “day” and “night” recalls the final lines of “The Man with the Blue Guitar”: “we shall sleep by night. / We shall forget by day” (*CPP* 151). Now, writing in the evening of his own life, Stevens has achieved a new clarity of perception, “that which night illumines”. Even encroaching darkness is accompanied by “midnight-minting fragrances”, a phrase whose alliterative energy pierces the measured and austere diction of the surrounding lines, just as the imagination cuts through ominous abstractions to achieve fresh understanding. Stevens has here achieved an expressive, impersonal symbolism that can not merely accommodate the timeless, general and generous amplitudes of “Credences” but can confidently reconcile the particulars of his own, time-bound emotional history – “an incessant being alive ... The body quickened ... brown skin ... [and] midnight-minting fragrances” – to their consummation in “a vivid sleep”. In “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (1941) Stevens describes poetry as “an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals” (*CPP* 659). “The Rock” fulfils this definition, holding the world steady in the mind’s eye.

Not all the poems in *The Rock* record an unambiguous triumph of the imagination. Nor is such a triumph the only foundation on which meaningful consolation might rest. In “The Planet on the Table”, the poet’s powers are bounded and qualified, yet he is content:

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.  
They were of a remembered time  
Or of something seen that he liked. (*CPP* 450)

<sup>26</sup> Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 147.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

The invocation of *The Tempest* affords a comparison with Pound's use of it in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* to provide a condensed metaphor for the erosion of civilisation: "Caliban casts out Ariel" (*PT* 550). In an early, unpublished poem, presented to Elsie Moll in 1908, Stevens had cast himself as Caliban:

There is my spectre,  
Pink evening moon,  
Haunting me, Caliban,  
With its Ariel tune.<sup>29</sup>

These lines primarily deprecate Stevens' ungainly appearance. As Vendler remarks, "never did any poet have a body more unlike his soul" (*WC* 37). But they also imply a sense of estrangement from an elevated realm of knowledge, the "Ariel tune". In switching his allegiance, in "The Planet on the Table", from Caliban to Ariel, Stevens overcomes his early insecurities. The poem's clear and simple diction builds to an important, central assertion, "His self and the sun were one", before this claim is qualified in the studied understatement of succeeding lines:

It was not important that they survive.  
What mattered was that they should bear  
Some lineament or character,  
  
Some affluence, if only half-perceived,  
In the poverty of their words,  
Of the planet of which they were a part. (*CPP* 450)

Mark Halliday argues, a little peevisly, that the first of these lines "strikes a false note": it implies "the mood of a famous old man who knows, after all, that his work will indeed survive".<sup>30</sup> But we have few reasons to doubt Stevens' sincerity. He turned down the Charles Eliot Norton professorship of poetry at Harvard, remarking that "There are several things that are of the utmost interest to me from which I have had to turn away" (*L* 853).

<sup>29</sup> See *Souvenirs and Prophecies*, by Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1977) 194.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Halliday, *Stevens and the Interpersonal* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1991) 98.

And, as we have seen, Stevens recognised the same retiring spirit and implacable self-reliance in Santayana, and was inspired. Poetry should bear true witness. The poetic impulse arises not from a thirst for fame, but from a desire to make sense of the world, to reconcile oneself to its wonders and perversities. Henry James finds in *The Tempest* “a disciplined passion of curiosity”, and Stevens remains ever alive, even in extremis, to the “lineaments”, “character” and “affluence” of the world. He does not yet make himself a Prospero, a controlling force beyond nature – “I have bedimm’d / The noontide sun, call’d forth the mutinous winds” – but is content, as Ariel, with the oneness between his poems and what they describe: “the planet of which they were a part”. Here, as in much of his late work, Stevens seems reconciled to his poems’ basis “In the poverty of their words”, in a partial vision of reality. But, elsewhere, the creative impulse transcends these constraints, as Stevens in the guise of “central man” assumes the limitless powers of a modern Prospero. In “Of Mere Being”, the imagination, stretched to its furthest possibility, is irresistible:

The palm at the end of the mind,  
Beyond the last thought, rises  
In the bronze decor,

A gold-feathered bird  
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,  
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason  
That makes us happy or unhappy.  
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.  
The wind moves slowly in the branches.  
The bird’s fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

(*CPP* 446-7)

Now the impersonal perspective is pushed to an extreme in which pathetic fallacy is explicitly denied: “without human meaning, / Without human feeling”. The gold-feathered bird and its “foreign song” are found “at the end of the mind”, which connotes both the

limits of human understanding and the end of consciousness: death. The very intractability of these inscrutable images licenses the crucial recognition that “it is not the reason / That makes us happy or unhappy”. The poem embodies Stevens’ longstanding conviction that poetry should aspire to an “irrational element”, through which humane and subjective insights, beyond the compass of logic, might be achieved. Some truths, elemental and inevitable, must still simply be acknowledged: “The bird sings. Its feathers shine.” But the final three lines reassert the shaping power of the poet’s intelligence. They move from the palm’s stasis “on the edge of space”, to the slowly awakening perception of wind moving in the branches, to the defiant energy of the final line, in which the gold-feathered bird, now transfigured, becomes a phoenix, whose “fire-fangled feathers dangle down”. Stevens’ late poems finally record a triumph of the imagination, which manages to evolve its own permanent and resistant rhetoric, even in those moments when the speaker seems daunted or unconsolated. For the beauty of these late poems is their consolation, leading poet and reader alike towards “a new knowledge of reality” (*CPP* 452).

## Conclusion

This thesis has emphasised the innovative techniques and thematic plasticity of the impersonal modes that Pound and Stevens refine. This is not to overlook the striking differences in experience and temperament between the two poets, or to deny that the commitment to impersonality can, at times, become too harsh and sceptical an ordinance. But Pound and Stevens share a fascination with the expressive possibilities of an impersonal poetic, through which private reflections can be transfigured into universal meditations.

For both poets, the escape from personality is gradual and uneven. *Cathay* and “Sunday Morning”, each completed in 1915, share a precocious poise and assurance, and anticipate many stylistic features of Pound’s and Stevens’ mature verse. Yet these early successes do not disclose an impersonal sensibility. They reflect instead the easy self-possession of young poets who have yet to approach the limitations of their gifts. Such confidence is temporary: “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” and “The Comedian as the Letter C” dramatise their authors’ own uncertainties about the rôle of the poet in a fractured and disorienting modern world. Pound, in the “Ur-cantos”, is first to settle upon a poetic form elastic enough to outstrip these anxieties, combining the precise apprehension of local particularities with the expansive themes central to his vision of a paradiso terrestre. Stevens, by contrast, continues to doubt the adequacy of the imagination to the sheer variety and intractability of experience. As the comparable creative anxieties of “The Comedian as the Letter C” and the later “Owl’s Clover” demonstrate, Stevens is hampered well into his fifties by an idiosyncratic sense of accountability, as if to transfigure reality for the purposes of art were tantamount to a deception. Only in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” does Stevens finally alight on the combination of stylistic economy and measured abstraction that underpins his late, meditative works. The insights of this poem are, in the most elementary sense, metaphysical: they are a return to first principles. And, in the articulation of these principles, language itself seems somehow purified, as crucial Stevensian terms – “sight”, “space”, “stone” – are gradually cleansed of unwanted associations. The guitarist symbolises a renewed confidence in the transformative powers of the imagination, and so matches the faith, latent in Pound’s earliest *Cantos*, in a future in which poetry can both sustain the finest achievements of the past and resist the material vulgarity of the modern world.



Pound and Stevens share, in many of their poems of the 1930s, a concern for the poet's public and political responsibilities. But, as WWII approaches, they increasingly pursue opposing trajectories. Pound becomes more obsessively concerned with politics and economics, and the often intemperate tone of his essays leeches into his poetry. In *XI New Cantos* unsettling connections are forged between the birth of American democracy and the rise of Italian Fascism. And, in *The Fifth Decad of Cantos*, Mussolini becomes an unignorable hero of Pound's epic, taking his place alongside Jefferson, Adams, Confucius and Malatesta. Conversely, Stevens' response to the looming threat of conflict is rather to retreat from the world. Even his war poems of the early 1940s, from "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" to "Martial Cadenza", treat their subject obliquely, and the austere abstractions of poems such as "Esthétique du Mal" invite us to question the very existence of a reality independent of the imagination. Despite these wildly differing preoccupations, striking similarities persist between the finest poems that Pound and Stevens wrote during this period. Canto XLVII reaffirms the Odyssean metaphor of Pound's epic as a voyage after knowledge. It moves seamlessly between competing voices, allowing the poet to inhabit multiple perspectives and to synthesise discontinuous themes, while the landscape of Rapallo is transfigured into the setting for classical myth and Eleusian mystery. An ethereal landscape, charged with immemorial significance, also dominates Canto XLIX, signifying the primacy of the natural order upon which any just society must rest. Stevens too, in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction", explores the competing perspectives of numerous personae. But his seraph, President and General Du Puy, unlike Pound's Circe and Tiresias, are transparently schematic figures. The impersonal refinements of "Notes" are reflected less in the variety of its voices than in the range and category of insights to which Stevens believes the poet should aspire. Accordingly, the final section of the poem, "It Must Give Pleasure", exceeds the limitations of philosophical logic, and effects a purely aesthetic reconciliation of sensate particulars with evocative abstractions. Just as Pound's impersonal voice is crucial in freeing his poetry from the chains of Usura, so Stevens exploits an impersonal perspective to make possible an accord between the imagination and reality.

The *Pisan Cantos* and "The Auroras of Autumn" both carry a charge of present or impending crisis, wholly unlike the crises of technique that had earlier precipitated each poet's mature style: the recognitions implicit in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and "The Man with the Blue Guitar" that fresh modes of expression are essential to confront a rapidly changing world. In the post-war period, both poets reach the simultaneous conviction that

even the most moving of aesthetic consolations may be finally inadequate to the predations of conflict and age. Their responses to this fresh uncertainty are, stylistically at least, very different. Though many of Pound's allusions and ideograms might themselves be opaque, the presiding themes of the *Pisan Cantos* are often rendered with an arresting clarity. In contrast, although the ten sections of "The Auroras" are almost free from extrinsic reference, the concepts broached in Stevens' limpid style are themselves elusive: his abstractions have never been more daunting. Despite these technical differences, it is striking that neither poet responds to personal troubles by adopting a guileless or confessional idiom. They remain united by an impersonal sensibility that strives to assimilate private anxieties to the redemptive truths immanent in art, landscape and history. Pound is forced to confront and to redefine his paradiso terrestre, realising that it owes too much to borrowed majesties. Stevens, meanwhile, eschews the confident proclamations of his major men – through which reality too readily cedes to poetic fictions – for a more sombre acknowledgement of the weight of the world. In subduing intense personal feelings to the impersonal resonances of myth and symbol, both poets generalise and extend the force of their insights.

In Pound's late work, the struggle to contain keen emotional pressures is increasingly apparent. *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*, in attempting to preserve "light over light", force Pound's already elliptical style to a deleterious extreme. The implications of individual images or allusions are rarely given space to develop, but are advanced as if for the reader's unquestioning acceptance. Yet in *Drafts and Fragments*, doctrinaire certainties are exchanged for metaphysical doubts. Pound increasingly speaks *in propria persona*, and these final cantos register a moving separation between enduring forms of beauty and the poet's diminishing capacity to apprehend them. Although Pound's lyric voice loses much of its earlier detachment, his sense of an impersonal wisdom, comprising aesthetic orders and historical verities that persist independently of the poet's powers of articulation, remains a powerful consolation. Stevens' late poems also disclose restless emotions, but they do not abandon an impersonal perspective. Instead, tranquil admissions of the poet's limitations, of his inevitably partial and provisional understanding, are continually offset by the irrepressible allure of the imagination, which can triumphantly encompass even a world "without human meaning, / Without human feeling". The abstractions of Stevens' late poems achieve an impersonal symbolism that can finally reconcile the poet's own, time-bound emotional experience to the eternal amplitudes of his supreme fiction.

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