Lawrence S. Rainey: On "Canto IX"

The Cantos of Ezra Pound has long been considered the most important work of Anglo-American literary modernism. It is also the most intractable: its difficulties are notorious, its obscurity legendary. Though we are ignorant about many matters in Pound's work, at least one point has gradually attracted a substantial consensus: the decisive event in the formation of The Cantos occurred when Pound composed the Malatesta Cantos in 1922 and 1923. This event marked a catalytic moment. It enabled Pound to discover poetic techniques essential to the formal repertory of The Cantos, such as the direct quotation of prose documents, a device that effectively dissolved the distinction between verse and prose--a crucial development in the history of modern poetry. Equally important, the Malatesta Cantos precipitated a radical revision of all the earlier cantos, crystallizing the design of the larger poem, which had until then remained obscure for Pound himself. These events, the outcome of an intense struggle with an enormous body of historical materials, consumed eleven months of his life. Yet their reverberations extended far beyond 1923. In later cantos Pound returned to historical topics connected with Malatestan material some one hundred times. In prose he treated the subject in reviews and essays of the 1930s, at times comparing himself with Sigismondo Malatesta and his work with the church Sigismondo had constructed. In his private life he talked about Sigismondo to anyone who would listen; he purchased slides and photographs of historical documents important for Sigismondo's life or times; he kept above his writing desk a bas-relief that depicted Isotta degli Atti, the woman who had allegedly inspired Sigismondo's greatest achievement; and in the closing years of his life he journeyed to Rimini again to visit the church of San Francesco one last, haunting time. For Pound, it is clear, the issues he had encountered in the dramatic moments of 1922-23 became a reference point for all his subsequent thinking about civilization and cultural politics. The Malatesta Cantos are a locus for exploring the entire project of The Cantos, the central aspirations of literary modernism, and the intricate history of their critical reception by modern scholarship.

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Quotation is a salient feature of major modernist texts, whether The Cantos or The Waste Land, Ulysses or To the Lighthouse. Its appearance in the modernist novel may not be surprising: after all, quotation has typified the novel since the day when Don Quixote recited Petrarchan sonnets and the formulas of chivalric romance. But quotation is also ubiquitous in modernist poetry--seven of the last eight lines of The Waste Land, for example, are quotations--surpassing the boundaries of generic expectations. Further, the modernist practice of quotation is not only pervasive, but qualitatively different: in addition to earlier poems or traditional literary materials, it cites tags from popular songs (O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag--), or the nightly injunction of pub-tenders (HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME), materials wrested from outside the conventional literary domain. And the citation of historical documents, a procedure first adopted in the Malatesta Cantos, seems an especially intransient form of this practice. The source texts are aggressively quotidian and antiliterary, invoking materials so alien to conventional notions of the "poetic" as to reconstitute the boundaries of subject matter acceptable in poetic discourse. Moreover, they are presented without ragged right margins, miming the graphic characteristics of prose as if to emphasize their departure from poetic norms. In part, then, they have elicited critical interest because
evaluating them is essential to our understanding not only of The Cantos, but of literary modernism. Another reason for interest is that criticism of the last two decades has virtually defined itself by the problem of quotation.

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Pound's use of quotation was ambiguous and ambivalent. It invoked the standards of philological accuracy in order to juxtapose them against a higher accuracy of the spirit. It enacted a critique of the bourgeois mentalité and a radical rejection of the reformist socialism that allegedly shared its foundations; yet the result was a utopian aspiration imperiled by its own emptiness, a threat that could only be met by authorization from the past, by the invocation of historical precedent--which meant a return to the terrain of philology and history. The cycle became vertiginous and inescapable, its gestures both rebellious and conservative its implications poised on an abyss of ambiguity.

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distaste for the world engendered by capitalism is structured through a radical antimaterialism that rejects both the historicist trend of elite bourgeois culture and the repetitious "uniformity" of an urban lower class public associated with socialism. Meanwhile the "middle" (read also "mediocre") socioeconomic strata are rejected in favor of an imaginary cultural aristocracy that embodies and is unified with the vitality of a traditional-rural folk, and this imaginary construct becomes the vehicle for values uncontaminated by the mentalité that has engendered the culture of capitalist industrialism, materialism, or its academic exponent, philology. And it was but a short step from the 1917 essay to his 1922 view of the courtly culture of Rimini, where the "men of unusual intelligence" become "men of unusual genius" as Pound approvingly cites (in the final version of the Malatesta Cantos) Bartolomeo Scacchi's report that Sigismondo typically discussed "books, arms, / And men of unusual genius." This was the background to Pound's use of historical quotation in the Malatesta Cantos--an aggressive, accusatory assault on the historicist trend of elite bourgeois culture.

Viewed in Pound's own terms, the quotations in the Malatesta Cantos are not structured by philology, but against it: the "passion for completeness" is replaced with "selection"; the consultation of "commentaries" gives way to "direct study of the texts themselves" (ten long weeks of archival research from February to April 1923); the method of "science" is superseded by "art"; the "dullness" of "the earnest" is met with "levity"; and the study of "mediocrity" is supplanted by the "primitive religion" of "hero-worship." Pound invokes the standards of philological accuracy only to savage the institutional apparatus that sustains them. His literalist translations parody the typical features of the loathed institution. Consider his citation of a single phrase from a letter of 1454: "the bay pony (ronzino baiectino) the which you have sent me." Here are the gestures of philology--meticulous report of the original wording in parentheses (ronzino baiectino), and a translation so literal as to skirt the absurd ("the which" for il quale). It is, of course, too literal, a cruel parody of the philological fetish with "unvital detail."


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