Pound’s Poetry as IMAGE TEXT

by James McDougall

“The age demanded an image”
--Ezra Pound “H. S. Mauberly”

1. If one literally flips through Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos*—by that I mean bends the bulk of the book and forces the pages through the fingers such that the pages flip at a high speed—one will notice the dance of the text as pages pass. Nothing too remarkable for a collection of poetry, but after the first quarter of pages that one flips past, one will begin to notice blocky bits of Chinese text. Going back and trying to comprehend what was just flipped through would reveal a densely packed whirring collection of politics, economics, high and low culture, history, commentary, fragments, monologues, classical texts, and endless rhythmic, visual, and linguistic poetic experimentation. *The Cantos* remains a high modernist text, *par excellence*, and it is hard to come across a poem that records a poet confronting poetry with such scope or depth.

2. By many standards of successful writing, *The Cantos* fails as a poem, as a commodity, as a monument, and as a life’s ambition. In such brilliant failure *The Cantos* succeed in leaving holes, ruptures, and folds in English poetic convention, revealing the impossibility of reforming and saving English lyrical poetry, which Pound’s contemporaries felt was their duty. With this rupture in lyric tradition *The Cantos* succeeds in bringing the IMAGE TEXT clearly onto the page and, in the process, forcing the lyric off the page. With the reader unable to depend on the lyric to provide comfortable and familiar rhetorical and narrative devices, the poetic text asks the reader to develop a literacy in reading images; perhaps closest approximations to Pound’s visual poetics would be comic books and animation—two media that were emerging contemporaneous with *The Cantos*. Pound’s use of the IMAGE TEXT can be traced through his forging a friendship with Bergson’s student, T. E. Hulme, editing the Fenollosa notebooks, translating classical Chinese poetry into *Cathay*, and finally through drafting the various manifestation of *The Cantos*. [1] American poets from the Confessionals to the Beats to the L=A=N=G=E poets would spend the last half of the twentieth century trying to put together a poetry after *The Cantos*. Exaggerated reports of the effects of high modernism on later critics and poets have suggested that Eliot changed poetry in the academy, while Pound changed poetry for practicing poets. For this reason he was awarded the Bollingen Prize by leading American poets despite the anti-Semitism and treasonous designs of both the poet and poem (Flory 294). As such, the poem and the poet remain an intellectual minefield; one might say that the poet, Ezra Pound, was the first to take the wrong step, leaving him caged, then institutionalized, and then dumb for years. The poetry that he has left behind, however, speaks of many curious things.

3. In a curious metaphor Derrida compares European theories of writing founded upon the Chinese character as a “European hallucination” (80). This hallucination that Derrida is referring to is Leibniz’s idea of a philosophical language [2] but it also relates to Pound’s (mis)understanding of the Chinese written language as a poetic language; that is to say the Chinese text in Pound’s poetry is an IMAGE
TEXT. Derrida’s assessment of European mis-recognition can be read in Lacanian terms: “the imaginary is the locus of the ‘ego,’ which takes itself to be a unified totality, and stems from a fundamental misrecognition (méconnaissance) at the mirror stage, an anticipation of mastery over one’s own body image.”[3] Framed in this Lacanian context, Leibniz’s conception of Chinese characters has nothing to do with the problems or virtues of any Other (Chinese language), but everything to do with a logocentric conception of European languages; the European attempt to understand the Chinese character as a primitive, pure, or natural language based upon its visual component, is a misrecognition of the visual component of the Roman alphabet used in Europe. Such misrecognition also suggests a linguistic world-view that is “an anticipation of mastery over one’s own body image”—this view undeniably presents an understanding of philosophy and linguistics that is both Euro-centric and totalizing. Such a misrecognition of the Latin alphabet as graphic evidently was not lost on producers of texts like acrostics, engravings, sheet music, and calligraphy, which represent a kind of teché of European letters that has existed before Leibniz proposed a philosophy where written language should transparently signify pure ideas. Returning to Derrida’s richly suggestive critique of eighteenth century philological debate, much has been made of misunderstanding; very little has been made of the hallucination dancing in the mind as a presence of no-presence.

4. The desire for a pure philosophical language can be compared to Pound’s modernist desire for a poetic language that would transcend the rhetoric of English lyrical poetry—a discourse dominated by versification where rules of verse became convention, and convention became leviathan. Looking at some of Pound’s early poetry, such as appears in his self-published chapbook, A Lume Spento, we find poetry shaped from the contours of pre-Raphaelite verse. After being laughed at by Ford Maddox Ford, Pound began to realize the melodramatic rhetoric of the Decadent poets’ verse that he had been emulating.[4] The hell that had erupted from the palimpsests of high modernism in early twentieth-century English poetry would result from two gestures (albeit not original gestures), first, to destabilize the lyric and, second, to juxtapose contemporary Euro-North American culture with Orientalism and/or primitivism. In the field of Romantic poetry, one can find these gestures in poets like Blake (margin images and myths), or Burns (epitaphs, Scottish lore), but this repetition of tactics emerges in the poetry with differing design and intensity. To undermine the primacy of lyrical verse in poetry was, for the modernist, to recast the modern condition as fragmented, creating a poetry for the times; poets ranging from Amy Lowell to H. D. had employed, as a physicist might a super-collider, Orientalism to smash English syntax while forcing incommensurable systems of metaphysics onto collision courses. The unexpected result of the latter was to wrest Orientalism from academics, making possible a public understanding of the Other not as a foil for European cultures, but as a source of poetic and spiritual renewal. This renewal comes about, however, not without cutting and suturing; thus, in its deterritorialized state Orientalism is always a fragmentary and staged tactic. The ultimate effect of these two attempts to refigure poetry was to reduce the lyric into fragments, requiring a different kind of reading. One can argue that the mise-en-scene of the early twentieth century cosmopolitan city demanded a new kind of text, because it demanded a new way of being in the world.
5. The story of *The Cantos* begins at the gates of avant-garde Anglo-American high modernism, T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound’s *imaginist* circle that emerged at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Pound would take the reigns of this movement and invoke the “European hallucination” to guide experimentation of a new poetics. These early imagist poets would establish a new twentieth-century poetic *chic* by appropriating the poetics of the Japanese *hokku*, and Chinese landscape poetry to create what often turned out to be nothing more than ornamental *chinoiserie*. From this early experimentation came imagism’s iconic poem, “In a Station of a Metro.” Not only did this now-famous poem destabilize the lyrical poem by its radical condensation, and parataxis, in which the denizens of the underworld (the subway) in the modern city are transformed, cartoon-like, into petal blossoms, it also includes a trace of the kinds of IMAGE TEXT that would later appear in his *The Cantos*. In the April 1913 issue of *Poetry* these lines appeared as:

**IN A STATION OF THE METRO**

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals on a wet, black bough.

The unconventional spacing in the poem is as pronounced as the radical parataxis of the content. The white spaces are a synchronic recapitulation of the parataxis, in that they separate the semantic units, juxtaposing the text with empty spaces. The blank spaces also mimic the situation of a traveler in the metro. Whether one arrives at the metro station while aboard the train, or one is on the platform watching arriving and departing trains, there is a break between the stillness as a train arrives; it stops; passengers disembark and board, and then the train speeds off. The rhythm of these blank spaces creates a pattern exterior to the lyrical pattern just as the machine in the metro, exterior to poetic consciousness, affects perception and reconfigures mimesis. The space between the windows, cars, and even between the stations receives an attempt at “direct treatment” through the spacing in the text. The white spacing provides a rhythmic overtone that occurs within the poem yet remains exterior to the lyric.

6. In *Cinema I: The Movement Image*, Deleuze declares: “The modern scientific revolution has consisted in relating movement not to privileged instants, but to any-instant whatever. Although movement was still recomposed, *it was no longer recomposed from formal transcendental elements (poses), but from immanent material elements (sections)*” (Deleuze 1986, 4; emphasis Deleuze’s). In order to explain how this transformation occurs, Deleuze gives a brief history of science, bringing Galileo, Descartes, and Newton and Leibniz, into the modern condition in the early years of film. These apparitions in Deleuze’s texts represent a kind of problem that Derrida shares in the *Post Card*. It is a problem of postal logic where an addressee must recognize the signature of the address, make sense of the disconnected retro and verso dimensions of the card, and question the possibility of presence being represented in absence. This is also a problem of differentials and integrals—how can we represent limits as numbers reach absurd proportions
while heading to zero or infinity. Pound retroactively theorized the “Metro” poem as using the poetics of “superposition” (Pound GB, 89). Much can be made of these breaks within a break of meaning at the site of juxtaposition (a simile that forgot its “like” and “to be”) that challenges the superposition (suggesting the jargon of photography, to “superimpose”) and creates static in the reading of the faces in the crowd, which supposedly aligns with the petals. The break creates a co-incidence of the privileged pose of blossoms with particular “sections” of the unprivileged crowd (Pound, GB 89). In this case superposition becomes both plot and character, tightly framing what the viewer can see, which is always through the filter of the poet/persona. This “frame consciousness” implies that the image is subject to limits, and so there must be cutting in order for the co-incidence to work. The crowd that is cut is sutured to the bough, and the faces, its petals—conventional tropes of classical Chinese and Japanese painting. The way of seeing “any-instant-whatever” (Deleuze’s “sections”), the banality of riding the subway, as a highly stylized piece of chinoiserie (Deleuze’s “poses”) depends not on motion but stillness, or at least a centrifugal vector within a moment of motion. The crowd must freeze into its privileged pose within a hallucination. Pound identifies this instant in terms of vortex forces:

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. (Pound, GB 89)

7.

春 日 凝 粧 上 翠 樓

(chun) (ri) (ni) (zhuang) (shang) (chui) (lou)

spring sun careful; toilet ascends green painted storiied house

Fenellosa’s notes rendered classical Chinese into modern English, writing underneath each character an equivalent that would include English parts of speech that are absent in Chinese grammar, such as articles and prepositions that collocate in verbal phrases. The spacing sets each character apart into discrete units, reflecting Sinology’s translation process through equivalents arranged in a superposition. By means of a specific linguistic calculus, Chinese translations are organized through what Berkeley would have criticized as “ghosts of departed quantities” (Berkely online). In Fenellosa’s notebooks translations usually have at least three lines: the characters, Japanese and/or Chinese transliterations, then possible equivalents. These units are divided by spaces not unlike the spaces that exist in “In a Station of the Metro,” only the characters offer a visual image of a different order, inspiring Pound in The Cantos to construct his Phanopoeia through a play of Chinese characters. Though the “Metro” poem did not use Chinese characters, and Pound did not at that time have Fenellosa’s notebooks, the ideogram, as an abstract set of Chinese with English equivalents, haunts the spacing and superposition in “In a Station of the Metro.” Additionally, the
“Metro” poem is haunted by a thirty-line poem:

I wrote a thirty-line poem, and destroyed it because it was a work of what we call “second intensity.” Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the following hokku-like sentence. (Pound GB, 89).

“In a Station in a Metro” has endured several translations in the same language with spaces suggesting characters that would maintain a superpositional relation to the English text.

8. *The Cantos* provides a variety of IMAGE TEXTs of which the Chinese character figures most prominently as the “antient” uprooter of what Pound saw as the corrupted lyric that had become dross within the English language semiotic order. [8] Similar to Italo Calvino’s notion of emblems in *Invisible Cities*, the Chinese characters in *The Cantos* are a language through which language is not always communicated but confronted. In the mid-1930s after working on *The Cantos* for over ten years, Pound began to change his experimentation, replacing vorticism with the “ideogrammic method” (Albright 90). Through this process the visual component of the Chinese character functions is polyvalent, and privileged over its semantic meaning, or phonemic representation. This shift in poetics coincides with Pound’s belief in Confucian political philosophy. According to Pound’s edited work on the Fellonosa notebooks, Pound imagined Chinese poetry as a play of visual tropes extrapolated from the appearance of each character forming a grammar based on the visual form, as if performing bypass surgery on basic questions of language acquisition like syntax, and the lexicon. [9] This assumption, however, does not accurately describe the linguistic applications of the written character to the Chinese language, which has a grammar independent of the appearance of the written sign. There are some cases, such as calligraphy, geomancy, and alchemy where the appearance of a character has priority over lexical and phonological properties. Not surprisingly, the European correspondents to these arts also maintain a strong visual language. This is important to Pound’s poetry because of the influence that Yeats’s interest in the occult had on Pound when Pound took up residence at Yeats’s cottage for three years as a secretary. Pound had read Yeats’s books on magic and alchemy. In many ways the Chinese characters that Pound employs become a kind of alchemical language, a unifying principle for a theory of poetry, and an application of poetry for a magical purpose. For example, the character 明 *ming* which according to Ezra Pound’s translation of the *大煕 Da Xue (Ta Hsio: The Great Digest)*, perhaps his most lucid and consistent examples of reading Chinese characters, signifies brilliance through its radical components:

The sun and moon, the total light process, the radiation, reception and reflection of light; hence, the intelligence. Bright, brightness, shining. Refer to Scotus Erigena, Grosseteste and the notes on light in my *Cavalcanti*. (Pound 2003, 619)

明, containing radicals for the sun 日 *ri* and moon 月 *yue*, becomes an alchemical “solution” that maintains the same symbolic properties of mercury. In the heraldic
language of alchemy, mercury is represented as having been produced or “actuated” by the sun and the moon (Dobbs 39). The Chinese language condenses the marriage of the sun and moon, the figure of Hermes; according to alchemical treatises, “this final merging of alchemical elements achieves the goal of the process, whether it be conceived as “philosophical gold” or the “Philosopher’s stone” (Materer 112). Pound envisions, as if a Philosopher’s stone, a “new” poetics that has the power to revive culture and resist corrupted politics. This theory of language surfaces in his rendering of the Confucian imperative 正名 zheng ming—to “call people and things by their names, that is by the correct denominations, to see that the terminology was exact,” such that the not just is not only necessary in poetry but it is also Dante’s “divine light” illuminating the upper-most spires of Paradisio, swirling through the cosmos (Pound, A Guide to Kulchur, 71). The ideogram also reconfigures the circuitry of the Thomist scholasticism that informed Dante’s rhetoric and world-view. As such, Pound finds a radical (root-stock) touchstone for twentieth century poetry—classical Chinese poetry as an unlikely site to graft hybrid strains of Dante’s vernacular epic. An important consideration to this development is the exteriority of these extrapolations that exist in The Cantos (alchemy, Confucian philosophy, and Dante) in relation to the Chinese ideogram. The ideogrammic method increases intensity in Pound’s poetic attempts to redefine what it means to read.

9. By arguing for the visual “poetry” that is formed through (ungrammatical) phrases such as 日昇東 (ri shang dong or “sun up east”), Pound proposes that the appearance of the written character has priority and an integrity over and above the spoken language—the writing comes first (Pound 1968, 33). Perhaps this is why Derrida calls Pound and Fenollosa prototypical grammatologists, [10] With this theory of Chinese writing, Pound stands guilty of the postcolonial critique of orientalism—he is constructing an ethnography of China as not only absolutely “other,” but also, in Rey Chow’s terms, “inscrutable,”—a stereotype, which is “the habit of hallucinating China”; it is “a moment where the other is transformed into a recycled cliche” (70). Chow, however cautions the wholesale dismissal of this complex of representation:

Whereas stereotypes are usually regarded pejoratively, as forms of entrapment and victimization of the other…stereotypes can be enabling: without the cliche of Chinese as an ideographic language, as a writing made up of silent little pictures, the radical epistemic rupture known as deconstruction could perhaps not have come into being in the manner it did” (Chow).

With this in mind Pound creates a situation of language where the textuality of poetry is called into question. Pound insists on image not word—he insists on an IMAGE TEXT. That is to say, that Pound maintains the Chinese character as Phanopoeia represents a visual language that is always scrutinible to those who cultivate the correct disposition towards the text. That is to say, even one who could not read Chinese could develop a literacy for reading images. We see this all the time with educational cartoon strips, where it is implied that the reader will know how to make sense of the succession of framed images. The reader is to examine the grapheme in order to encounter meaning. Returning to Pound’s three-
character, comic-strip-like phrase 日 昇 東, 日 ri is supposed to represent the sun. Etymologists have traced the form of 日 to a circle with a dot at its center, such that 日 once had a more direct representation, which is similar to European alchemical[11] shorthand for gold, “☉” (Yi 34). The second character in the phrase, 昇, represents a transition word to 東, which poetically repeats the previous word 日 in the radical 昇. Therefore, the play, or poetry, of language exists in the last character that—when read right to left—creates Pound’s sense of Phanopoeia. He suggests that the grapheme repetition produces “overtones,” with a cinematographic notion of rhythm (Pound 1968, 33). This approach to language is prototypical L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, or McCaffery’s “book art” where the organization of poetry is “a first order experience of graphemes” (qtd. in Perloff 1998, 265). As Pound applies the Chinese character to The Cantos, he violates the strict right to left ordering, which in turn disrupts the transparency of the Latin alphabet text. In this sense, the Chinese Character (as well as Egyptian hieroglyphs, Cyrillic, and countless miscellaneous symbols that appear in The Cantos) as IMAGE TEXT reinvigorates all text on the page as a possible site for IMAGE TEXT. Even the negative space on the page undergoes a metamorphosis into a dynamic element of text.

10. Pound’s IMAGE TEXT experimentation began with monoglot imagist poetry that tried to represent a polyglot modern world. In The Cantos, however, Pound smashes the tight, single-image, single-language lyric, letting loose the floodgates from which flow not only divergent discourses, but different languages with their various alphabets and glyphs. The first Chinese character to appear in The Cantos comes at the end of “Canto XXXIV”:

 Electro-magnetic

 Justum et Tenacem (Canto XXXIV, P 171)

 The character 信 xin means “letter (i.e. postal),” as well as “to believe”; Pound rends this word in the 大学 “Terminology” as: “Fidelity to the given word. The man [radical for “man” 卍 ren] here standing by his word [radical for “word” 言 yan]” (2003, 616). The meaning of the Latin comes from an inscription on John Quincy Adams’ ivory cane, taken from the Diary of John Quincy Adams (Cookson 39). Here Pound constructs a fragment of co-incidence: it’s a coincidence that the cane with the inscription has a similar meaning to a keyword in (Pound’s understanding of) Confucian philosophy, and that this Chinese character appears as if the concept “word” can metaphorically take the place of a cane, which supports the “man.” The rhetorical substitution is a visual pun. The visual pun, as IMAGE TEXT, creates Confucian overtones that harmonize with the Latin inscription (the Latin translates as: “Constant in purpose... / Just and enduring”) (Cookson 43). This would be unrecognizable to the monoglot English reader who would have to be incredibly gifted to see in the character xin a man actually standing by his word. But this obscurity comes with a Chinese word at the end of a canto filled with scathing rails against capitalism, catalogues of the evils that took place in antebellum Georgia—the institution of slavery and the forced march of the Cherokee trail of tears—and the evils committed by men who
did not stand next to their words; men with no fidelity who cheated slaves, and Native Americans through ignorance and lies (39). As such, the character represents a potential way of knowing that lies hidden while at the same time being out in the open. Pound puts the shoe on the other foot, as English speakers have driven other language groups out of Georgia, Pound drives out the English speaker with Latin and Chinese.

11. Above the Chinese and the Latin is written “Electro-magnetic (Morse),” which relates to the message through superposition with the method of delivery (letter”). The Chinese character’s graphic presence creates a different order of meaning, as it disrupts the versification of the lyrical text. For example, the character takes up two lines of Latin text. Should this indicate the concept is twice as important? Does it represent a boundary of meaning, even though the meaning of the foreign texts harmonizes? Whatever the case, it makes citing the lines a problem—is this one line, or two lines joined at the? They do not read left to right, and this disruption of formatting makes one aware of language in a passage that is about violence. The word that interrupts, the character for “letter,” a technology of communication, needs to be translated. Perhaps it is a problem similar to citing text on a cane. If you were smacked quite firmly on the forehead with the cane and the words left an impression, would you know what the impression of the letter meant at the moment you were struck? One gets the sense that by this stage of The Cantos, Pound, through a coda containing an IMAGE TEXT, forces the reader to find two different dictionaries and know where to find the connection between these ideas, Adams’ cane and the fragments of history. Even if a reader were to perform these tasks, the canto would suggest that there is no end of reading, and that this task will not necessarily lead to comprehensive understanding.

12. It is unlikely that Pound was an avid reader of comic books; for Pound their allegiance with the popular culture industry of the United States would have left them in the enemy camp, but Pound was a fan of Disney productions and had seen in them a Confucian ethic. He was not the only Fascist to have this proclivity for Disney. The possibility for a radical transformation of language, narrative, poetic tradition that one finds in Pound’s The Cantos experiments is not that different from what one can find in the cartoons of the 1930s, for example the “Minnie the Moocher” Betty Boop episode. The cartoon presents little coherent narrative, but rather an animation (an animus) for Cab Calloway’s song by the same title. The song thus creates/organizes the visual field as Betty Boop encounters an underworld inhabited by skeletons, ghosts, and a phantasmal walrusesque-Cab Calloway (or more accurately a Cab Calloway-esque walrus). Calloway’s music stages the animated gimmicks, the movement of the characters, and dramatic tensions; the music combined with the animation displaces a universe of reason and order with a universe of imagination and intensities.
Like Greek myth, the supernatural and the natural intermingle in animal forms and the mise-en-scene assumes neither a predictable stability nor a circumscribed field of knowing—not a well-charted Cartesian realm. Moreover, just as time is replaced by the timing of the song in Betty Boop, Pound’s *The Cantos* does not have any unifying temporal coordinates. Skeletons and ghosts pop out of caves in Betty Boop; John Adam’s America mixes with dynastic China in *The Cantos*. The cartoon can be a way of thinking about Pound’s shifting experiments. The early Cantos seem to have an animated quality, as Pound paints his hell denizens as grotesque caricatures. In these earlier Cantos, Pound experiments with the IMAGE TEXT in ways much different than the ideogrammic method.

13. *The Cantos* are labeled not individually by numbered Cantos but by larger sections, such as: “A Draft of XXX Cantos,” “Rock-Drill De Los Cantares LXXXV-XXV,” “The Pisan Cantos LXXIV-LXXXIV.” The link between these titles is not the thematic content, nor the implied “stage” of completion, like “Draft.”
The Roman numerals fashion a rhetorical unit that metonymically attaches Pound’s cantos to Dante’s cantos of the Divine Comedy, suggesting an indexical function or a crib for the reader to find his or her location in corresponding Dantean, Blakean, and Poundian visions of hell. The index is exterior, and is perhaps necessary only for the poet. As Pound was publishing The Cantos he had experimented with different media and different styles of representation. For example, in the 1925 publication of A Draft of XVI Cantos Pound included margin illuminations from Henry Strater. Strater illustrated the margin to suggest pre-mass-produced print (Materer 42). The artwork recreates the poem as an art object—a commodity, in and of itself. There is a sense that the “value” added text of A Draft of XVI Cantos comes with rarity and authenticity as advertised in the title, A Draft…, especially because it was a limited edition “de luxe print” (Taylor 165), marketing itself on economies of scarcity. [112] The draft implies an unfinished product in addition to being a fetish object—a collector’s item, the trace of an original design, glutted with meaningful intentionality, and an illusion of presence of an absent author. Titled “draft,” however, also indicates Pound’s own indeterminacy, and the stage of experimentation that The Cantos represented. This situation would lead the project towards failure.

14. The “complete” New Directions version of The Cantos lacks the marginal illustrations that exist in the 1925 Drafts of XVI Cantos. Pound’s use of the Chinese characters as IMAGE TEXT supplements an erasure of the ornamentation in later versions of The Cantos. The illustration for Canto 16 is especially important in translating the pastiche of the Blakean imagery within the lyric (or aural text), replicating the image text in a kind of double helix structure (see figure 3). At the top of the page, the “A” is a double of itself. The alphabet is mimetically represented by the gateway to the following plays on the word “passage:” 1) the passage as text; 2) the passage through London as Hell (a vision of war-mongering, vampiristic usurers “dragging their jewel’s in the mud,” shit-smearing politicians, and the infernal “clatter of presses”) in cantos 14 and 15; and 3) The passage through at least three different texts—Dante’s Inferno, Yeats’s symbolism (Materer 40), and Blake’s illustrations of the Divine Comedy (Glendening 103). Interestingly, the gateway is closed, as if to suggest the passage
between the image and the text is barred, even though they are contiguous through the letter “A,” which mutually interpenetrates text and illustration. The gate also specifies Pound’s relative position in *The Cantos* to Dante’s *Inferno* and Blake’s illustrations. Dante’s famous gate to Hell that appears in “Canto III” of the *Inferno*, where the souls are to “abandon all hope,” beginning with the celebrated lines:

Per me si va ne la città dolente,  
per me si va ne l’eterno dolore,  
per me si va tra la perduta gente. (*Inferno*, Canto III, lines 1-3)

This intertextual spatializing occurs also through Pound’s reference to Blake’s illustration “Charon and the Condemned Souls,” which contains a bit of text that absurdly appears to be graffiti on the lower right hand corner of the shores of Hell: “HELL Canto 3” (see figure 3). The writing makes no sense in the picture; it is not the title; instead it is a citation to a work of art that is already a citation. Pound not only places his cantos in the textual realm of Dante, but also in Blake’s visual interpretation of Dante. Like the cartoon world of Betty Boop, one form is exchanged by another while maintaining certain rhythms, certain intensities, while abandoning story. Also the numeric coordination of the hell scenes seems to trump any thematic content in the alignment. There is a sense that this ordering is empty of value, which of course is Pound’s commentary on the modern condition, and his purported motivation for writing poetry in the first place.

15. Pound’s Canto VXI is the third canto of his trip through the specific hell of London (“per me si va ne la citta dolente”) where a character identified as “Blake” warns of evil (“per me si va ne l’eterno dolore”) and where abide the nefarious demons who instigate World War I while artists, such as Hemmingway, Wyndham Lewis, and T. E. Hulme, suffer the evil of the war on the battlefields of Europe, as “lost generation” figures (“per me si va tra la perduta gente”). With this in mind, the twin screws are a visual pun on “getting screwed” by the build up of militarism (the makers of the gun; thus, the makers of the phallic death instruments) on each end of the “no man’s land.” The “A” becomes all the more appropriate as an “a” in “ass,” corresponding to the naked form of Blake on the spire opposite the “A” whose ass faces the reader. This in turn quotes Blake’s margin illustrations; many of which confront the reader with protruding rear ends. There is a polyphonic encounter with obvious and subtle intertextual figures to construct the carnivalistic grotesqueries of English finance, politics, and print capital. The spires are at once Yeats’s gyre, and Dante’s mapping of Purgatory; the spires are also the rising vortex that climbs above the Wasteland—perhaps a self-reference to his work in editing Eliot’s “The Waste Land.” The spire on the left forms the phallus-shaped “A,” which in psychoanalytic terms forms the passage into the symbolic order through cutting, circumcision, ritual castration; this is what apparently takes place as the “A” is cut away from the text by the illustration. In the illustration, opposite the gate, there is a wee naked Blake figure running up the screw.

16. As Glendening shows, Pound’s Canto XVI begins with a selective ekphrasis of Blake’s illustration “Charon and the Condemned Souls” (103):

And before hell mouth; dry plain
And two mountains;  
On the one mountain, a running form,  
And another  
In the turn of the hill; in hard steel  
The road like a slow screw’s thread,  
The angle almost imperceptible  
So the circuit seemed hardly to rise;  
And the running form, naked, Blake,  
Shouting, whirling his arms, the swift limbs,  
Howling against the evil,  
His eyes rolling,  
Whirling like flaming cart-wheels,  
And his head held backward to gaze on the evil  
As he ran from it,  
To be hid by the steel mountain,  
And when he showed again from the north side;  
His eyes blazing toward hell mouth,  
His neck forward,  
And like him Peire Cardinal.  
And in the west mountain, Il Fiorentino,  
Seeing hell in his mirror  
And lo Sordels  
Looking on it in his shield;  
And Augustine, gazing toward the invisible. (Canto XVI, 68)
Figure 5. The text in the illustration reads “Hell Canto 3.”

Blake is at once a Charon figure and a prophet warning of evil (not unlike the responsibility that Pound sees himself shouldering throughout his poetry and criticism) in a canto that details the involvement of Pound’s contemporaries in World War I. The illustration in the 1925 edition can be seen to represent a caricature of a Blakean print, as well as a representation of Hades or a no-man’s-land between the trenches of white spaces between the two “screws.” The illustration includes a “Blake” figure but does not include the Byron, Wyndem Lewis, nor the Hemmingway that later emerge in the canto. In fact, Blake in London, is a representation of Pound in London, howling against the established order, while Pound’s contemporaries died in the trenches.

17. Pound creates a text where his experimentation with extra-diegetic elements of the poem replaces a monologic lyric with a kind of Bakhtinian polyphony where:

Polyphony itself, as an event of the interaction of full-fledged and innerly unfinalized consciousnesses, requires a different artistic conception of time and space, a “non-Euclidean” conception, to use Dostoevsky’s own expression. (148)

The Draft of XVI Cantos forms a vortex of an intertextual canto that mimics a painting mimicking a canto. If one were to try to reproduce Dante’s Inferno in poetry in a way that would not reproduce an exact replica, but something that contains the genetic code of the Inferno, one would need a second variable, to add variability. The Blake image then functions as not only a site for reproduction, but for the exchange of codes. Pound is not simply reproducing Dante’s Inferno just to replicate it, but because he identifies the inferno as having been replicated through different historical situations, and both Dante and Blake have attempted artistic interventions to the particular “infernos” of their day. I suggested before that “Canto XVI’s” relation to its illustration, conjoined at the IMAGE TEXT “A,” forms the double helix, like the DNA model of reproductive code that is transferred through a whirling three dimensional vortex:

The image…is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can and must
perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing. In decency one can only call it a VORTEX. (Albright 60)

The vortex creates a different relationship to history than a linear narrative because the memory of DNA is not the hallucinatory re-membering of presence; it is immanent in the genetic code—a magical code and unconscious memory producing a Poundian 明. This is Pound’s mercury, his alchemical “Philosopher’s stone.” It is his poetics of the image.

18. One of Ezra Pound’s early theories of poetics came about through an attempt to explain the Imagism “school” to Poetry readers. He explains that good poetry should be rigourously composed with a “direct treatment of the thing” (Pound, March 1913, 200). In this *ars poetica* Pound imagines a “treatment of things” as *techné* or technics of representation as a way of revealing. Though, on one hand, Pound rages against the rhetorical flourishes of late-Victorian and Edwardian poets, clearing out a space of difference for his own poetry, on the other hand he invokes the cult value of the poet, engaged in poetic production. This cult value of the poem results largely from changing his system of signs. There are also large sections of the Adams and China cantos that include dates, margin notes, quotations, which are often accompanied by an authoritative if not authoritarian narrator who tries to cram together competing moments of history and historical figures. In 1950 Achilles Fang offered to revise and correct the errors in the China Cantos to which Pound replied:

No need to correct Chinese Cantos—the are not philology, all the funny spellings indicate tradition, how the snooz got to your-up [:] some latin, some by Portergoose, some by frog […] when it comes to tradition—yes, thank Fang for any precisions, but, there is also another point, even where diagrams (roman) fer Ez himself to study, and work on theory that changes of dialect, etc.—do not affect melodic coherence—this is not dogma, it is conjecture. (qtd in Taylor 176)

19. In the “Adams” and “Chinese” cantos the authoritative voice, which attempts to “shift from what is heterogeneous towards a homogeneity which conceals the production on which it is based,” is undone by the impossibility of the project (Durant 185). Pound dramatizes the fact that the knowledge of China constructed by Orientalists has no real coherence and is actually a tower of Babel, full of misinterpretations, misrecognition of signs, inaccuracies, which in its terrible incompleteness teaches lessons, exemplifies the pitfalls of history, and is fraught with aesthetic possibilities. In discussing the contradictions evident in Carl Barks’s comic book narratives, Donald Ault points out that the comics contain the paradox of “surface flatness with three-dimensionality, self-reflexivity with character self-presence, subversion of an underlying world with the coherence of a total world” (“Visionary Synchronicities in Carl Barks Comics†”). Pound’s ability to accept incompleteness registers his *The Cantos* as a project of “ruins,” an experiment, and a refutation of totality. Alan Durant suggests this is what makes *The Cantos* a text that can endure both its content and its author, because it can be
read against the author’s intent (188).

20. Pound wrote about The Cantos to James Joyce in 1917: “I have begun an endless poem of no known category. Phanopoeia (light-or image-making) or something or other, all about everything” (Cookson xvii). The Cantos have no real “end,” just a series of scraps and fragments. Maybe Pound was already showing a tendency towards the delusion of a totalizing system based on the provisional need for self-destruction. What remains is a twentieth-century literary enigma—a hypercanonical modernist text from an age that, according to Pound, “demanded an image.” The Cantos bears witness to Pound’s ambitions, and failures; The Cantos also bears witness to the unstable of distinctions between images and text, predicting what commentators have hailed as the deconstruction of logocentric master narratives also known as the postmodern.

21. Notes

[1] Unless explicitly stated references are to the 1998 New Directions version of The Cantos of Ezra Pound: 萊. The “萊” on the title page is one of Pound’s Confucian keywords, “Cheng,” which Pound describes in his translation of the Confucian 大學 Da Xue as, “‘Sincerity.’ The precise definition of the word, pictorially the sun’s lance coming to rest on the precise spot verbally. The right-hand radical of this compound means: to perfect, bring to focus.” The bit about the sun’s lance (the parallel lines in the left radical) resting on the precise spot verbally (the “日” kou in the right radical means mouth); in this reading Pound intertwines the lexical meaning of “日” with visual associations of the parallel lines. That is to say that this word is a meditation of language through language, as a site for cultural “actuation,” and political harmony.

[2] Leibniz states: “Speech is to give the sign of one’s thought with an articulated voice. Writing is to do it with permanent characters on paper. The latter need not be referred back to the voice, as is obvious from the characters of the Chinese script” (qtd. in Derrida 79).


[5] In the March 1913 issue of poetry Pound provides the famous description of the image: “An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (200); “It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sudden growth.” (200)

[6] Pound’s three categories of poetry were: “Melopoeia, which is poetry as music (canto), Phanopoeia, which is the poetry of the visual image, and Logopoeia,
defined as ‘the dance of the intellect among words’” (Bacigalupo 199).


[8] Frank Latrecchia situates the Palgrave Anthology as an example of the kind of literary devolution that modernist poets such as Pound were responding to—a literary vacuum where poetry had “[n]o narrative allowed, no intellect at meditation, no personal, occasional, religious material, no humor (the very antithesis of the ‘poetical’), no dramatic textures of blank verse because the speaking voice is alien to song lyric (a redundancy: Palgrave recognized no dramatic lyric, no Donne, no Blake)” (57).

[9] According to Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska “could understand primitive Chinese ideographs (not the later more sophisticated forms), and he was very much disgusted with the lexicographers who ‘hadn’t sense enough to see that that was a horse’” (Pound 1970, 46).

[10] Derrida says in *Of Grammatology*, “This is the meaning of the work of Fenellosa [sic] whose influence upon Ezra Pound and his poetics is well-known: this irreducibly graphic poetics was, with that of Mallarmé, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition. The fascination that the Chinese ideogram exercised on Pound’s writing may thus be given all its historical significance” (92).


[12] For an in depth discussion on the marketing of modernism, see Laurence Rainey. As such, Pound creates the kind of cultural commodity that he so vehemently denounces.

22. Works Cited


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