EPISTEMOLOGY AND INTERTEXTUAL PRACTICE
IN EZRA POUND’S THE CANTOS

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Masters of Arts
in English

By

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Washington, D.C.
April 23, 2007
For my parents,
without whom this thesis could have never been started,
and for Landon,
without whose love and support
it could never have been finished.

Special thanks to Eddie, for his patience, advice, and encouragement.
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ABSTRACT  

This project examines the poetics that support the dense and self-conscious intertextuality of Ezra Pound’s The Cantos. Arguing against mainstream interpretations that link the profound difficulty of this textual practice to the poet’s renowned snobbery and academic elitism, this thesis proposes that the poem’s intertextuality models and foregrounds a specific epistemology and poetics, wherein the reader, continually confronted by a dense texture of implied meanings, must engage in a difficult process of decoding or translating in order to make sense of the verses. Pound’s intertextual practice thus initially enacts, on a micro-level, the meta-narrative Pound establishes in the first 70 cantos: man’s movement from the darkness of ignorance to the clear light of philosophy. The later cantos, by contrast, reveal Pound’s increasing uncertainty as to the reliability or efficacy of the neoplatonic epistemological model he had earlier advanced. This shift in poetics, coinciding with the poet’s internment for treason during WWII and his fears that he was on the brink of a mental breakdown, bears important implications for Pound’s intertextual gestures in the later cantos as well, suggesting that Pound may not always be in control of the poem’s intertextual operations, and that the reader’s diligence in chasing allusions and navigating the intertext may not always yield deeper textual meaning. The project concludes by examining the implications of this breach in faith in terms of Pound’s questionable political and social beliefs.
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Introduction

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…

--Canto I

The vast, allusive textual expanse that comprises Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos* initially appears as Kimmeria itself. Dimly lit by virtue of dense and obscure referentiality, it presents the reader with a thriving population of figures and voices jostling against one another, as though going about their business in the dark. It falls to the reader, then, to “pierce” the “close-webbed mist” by traveling intertextually—by reaching towards anterior texts in order to discern the identity of a given figure and illuminate the meaning of a given line. The sheer number of references, coupled with the diversity of literary and historic traditions from whence they spring, constitute, as has often been observed, a formidable challenge to the reader; as Pound once said of the analogously difficult poetry of Guido Cavalcanti: “these are not sonnets for an idle hour” (“Introduction” xxiii). The question for the critic is thus: why this marked difficulty? Why are Pound’s cantos so densely intertextual?

Mark Kyburz insists that the critical response to this query has been woefully inadequate, as scholars have almost universally embraced an erroneously “defensive textualism” (20) when approaching *The Cantos*. In particular, Kyburz objects to a set of unquestioned assumptions that he believes have dominated Poundian scholarship thus far,
including the notion that Pound’s work is admirably and necessarily difficult, that his poetry constructs an autonomous and ahistorical universe, and that these features appoint painstaking exegesis as the only adequate mode of reading his poetry. In other words, Kyburz argues that scholars have reified and authorized Pound’s poetics in the name of examining them. The reminder is well-considered, though perhaps not for the reasons Kyburz advances. He insists—like Ann Ardis and others—that a “textualist” approach to The Cantos ignores the significant way in which Pound’s assumptions about (or, more acutely, his contempt for) his contemporary audience affected the production of his work. From their perspective, the dense referentiality of The Cantos is but symptomatic of his belief that his poetry could only be understood by a select, well-educated minority—the “voi altri pochi” (“Introduction” xxiii) or “you other few,” to whom he addresses his poetry. The interpretation is consistent with accounts of his renowned elitism, but overly antagonistic and reductive in its unwillingness to consider the fact that Pound’s pronounced intertextuality may have had an intentional textual function as well. If Kyburz critiques readers for their readiness to accept Pound’s poetics as gospel—for their inability to read his verses critically and dispassionately—he commits the same error, though at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum: he appears determined to deny the potential significance of Pound’s poetics by exposing The Cantos as a prolonged, elitist affront to the common reader.

The present study seeks to avoid both extremes—indeed, to abstain from manifesting a predisposition to Pound the poet altogether—and to instead examine the text’s difficulty in terms of its immediate implications for the reader. Concurring with Kyburz in his recognition of a need to re-examine the central difficulty of Pound’s
cantos—his intertextual practice—from a more critical (less defensive) perspective, the following study therefore approaches the intertextuality of *The Cantos* not through honorific explication but by straight-forwardly asking: Why this textual practice? How does it function in the text, for the reader? What are the poetics that support this textual feature, and what significance do they bear within the context of Modernist poetic expression?

In asking why Pound opted for a poetry of such obscurity and compression, the polysemous “intertextuality”—a term that arrives heavily-freighted with theoretical implications—requires definition. In its broadest sense, as Graham Allen summarizes, theorists have used the term to define the way in which “the act of reading…plunges us into a network of textual relations” such that “meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates” (1). All texts are intertextual to some degree, but this project will address only the “self-conscious intertextuality” of *The Cantos*, which is here defined as the deliberate foregrounding of the way in which the text assumes meaning through its relationship to other texts. The “self-conscious” qualifier has been appended in order to foreclose engagement with more theoretical discussions of what may or may not be true of the Text as a general proposition. Accordingly, this paper does not seek to affirm, reify, or wholesale import those theories of intertextuality first developed in the 1960s and 1970s by Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and other Tel Quel thinkers. Such theories conceive of the Text as a dynamic intersection of different texts or writings for which the author cannot possibly claim responsibility, and through which literary meaning can never be fully stabilized. Whether or not this is true as a general property of the Text engages a debate that is rather
distant from the scope of the following project, which concerns itself firstly with the
textual implications of the straight-forward observation that Pound’s cantos are largely
unintelligible without recourse to a vast and varied body of texts, myths, histories,
language traditions, and other cultural productions.

The first chapter thus begins by examining the poem’s intertextual operations
through close textual analysis of several passages from the early cantos. Noting that
Pound’s intertextual practice foregrounds a specific type of interpretive process in these
cantos and correlating that process with Pound’s own writings on the related subjects of
poetry and reading methods, the chapter then finds that his intertextual practice—at least
at the outset of The Cantos—corresponds strongly with the poem’s broader thematic
orientation toward what Richard Pevear terms “the struggle to move from the darkness of
history into the light of the sun” (54). The chapter concludes by proposing that Pound’s
dense intertextuality serves as a literalized, “micro-” version of an epistemological meta-
narrative.

However, as the second chapter demonstrates, Pound’s later cantos—those
written during and after Pound’s internment for treason during World War II¹—betray
increasing uncertainty as to the efficacy of the epistemological model that he has
endorsed and structured throughout the poem. Accordingly, these cantos problematize
the intertextual practice Pound relies upon so heavily earlier in the poem, and illustrate
the textual reverberations of epistemological crisis for the modern poet. Most
significantly, a concern with the mechanisms of memory displaces the poem’s earlier
emphasis upon those of cognition. Pound despairs of encoding for the reader a path to

¹ On July 26, 1943, the U.S. indicted Pound for having given aid and comfort to the
enemy.
deeper truth, and instead adapts the poetic space to his nearly compulsive need to memorialize those elements of culture and experience that he suddenly fears losing. The shift, as chapter two argues, reflects both Pound’s anxieties about his mental stability while interned in poor conditions in Pisa and admitted for psychiatric treatment at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, and his propaganda-induced belief that the Allies had launched a campaign of calculated cultural terrorism in Fascist Italy.

Taken together, these chapters aim at demonstrating the way in which The Cantos records a dramatic change in poetics marked by the disintegration of Pound’s faith in an epistemology promising metaphysical transcendence. They argue that The Cantos should be read as a chronicle of intellectual evolution—a means of bearing witness to the forces of experience that penetrate the poetic spirit so deeply that those cognitive frameworks formerly vaunted as unimpeachable must be discarded. The project thus insists upon an acknowledgment of the poem’s unique history of composition: the fact that Pound composed The Cantos over the span of nearly sixty years, and that the shift in perspective that takes place towards the end of the poem must not be construed as a failure to achieve aesthetic goals, but rather as a signal of the poem’s existence as a record of personal change. Accordingly, this project approaches The Cantos experientially—as it unfolds in narrative time—initially examining the ways in which his first 70 or so cantos present and make use of intertextual gestures, then encountering the change that takes place at the outset of The Pisan Cantos, and finally coming to terms with the import of that change in terms of his intertextual practice. To borrow from the terminology of The Cantos, this project serves as a “periplum,” an account of a temporal journey, and thus presents the text “not as land looks on a map / but as sea bord seen by men sailing” (324).
The project concludes by situating this interpretation of *The Cantos* within a broader framework of Poundian scholarship, taking up in particular Charles Olson’s pointed, pertinent question: “Shall we talk a 100 Cantos and not answer the anti-Semite who wrote them?” (qtd. in Brooker 227). The final section aims at—far from exonerating Pound through defensive textualism—using the text in order to examine the ways in which Pound’s epistemological principles may have contributed to his dark and damning espousal of a fascist and anti-Semitic ideology.
Chapter I
Self-Conscious Intertextuality and the Epistemological Meta-Narrative of the Early Cantos

Knowledge the shade of a shade,
Yet must thou sail after knowledge
Knowing less than drugged beasts.

-- Canto XLVII

In 1915, an editor of The New Age wrote: “Mr. Pound is so busy borrowing ideas from all sources that he has not time to examine their meanings…he must economise his means and stop running to waste like a British museum in the loose” (qtd. in Ardis 423). The quote is accurate at least in its account of the poem’s density of reference: scarcely can one travel from one line to the next without stumbling upon a historical figure, mythological trope, or even tonal shift that requires intertextual navigation. How do these discursive gestures function within the broader framework of The Cantos, and what are the implications for this heavy-handed and self-conscious intertextuality? A close look at four lines from the opening of Canto IV serves as a useful starting point for exploring the reader’s first interactions with the poem’s strenuous texture. The canto begins:

Palace in smoky light,
Troy but a heap of smouldering boundary stones,
ANAXIFORMINGES! Aurunculeia!
Hear me. Cadmus of Golden Prows! (13)

Little appears intelligible without a working knowledge of the terms Troy, Anaxiforminges, Aurunculeia, and Cadmus. The third line presents particular difficulties, as the phrases appear entirely stripped of contextualizing clues; condensed to their names alone, they operate as shorthand for the depth of tradition each represents. These references immediately establish a dense texture of implied meanings—a glimpse of movement beyond the “close-webbed mist” that initially obstructs comprehension. The sheer number of intertextual references here (representative of the scale of density throughout *The Cantos*) foregrounds and repeatedly insists upon a specific type of interpretive process in which the reader must travel intertextually in order to unveil the identity of a given figure or term and thus make sense of the lines themselves.

The process is rather akin to translation, or the analysis of shorthand: all three engage the interpretive faculty in the act of converting or substituting one unit of language for another of equal value in order to bring meaning into focus. Importantly, then, the reader cannot operate by logical deduction, but rather by sudden intuition. In the third line identified above, for example, the immediate context provides no traction for the reader ignorant of the terms “Anaxiforminges” and “Aurunculeia”—or even for the reader able to recall at an instant these figures from their respective sources, as they arise from two distinct cultural traditions whose relationship to one another is far from self-evident. Once the reader takes the time to trace the intertextual gestures and consider the relations between them, he discovers a rather intact meaning behind the initially opaque verses: the visual progression from an image of Troy, a civilization in ruins, culturally destroyed by an external force—to a figure that represents the building of a
new city, as Cadmus was the mythical founder of the City of Thebes. In the intervening lines, the narrator invokes two muses, as it were—Anaxiforminges, a phrase from Pindar meaning “lords of the lyres,” or those proficient in music and art, and Aurunculeia, a bride whose marriage is celebrated in a work by Catallus. That is, in beseeching figures of art and love, the narrator shifts from an image of decay and destruction to one of birth and civilization-building. This central concept—the way in which art and human emotion stand as a counter-force to the deadening and ruinous progress of history—forms a central theme in *The Cantos*. In the process of establishing this notion, Pound draws from an unwieldy range of cultural sources and paratactically links these references to one another. The method challenges the reader—regardless of his level of familiarity with those traditions—to not only grasp a figure from his original context, but perceive hidden or counterintuitive relations between multiple and distinct cultural contexts.

But perhaps even more significantly, the progression of images establishes an economy of light that corresponds strongly with the reader’s own experience in encountering the lines. Effecting the move from smoky incomprehension to daytime clarity, the reader—not the poem—serves as the site of transaction and exchange. In an early letter to his wife, Dorothy Shakespear, Pound explicitly addresses this principle as the aim of a new poetry he was cultivating: he writes that he hoped to use “the ‘vagueness’ etc. as an incident in the much more difficult process of drawing down the light, of embodying it, of building it into the stiffer material of actualities. The whole thing a process of art, of the more difficult art in which we are half media & half creators” (qtd. in O. Pound and Litz 76). Pound’s intertextual references necessitate just this process on a micro-level: they direct the reader to “embody”—to give a form and
substance to—what initially appears a vaguely outlined figure dancing just beyond the reader’s immediate ken. His intertextual practice therefore literalizes a poetics by which the reader, far from passively receiving or witnessing some sort of poetic illumination, must engage the text in order to attain an awareness of the reality beyond it. He must be both “media” and “creator”—the site and agent of transformation.

Pound importantly developed this distinction (between the reader as a passive recipient versus an active agent in the process of enlightenment) in 1914, while delineating the principles of Vorticism in an essay on the subject. Here, he writes:

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. (Gaudier-Brzeska 1970)

Pound’s poetry shapes the reader into the latter sort, requiring the interpretive function of the reader in a particularly aggressive fashion, as it continually commands the reader to isolate a mythological character or historical figure from his original context and adapt him to the new framework in which he has been presented in the cantos. His intertextual practice, at least in the early cantos, therefore points to a poetics that presupposes the existence of a transcendent reality or Truth that can be accessed through sufficiently activated intellection or perceptiveness. The model is thoroughly neoplatonic in its

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2 Pound makes similar distinctions throughout his critical writings, as in his essay on Remy de Gourmont, in which he contrasts “aesthetic receptivity” with a state of mind in which “love, passion, and emotion” serve as “intellectual instigation” (Literary Essays 343). Peter Liebregts has further argued that “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” represents Pound’s “study of the ‘passive’ and ‘active’ self,” as it offers a “portrayal of a poet who cannot actively create through a vision arising out of his aesthetic receptivity” (44).
figuration of the experience of illumination as an intellectual process requiring both intensity of thought and resolution of will (what he often termed the *directio voluntatis* or “direction of will”), as will be more fully explored later. It here bears noting however, that Pound found this neoplatonic model so compelling and so crucial to his own life experience and to his comprehension of the world around him,³ that, as Peter Liebregts convincingly demonstrates, the seemingly idiosyncratic band of literary, historical, and philosophical figures that he admired most and from whom he must frequently draws (figures as disparate as Confucius, Dante, and Mussolini) can be understood if one recognizes that Pound discerned in their work a neoplatonic conceptualization of epistemology. In his writings on each of these personal heroes, for example, Pound expresses his most fervent admiration for their conceptualizations of those exceptional instances of illumination and heightened consciousness that transcend material reality—that is, for their neoplatonic figuration of the knowledge-acquisition process.

Pound’s sense of “tradition”—even without an awareness of the line of neoplatonic thought that runs through it—remains crucial to understanding his poetic practice. In his critical writing, he self-consciously positions himself as the inheritor of a selective canon, producing the same great art that his forebears did, and believing that many of his practices are not “new inventions[s]” but rather a matter of “critical discrimination” (“Imagisme and England” 185). The claim is surprising in light of the marked difference between his poetry and that of, for example, Dante Alighieri, his most cherished mentor. That Pound considered his poetry “traditional”—classical, even—

³ Peter Liebregts demonstrates Pound’s familiarity with neoplatonic philosophy (see 22-3), as well as his tendency to “conflate various stages and different doctrines of the Neoplatonic tradition” (23) in adapting various systems of religious belief to his own artistic purposes.
reveals that the difficulty readers experience seemed to him an adaptation of a poetic principle he valued in earlier models. His writings on the 12th-century troubadours, for example, demonstrates the way in which Pound derived his “difficult” poetic style from an earlier prototype, and thus usefully articulates his conception of his own poetics. Writing in the “trobar clus” or “closed style”—a difficult and dense mode involving what Pound termed “veiled meanings”—the troubadours, Pound insists, were not seeking “obscurity for the sake of obscurity,” but rather affirming that “the interpretive function is the highest honor of the arts” (87). He adds that many 12th-century readers erroneously believed that “poetry, especially lyric poetry, must be simple; that you must get the meaning while the man sings it” (88). While such “simple” models exist, most specifically in the “trobar pla” or “plain style” in which other Provencal poets wrote, Pound, like the “trobar clus” poets, prefers a form of the lyric “that is not always intelligible at first hearing” (89). Despite their superficial formidability, Pound claims, these poems categorically lead to deeper insight, as “an art is vital only so long as it is interpretive, so long, that is, as it manifests something which the artist perceives at greater intensity, and more intimately than his public” (87).

While ostensibly engaging the troubadour tradition, the statement reads as a response to the negative critical reception his poetry evinced. Pound habitually faced criticism in tune with that of Harold Monro, the renowned publisher of five volumes of Georgian Poetry, who censured Pound for “pepper[ing] nearly all his writings with archaisms, exoticisms, foreign words ancient and modern, willful obscurities, and gibes at people less gifted than himself” (qtd. in Homberger 176). Pound’s careful defense of parallel “obscurities” in troubadour poetry suggests that, far from purposefully
mystifying the average reader, he considered difficulty a necessary feature for good poetry, which, at its best, conducts the reader to keener insight. Access to deeper truths can only be achieved, he implies, through willing exertion. Lines like the above-quoted ones from Canto IV or the following from Canto II requires and foregrounds this volitional spirit on the part of the reader:

   Hang it all, Robert Browning,
   there can be but the one “Sordello.”
   But Sordello, and my Sordello?
   Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana.
   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 (6)

Here, the sheer volume of intertextual gestures and the disparateness of the traditions to which they refer necessitate a serious and painstaking engagement with the text as well as a commitment to the belief that Pound is, in fact, directing the reader somewhere. Thus, reading The Cantos involves both the directio voluntatis and a deep faith that powerful, anagogic meaning lies just beyond the poetic surface.

   The poet assumes an interesting role in this model, as he seems to have preceded and paved the way for the reader on the path to transcendence. In an early essay, for example, Pound explains that “Greek myth arose when someone having passed through a
delightful psychic experience tried to communicate it to others” (*Early Writings* 200). In this expression, Pound conceives of the text as a means of presenting the path to metaphysical apprehension or keener insight. Here, as always, Pound is process oriented: poetry recreates the “passage” through a “delightful psychic experience.” In some ways, Pound adapted this model from Dante, whose *Divine Comedy*, Pound believed, represented “the journey of Dante’s intelligence through the states of mind wherein dwell all sorts and conditions of men before death” (*Spirit of Romance* 127). Pound’s emphasis on the artist’s desire to transmute such psychological “sorts,” “conditions,” and experiences—rather than sensory or emotive ones—bears noting. The early cantos manifest this accentuation, as they seem to operate by retro-cognition; as Edwin Barton points out, “by retracing the labyrinths of cognition that had brought him through unfamiliar territories of the mind and spirit, Pound provides a ‘clew,’ thereby ‘admitting one to a deeper knowledge’” (195).

The very first canto is a particularly clear example of this feature, as it thematically conveys the principle of retro-cognition that it performatively delivers. Here, the narrator recounts a portion of the Odysseus narrative—his descent to the underworld in search of Tiresias’ wisdom. The canto thus thematically presents the challenge of sailing after knowledge, and the way in which the individual must seek that knowledge in the minds of men more prescient than he. Pound underscores this theme even more explicitly when he interrupts the otherwise straight-forward narration of Odysseus’ adventure by writing:

> Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus,

> In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer.
And he sailed, by Sirens and thence outward and away
And unto Circe. (5)

By commenting on the Divus\textsuperscript{4} translation of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Pound deliberately calls attention to the intertextuality of the canto—its relationship to both *The Odyssey* and transliterated versions of the Homeric original. The implication is that Pound and Divus, like Odysseus, have sought knowledge in the minds of men that have preceded them by translating and adapting their works, and by tracing the intellectual and artistic moves that those individuals made in order to produce the originals. The fact that the final two lines quoted above—“And he sailed, by Sirens…”—could syntactically belong to the subject Divus (particularly since the “out of Homer” clause seems to anticipate and parallel the subsequent: “and thence outward and away”) reinforces this reading by suggesting that both Divus and Odysseus have set sail after knowledge by extrapolating from the wisdom expressed by another.

Meanwhile, the abundance of intertextual references in the canto urge the reader to follow Odysseus’ (or Divus’—or, by implication, Pound’s) lead by requiring him to actively chase meaning—to “catch up” to Pound’s enlightened position, in a sense. The reader discovers that by navigating the intertextual gestures—by tracing Pound’s cognitive moves and moving steadily through the canto—he has been directed from “the bounds of deepest water” (3) to a position of worship before the gold-bedecked, sun-lit figure of Aphrodite, goddess of love. Once again, Pound figuratively conveys his metaphysics of light in a way that coincides with the reader’s sudden awakening to textual meaning.

\textsuperscript{4} As the lines suggest, Andreas Divus translated Homer’s *The Odyssey* into Latin in the Renaissance. Pound was familiar with the Divus edition.
James Longenbach has convincingly argued that Pound, like his dear friend W. B. Yeats, consciously engaged with the phenomenon of retro-cognition\(^5\) after reading a book entitled *The Adventure* (1911) in which two women claim to have found themselves transported back into the 18\(^{th}\) century while strolling through the gardens of Versailles, and corroborate this account by consulting the French National Archives and correlating their experience with official records. Longenbach insists that “not only the mechanism but the substance of the vision appealed to Yeats,” though he is less certain as to the role of the concept of retro-cognition in the work of Pound: “not so clear is the centrality of these same ideas to Pound’s efforts to write a ‘poem including history’” (226).\(^6\) The key lies in understanding that Pound valued the process of cognition over the vision it accesses: his poetry seeks not to enshrine transcendent experience or represent a lucid vision of the past, but to provide the reader with “the means of an active re-imagination of this perception in art” (Liebregts 44). Pound wrote, for example, that “a clavicord or a statue or a poem, wrought out of ages of knowledge, out of fine perception and skill” enables “a hundred other men, in moments of wariness, [to] wake beautiful sound…that they can be carried out of the realm of annoyance into the realm of truth, into the world unchanging, the world of fine animal life, the world of pure form” (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 157). The principal value in a finely-crafted work of art, Pound insists, emerges in its capacity to draw “a hundred other men”—the poem’s unknowable and unnumberable future audiences—along the pathways to transcendence.

\(^5\) The term had not yet been coined; I use it here for convenience.
\(^6\) Longenbach here refers to the way in which Pound once famously described *The Cantos* as a poem “including history.”
Pound frequently cast the poet’s function—his application of “fine perception and skill”—in technical language, likening himself to an engineer, crafting various tools that would permit others to achieve the enlightenment he had enjoyed. He writes, for example, that the poet “understands and translates to the many, build[ing] for the initiated bridges and devices” that serve as “doors into eternity and into boundless ether” (*Early Writings* 194). Pound’s self-conscious intertextuality serves as one such bridge or device, conducting the reader toward deeper understanding and importantly foregrounding that movement, as his references elicit a consciousness of being led from one mental state to another. In forcing readers to turn to antecedent cultural myths, texts, and so on, these references (which operate in much the same way as his eccentric ideograms and hieroglyphics\(^7\)) initially bewilder with their foreignness and immediate illegibility but then serve as conductors, directing readers to strain for and eventually achieve comprehension.

It is here that the term “intertextuality” demonstrates its utility, as it appropriately registers and highlights the process—the movement between texts—rather than the product or destination of that journey, as might the phrase “allusion” or “reference.” In describing the poet as the forger of “bridges” and “devices” permitting the reader to attain transcendence, the emphasis falls on the mechanisms that enable understanding rather than the veiled meaning they aim to disclose. Thus, in an essay on Dante, he writes: “There are works of art that are beautiful objects and works of art which are keys and passwords admitting one to deeper knowledge, to a finer perception of beauty” (*Spirit of* 7

\(^7\) Though several critics have established that this is not universally the case, Pound believed that the reader could discern the meaning of an ideogram by careful visual analysis, insisting that the character could be dissected into a number of more easily recognizable sub-units in order to determine the meaning behind the ideogram.
Again, the virtue of great art is its utility in enabling passage rather than its finery and aesthetic appeal as a static object, purported to be beautiful. Pound aims for the reader’s “finer perception” rather than beauty itself; he expresses no need to define or represent the reality seen in that vision.

Pound’s poetry therefore inaugurates a process—a journey—instead of delineating a terminus, with fixed coordinates. His is a poetry that must be approached as—to borrow the language of the cantos—“periplum, not as land looks on a map / but as sea bord seen by men sailing” (324). The emphasis falls upon direct experience, eyewitness without the mediation of representation or the advantage of perspective. Pound accordingly figures a good poem as a sort of puzzle that must be “figured out” or pieced together by the reader. In an essay on the famously dense poetry of Rihaku, the Chinese poet whom Pound greatly admired and translated, for example, he writes that though Rihaku’s verses initially appear as “puzzles,” “upon careful examination, we find that everything is there [in the poem], not merely by ‘suggestion’ but by a sort of mathematical process of reduction…you can play Conan Doyle if you like” (Early Writings 298). The phrase could be equally applied to the opening lines of Canto IV referenced earlier, where the reader does find “everything there” once the intertextual references have been grasped. The elucidation process does not operate by force of hazy symbolism or emotive suggestion, but by nearly factual cross-checking that results in a sudden discovery. As Pound writes elsewhere, the poet “never arrives at his utility through occult and inexplicable ways”: the meaning is “scientifically demonstrable” (194). His self-conscious intertextuality demonstrates this principle with particular lucidity; while, for example, the earlier-referenced opening lines of Canto II may initially
bewilder the reader with their invocation of a large number of figures from a diverse range of traditions—Robert Browning, Sordello, Lir, Picasso, Helen of Troy, and Homer are referenced within the first twelve lines—the “meaning” of the lines is, in fact “scientifically demonstrable” by carefully coordinating each of the names within their semantic contexts.

Critics tend to explain Pound’s desire for a poetry of precision and clarity in contradistinction to the “emotional reverberation and suggestiveness” of the Symbolist tradition (Tryphonopoulos 81), which Pound rejected and criticized. And while it is true that Pound explicitly denounced the Symbolist’s “mushy technique” (Gaudier-Brzeska 84), the fact that his is a poetry of what he termed “a sort of hyper-scientific precision” (Spirit of Romance 87) seems equally grounded in a tradition that far predates the emergence of Symbolism in the late 19th century. Pound elsewhere insists, for example, that “the science of the music of words and the knowledge of their magical powers has fallen away since men invoked Mithra by a sequence of pure vowel sounds” (“Introduction” xxiii), and the accuracy and precision he sought in his own poetry represented, for him, a revivification of this ancient rite. In finding the precise words—the “cheng ming”8 Pound refers to so incessantly throughout the cantos—transcendence might be attained. In other words, far from crystallizing his own poetic technique out of an aversion to the Symbolist variation, Pound adapted his “hyper-scientific precision” from a specific tradition he constructed for himself and embraced throughout his poetic career. This is significant, in that critics seeking to understand the difficulty of Pound’s

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8 The Confucian concept (more conventionally transliterated as “zheng ming”) of “rectifying names” or “attaining precise verbal definitions” (Lan 45). In canto LXXIV, Pound explains “cheng ming” as “the word is made / perfect / better gift can no man make to a nation” (474).
poetry in terms of the assumptions he had about his contemporary audience, and the way in which those assumptions led him to develop a more obscure, challenging mode of expression may unfairly overlook Pound’s conscious adaptation of a particular poetic model that he admired and believed had been preserved by certain groups of poets in specific centuries.

The “hyper-scientific precision” of Pound’s poetry has led both Pound and his scholars to describe his poetic practices through a number of technical metaphors rich with implication. In a letter to the aged poet, Marshall McLuhan, one of Pound’s principle disciples, observed that Pound used allusion “not as ornament” but rather as a sort of “vacuum,” or a means “of making available the total energy of any previous situation and culture” and “shaping and amplifying it for current use” (qtd. in Barton 182). McLuhan goes on to describe the way such instances of allusion “operate by opening up, unveiling an entire mystery contained in an originally foreign phrase” (qtd. in Barton 182). Pound’s correspondence with McLuhan on this matter affirms this reading, but one need only consider the poet’s infatuation with ideograms, translations, and imagism to find sufficient corroboration, as each presents units of language “charged with meaning.”

The reading and comprehending process, to continue the analogy, enacts a transfer of energy, such that reader accelerates through the language to the concept beyond. In these figurations, the text itself serves as a threshold through which the reader must pass in order to reach a pre-ordained destination.

Pound’s conceptualization of the reading process as a journey, a “sailing after knowledge,” assumes yet deeper meaning when the reader recognizes that, in many ways,

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9 Pound elsewhere used this phrase to describe poetry more generally, asserting that poetry is “language charged with meaning” (ABCs of Reading 28).
The Cantos represents Pound’s adaptation of Dante’s Divine Comedy—his re-writing of the Christian paradigm of movement from earthly existence through the gates of heaven into paradise. In The Cantos, this movement from the material world to the idealized transcendent realm beyond is not only thematically conveyed, but figured in the very reading process itself, as the poem’s self-conscious intertextuality asks the reader to move above and beyond the material word on the page to achieve a state of limpid comprehension. In this light, the reading process becomes an anagogic one, where the interpretive function of the reader becomes capable of discerning profound metaphysical meaning. In much of his prose, Pound articulates this understanding more explicitly, representing great poetry as a “ritual” aimed at exposing anagogic meaning—an ultimate spiritual or mystical sense. In his essay on the Provencal tradition, for example, he writes that the “trobar clus” have “a purpose and effect”: the poems make their revelations to those who are already expert” (Spirit of Romance 89). Or, to recall the terms proposed elsewhere, the poem builds “for the initiated bridges and devices” and for those “initiated,” “the signs are doors into eternity and into boundless ether” (Early Writings 194). The language here is again unmistakably imbued with a religiosity that suggests that, for Pound, the reading process has replaced the religious ceremonies of the past as a means to spiritual fulfillment and metaphysical experience. In other words, The Cantos largely addresses man’s movement from the tribulations of earthly existence to paradise, but the journey has been transposed from the Christian pilgrimage of the soul to a secular, solipsistic process of the mind. The Cantos thus constructs an epistemological meta-narrative in lieu an equally totalizing Christian one.
Pound’s brand of epistemology, as earlier indicated, suggests that the search for meaning—for transcendent Truth—is a difficult and morally-freighted process, requiring a high (nearly impossible) level of cerebration. “Beauty is difficult,”10 Pound accordingly reminds his reader in a chorus-like refrain throughout the later cantos. Similarly, in his introduction to *The Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti*, which Pound translated in 1912, he writes: “These are not sonnets for an idle hour. It is only when the emotions illumine the perceptive powers that we see reality. It is in the light born of this double current that we look upon the face of the mystery unveiled” (xxiii). The language Pound here deploys is particularly suggestive: first, he acknowledges that the reading of these sonnets (which he implicitly appoints as “good poetry”) requires an investment of time and energy. That is, the reader will not, in contrast to the simpler models of poetry he describes in his essay on the troubadour tradition, “get the meaning while the man sings it” (*Spirit of Romance* 88): enlightenment is neither precipitate nor guaranteed. Mental and emotive exertion—the *directio voluntatis*—becomes requisite to “see[ing] reality” in a process that is as occult11 and mysterious (“we look upon the face of the mystery unveiled”) as it is technical (“in the light born of this double current…”).

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10 Pound attributes the quote to Aubrey Beardsley, who insisted upon this point in a conversation with W.B. Yeats.
11 The application of the term “occult” may seem questionable here, as Pound insisted, as earlier noted, that the poet “never arrives at his utility through occult and inexplicable ways.” I intend “occult” to refer to the Gnostic or theosophic understanding of the way in which the individual accesses the Divine through an esoteric form of hidden knowledge—a process that was often presented in technical, precise terms, and about which Pound had read widely. I believe that Pound here intended “occult” to mean vaguely-defined or un-founded in the text, as, elsewhere in his writings, Pound does seem to embrace an occult faculty in his own poetry: “When any man is able, by a pattern of notes or by an arrangement of planes or colours, to throw us back into the age of truth, everyone who has been cast back into that age of truth for one instant gives honour to the
These features correspond strongly with the characteristics that Renaissance-area members of the Florentine Academy attributed to the knowledge-acquisition process. The Florentine Academy—a school of thought Pound studied and critically engaged in his own writings—fused the principles of Plato and Plotinus (conventionally considered “the father” of neoplatonism) with “occult” texts such as Orphic Hymns, Chaldaean Oracles, Hermeticism, Jewish Kabbalah, and some elements of Christian theology (Liebregts 22). While it is perhaps clear that Pound borrowed his syncretic conceptualization of epistemology from these neoplatonic revivalists, the fact that Pound seems to have been solely drawn to the Academy’s epistemological model (rather than, for example, what Liebregts describes as “the theurgical obsessions of Iamblichus, or the ontology and deification of numbers by Proclus” (22)) suggests the central place that questions pertaining to knowledge and its acquisition played not only in Pound’s life but in the Modernist era more generally.

While the above-quoted prose both establishes the centrality of epistemology to Pound and provides richly signifying language that exposes the conceits and figurations spell which has worked, to the witch-work or the art-work, or whatever you like to call it” (Literary Essays 432).

12 As indicated in a letter to Dorothy, Pound planned, but abandoned a book that would have covered a number of the Florentine Academy’s principle philosophers, including Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino (Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespear 59). He did, however, publish an article on the Florentine Academy in a 1915 edition of the New Age. For a more detailed discussion of Pound’s engagement with the Florentine Academy, see Liebregts 22-23.

13 Pound labeled this hybridized philosophy “a most eloquent and exciting and exhilarating hotch-potch” (Gaudier-Brzeska 112). As Charles Schmitt explains, however, the “the Neoplatonic system of metaphysics and epistemology…provided a life-giving sap to hold it [the Florentine Academy’s brand of philosophy] all together” (206). Thus, Pound not only embraced the syncretic philosophical approach these thinkers exhibited, but the neoplatonic system that supported and united the “hotch-potch.”
he relied upon in order to articulate and shape his conceptualization of the process, the self-conscious intertextuality of *The Cantos* performs these principles powerfully on its own two feet. His intertextual practice suggests, by continually insisting upon the reader’s laborious engagement in the process of intertextual decoding, that limpidity and full comprehension, and the beauty that such conditions seem to represent, require the reader’s movement beyond the boundaries of the text, outside of the language directly presented upon the page, and into the intertext. As Pound writes in an early essay entitled “The Wisdom of Poetry”: the poet, like the engineer builds “bridges and devices…for the initiated the signs are a door into eternity and into the boundless ether” (*Early Writings* 194). His intertextual gestures enables this sort of textual transcendence—the movement beyond the material word and into “the boundless ether” of the intertext—but require considerable effort, time, and learning—not to mention stamina, as the reader must continually cede his hard-earned position of comprehension in the face of the continual surge of references that the poem presents. Process is of the essence: his self-conscious intertextuality commands the reader into continuous and unceasing activity, luring him to a position of interpretive clarity before plunging him back into a state of confusion, where a mosaic of names and voices seem to clamor for attention and coordination.

The implication is that Truth is only transiently available in the short-term, but that a more solidified and holistic comprehension may await the reader by the poem’s end, and that the reader’s short-lived experiences of textual comprehension will ultimately lead to a yet deeper, anagogic state of understanding. This is because, if the reader finds himself capable of accessing a rather lucid reading of a particular canto or sequence within a canto by dutifully coordinating the text’s various references, he begins
to trust the practice, accepting each intertextual gesture as a conscious choice, as materials carefully pieced together. As he progresses through the text, enjoying moments of enlightenment, his faith in the poem builds; his confidence that they will lead him to some sort of climactic and all-informing conclusion mounts. The reader anticipates transcendence in terms of a liberation from the trying texture of the poetry, an ability to move beyond textual play and into a more fully awakened, fully informed state of consciousness capable of understanding the text not in terms of its minute intertextual gestures but as a cohesive whole.

In his prose, Pound explains this move towards the anagogic by adopting a terminology of enlightenment that connects vision, insight, and knowledge into a singular process—the process to which he so consistently refers throughout the cantos in a Confucian register, and with which he continually parallels the Christian’s journey to heaven, as exemplified in Dante’s Divine Comedy. In claiming that the process of reading aims at “seeing the reality” in the “light” of the reader’s intellection, Pound figures the experience of heaven or hell in explicitly visual terms. Of course, Pound, whose eye is always caught by interplay of light and shadow, in some ways adapted his metaphysics of light from Dante’s Divine Comedy. In Canto CVII, Pound dutifully cites Dante’s inspiration in the development of this enlightenment model, quoting from the Paradiso when he writes: “non per color, ma per lume parvente” (776): man sees “not by color, but by light.” This, then, becomes the principle thematic move of The Cantos: the

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14 As Chungeng Zhu points out, Pound believed that “the Confucian Dao, which he refers to as the ‘process,’ not only operates as an inherent unifying principle of harmonious order manifest in nature but also sets the norm to be followed in establishing culture” (58). In his endnote to this comment, Zhu clarifies that “the Confucian Dao refers to the universal principle inherent in all things—concrete and knowable” (71).
difficult journey from the darkness of ignorance to the light of serenitas.\textsuperscript{15} In Canto I, for example, the imagery progress from the darkness of the Kimmerian underworld to the gold-laden figure of Aphrodite; similarly, in Canto IV, the reader shifts from the hazy smokiness of ruin and rubble to the golden, illuminated promise of constructed comprehension by actively invoking and fusing two literary traditions.

Pound’s version of the ascent, in contradistinction to Dante’s \textit{Divine Comedy}, has been transposed into a godless and truly secular world. It has also been revised in terms of its finality: whereas Dante insisted, in Pound’s view, that “the actions and conditions…of men’s mental states in life” correspond with the terms of existence “in which thy are, after death, compelled to continue” (\textit{Spirit of Romance} 128). Pound does not present “paradise” as an eternal resting place, accessed at the end of life, as theology proposes, but rather a state of mind transiently achieved through moments or flashes of intellection. Thus, while in Christian theology (though not in \textit{The Divine Comedy}, as will be addressed below), paradise is solidified as a singular space in eternal time; in \textit{The Cantos}, though they suggest that some sort of \textit{summum bonum} awaits the reader at the text’s completion, “paradise” is dispersed throughout, accessed temporally rather than spatially. Edwin Fussell situates this observation within the broader sweep of Modernism, writing that “Pound’s major Dantescan detachment was to peel place (what Pound felt as place) from the \textit{Comedy} and to redistribute it at large, thus achieving a kind of fluent modernity, a stereopticon simultaneity, and a good deal of textual chaos” (75).

\textsuperscript{15} In Canto LXXX, Pound, quoting Shakespeare, writes: “There is no darkness but ignorance” (521).
suggest simultaneity as cyclicality. It further overlooks the fact that Pound had actually borrowed Dante’s concept of paradise as a mental state; he writes in his essay on Dante: “There is little doubt that Dante conceived the real Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise as states, not places. Richard St. Victor had, somewhat before, voiced this belief, and it is, moreover, a part of the esoteric and mystic dogma” (128). Regardless, though, Pound’s belief that transcendence—access to paradise—could be briefly achieved through moments of heightened intellection.

Pound’s intertextuality enacts this principle of transcendence on the smallest scale imaginable: in the most basic unit of a word serving as an intertextual conductor. Chasing a sequence of references and coordinating them with one another, the reader literally move outside of the text—transcends its boundaries and accesses an initially obscured meaning. The persistence of Pound’s intertextual technique—the way in which the reader rarely encounters a sequence of sentences that can be placed end-to-end in an immediately digestible fashion without recourse to a number of external texts—reminds the reader that the quest for meaning is never a uni-directional or finalizing process. Enlightenment proves evanescent as the reader begins to recognize how precious, fleeting, and difficultly-obtained those moments of elucidation are in the process of cycling back and forth, alternating between poles of light and dark, enlightenment and ignorance. In a particularly applicable passage from Canto CXIII, for example, Pound writes: “Out of dark, though, Father Helios, leadest / but the mind as Ixion, unstill, ever turning” (810). As is customary throughout the cantos, full meaning hinges upon the unveiling of terms (in this case, “Father Helios” and “Ixion”): the line itself commands the mind into action, rendering it “unstill, ever turning” as it literally conveys the
speaker’s prayerful desire to be led to light by Helios (the sun). The speaker, however, dejectedly acknowledges that he is bound to a life of restless and ceaseless movement back and forth: Ixion’s punishment for lust left him bound to a wheel ceaselessly rotating in air.

The dejection and sense of temporal indeterminacy present in these lines from Canto CXIII point to the profound change that takes place in Pound’s later cantos, which will be more fully explored in the subsequent chapter. However, it here bears noting that though Pound persists—through the very end of his cantos—in his belief that heaven is a state of mind intermittently achieved; his later cantos manifest a loss of confidence in the epistemological model he had earlier advanced as a means to access those paradisal conditions of order and enlightenment. Thus, he writes in Canto LXXIV:

Le paradis n’est pas artificiel

But spezzato apparently

It exists only in fragments unexpected excellent sausage

The smell of mint, for example,

Ladro the night cat (458)

That is, he articulates not only the precariousness of transcendence—which he acknowledges throughout the entirety of his cantos—but the unforeseeability of its arrival, its element of surprise. Pound’s awakening to this concept marks a profound departure from his earlier cantos, and registers the trauma that Pound experienced upon discovering his inability to conceive of a pattern of action that might explain this movement between poles of enlightenment and ignorance—and his humbled awareness that the best he can do is to come to terms with the immediate experience of heaven or of hell through his
poetry. Thus, as he writes in Canto CXIII: “The hells move in cycles, no man can see his own end” (807). The unforseeability of that cyclical movement details Pound and his formerly unshakeable confidence in neoplatonic epistemology. However, the sudden and unanticipated smell of mint wafting through his tent, or the unexpected kindness of a prison guard who crafts for him a makeshift table out of discarded boxes\textsuperscript{16} reaffirm his belief that heaven is, indeed, “real”: “le paradis n’est pas arificiel” (458). This affirmation—his experience of “Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell” (541)—proves enough to sustain Pound’s poetic enterprise, despite his traumatic experiences during and after the war.

Pound’s mounting ambivalence in the later cantos as to the reliability of the epistemological model he had earlier unequivocally endorsed does not, however, mean that Pound does not continue to grapple with its potential throughout the very end of The Cantos. He continued to strain for a model that might work in the place of the deposed neoplatonic version. Thus, though he loses confidence in those devices he had designed in order to direct his readers to moments of anagogic meaning, he continues to be drawn to figures like Confucius, Richard St. Victor, and Dante, who, he believed, had devised ways to attain metaphysical transcendence—and had succeeded. In Canto LXXXV, for example, he marvels (rather than scoffs) at the Shang Emperor Cheou’s assertion: “Gentleman from the West, / Heaven’s process is quite coherent / and its main points

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\textsuperscript{16} Pound includes these examples of unexpected and spirit-renewing kindness and beauty in his Pisan Cantos, where he positions them as the triumphant antidote to his spiritual and mental duress. After fearing that he may be suffering from amnesia—and thus the loss of his mental faculties—Pound links his sudden and mentally reassuring recollection of the name “Mme Pujol” to “a smell of mint under the tent flaps / especially after the rain” (448), that is, the fleeting experience of something beautiful in the context of dreary and painful existence.
perfectly clear” (572). Similarly, in Canto LXXXVII, Pound admires Richard St. Victor’s\textsuperscript{17} schema for the three stages of thought that lead to spiritual communion with God: “‘cogitatio, meditatio, contemplatio.’ / wrote Richardus, and Dante read him” (590). In \textit{The Spirit of Romance}, Pound delineates between Richard’s three phases in explaining that the “cogitatio” represents the “aimless flitting of the mind”; the “meditatio” refers to the “systematic circling of the attention around the object”; and the “contemplatio” involves the “identification of the consciousness with the object.” In this last, pure state, the mind sees God or transcendent Truth—the formerly-hidden reality.

Importantly, Richard believed—as, initially, did Pound, as earlier described—that the individual attained this state of transcendence through mental exertion: both considered “faith,” though necessary, corollary to intellectual acuteness. For Richard, of course, “faith” is theurgical in nature; for Pound, “faith” consists of a whole-hearted belief in the existence of a higher Truth revealing the order and coherence of the universe. Both, though, conceive of the mind (as opposed to the heart or soul) as the central agent in accessing deeper knowledge. As Liebregts explains of Richard’s perspective: “revelation and faith…are not \textit{contra} but \textit{secundum rationem},” though—despite this hierarchy—“the first can never replace the latter, since the mystical contemplation of God is the \textit{sumnum} of all knowledge, and one needs faith to make the journey upward or inward. Mystical experience, then, is the highest knowledge of God” (300). As earlier suggested, Pound literalizes these principles through his intertextual practice, using his references as a sort of built-in barrier to immediate comprehension that can only be overcome by transcending the text’s material boundaries.

\textsuperscript{17} A 12\textsuperscript{th}-century neoplatonic philosopher.
Richard’s emphasis on the centrality of the mind as well as his figuration of mystical experience as an actively-engaged process in which the mind gradually focuses its faculties appealed to a young Pound, who celebrated what he termed the “keenly intellectual mysticism of Richard St. Victor” (Spirit of Romance 22). The metaphysics of light that Richard figures in his writings on the subject of spiritual transcendence—his visualization of the process in terms of light/dark binaries—particularly attracted Pound in his earlier years. Pound even adopts this language to explain Richard’s “contemplatio,” describing it as a condition in which thought “radiates from a centre, that is, as light from the sun it reaches out in an infinite number of ways to things that are related to or dependent on it” (Collected Early Poems 99). It is clear that, in his early cantos, Pound sought to draw readers to the “contemplatio” mode by requiring through his self-conscious intertextuality a focused, nearly spiritual, presence of mind: after all, a “flitting” over the surface of the cantos will yield little comprehension. One must settle in for the long haul, willing to chase each intertextual gesture: “these are no sonnets for an idle hour” (“Introduction” xxiii).

A close analysis of Canto CX, which explicitly addresses and incorporates Richard St. Victor’s philosophy, demonstrates both Pound’s continued investment in the possibility of discerning and figuring the path to deep spiritual insight, and his revisionary attitude toward the earlier model he advanced. The first couplet of the canto—“From the colour the nature / & by the nature the sign!” (625)—modifies the epistemological principle Pound proposed earlier in the poem. While the lines preserve a sense of the dialectical movement from sight to insight to knowledge, or, as Pevear has worded it, the way in which “eyesight leads to insight, and clarity of perception is the
basis for ethical life” (52), in this case, what appears before the individual derives from the essence of the object perceived, an essence that is not intelligible by any process of the mind, but rather made manifest through the individual’s affection. Quoting Richard St. Victor, he insists, several times within the canto: “ubi amor ibi oculus est” (“where love is, there is eyesight”); as he famously asserts in Canto LXXXI: “What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross” (541). Pound now seems to insist that love—rather than a specific epistemological approach—enables perception.

And yet, Pound still seems to gravitate towards and seriously consider the mental processes figured by Richard St. Victor. In these opening lines, for example, Pound reminds his readers that an initial visual survey (a recognition of “colour”) leads to a deeper understanding of the essence (“nature”) of reality, which in turn becomes a “sign” referring to a deeper meaning. The tri-part structure corresponds strongly with Richard St. Victor’s three-tiered model of thought, whom he invokes both in the epilogue and in his repetition of the Richardian quote “ubi amor ibi oculus est” (“where love is, there is eyesight”) within the canto. Again, Pound fixes his attention upon the process of discovering and approaching the sign rather than the transcendental signified itself. He continues to entertain the possibility that some sort of mental process—when supplemented by the perceiver’s affection—might enable deep meaning.

Pound’s emphasis here on the significance of love, though, suggests a significant shift away from his earlier model. In the canto, he presents a number of different ways in which divinity or transcendent meaning manifests itself through love, or the way in which beauty materializes seemingly out of thin air when love is present. He describes, for example, the “beatific spirits”—immaterial ghosts that, joined together in mutual, saintly
affection, form “one ash-tree in Ygdrasai”; “Baucis, Philemon,” two lovers from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* who, rewarded for their generosity of spirit, are granted their wish of staying together forever when Zeus transforms them into an interwining pair of trees; the figure of Amphion, the architect who will bring a temple “not yet marble” (i.e., not yet constructed) into being. These examples become even more explicit and dramatic towards the end of the canto, where Pound writes “out of heaviness where no mind moves at all,” suddenly, two life-giving rivers conjoin: “Wei and Han rushing together / two rivers together / bright fish and flotsam / torn bough in the flood / and waters clear with the flowing” (627). The image is one of revivification and purification, a movement from dearth to life-giving water and clarity. He then describes artistic murals “taking form now” (628), “the stone taking form in the air” (628), and a forest, populated by beasts and trees, materializing before the viewer’s very eyes: “the trees rise / and there is a wide sward between them /…and where was nothing / now is furry assemblage” (628). In the midst of these sudden materializations, Pound invokes Sibylla, the all-seeing priestess of the oracle at Delphi:

    Sybilla,
    from under the rubble heap
    m’elevasti
    from the dulled edge beyond pain,
    m’elevasti
    out of Erebus, the deep-lying
    from the wind under the earth,
    m’elevasti
from the dulled air and the dust,

m’elevasti

by the great flight,

m’elevasti

Isis Kuanon

From the cusp of the moon,

m’elevasti

the viper stirs in the dust,

the blue serpent

glides from the rock pool (626-7)

The lines suggest that the individual is elevated from the depths of hell—Erebus—by beseeching a goddess in an act of love and admiration. Significantly, Pound lifts the incantatory refrain—“m ’elevasti” or “you raise me”—from Dante’s praise for Beatriz in Paradiso, another instance in which selfless love enables the individual to transcend his hellish earthly existence. The intertextuality in this sequence appears particularly pointed; rather than interpolating the lines with a phrase of his own invention—“You raise me,” “You lift me,” or some other synonymous formulation—Pound leverages the reference to amplify and deepen his message of transcendence through both intellection and emotion. That is, these lines require the reader to exercise his interpretive powers while affectively responding to the incantatory rhythm and powerful, prayer-like feel of the lines. The modification to his earlier model is complete: here, the reader is asked to exercise his emotive powers in conjunction with the force of his intellect. A new paradigm seems to be emerging.
As always, however, the canto’s crescendo—its progression towards increasing illumination and implicit proximity to heaven—is short-lived. The climax is never attained: Pound desists from presenting the transcendent reality itself, and the reader finds himself abruptly hurtled into the pre-enlightenment images that open lines Canto XCI:

ab lo dolchor qu’al cor mi vai

AB LO DOLCHOR QU’AL COR MI VAI

that the body of light come forth

from the body of fire

And that your eyes come to the surface

from the deep wherein they were sunken

Reina – for 300 years,

And now sunken

That your eyes come forth from their caves

& lighten them (630)

Once again, the reader has been implicitly positioned amongst the blind, with Pound urging him to turn towards the light both literally (the narrator commands the reader’s enlightenment) and intertextually, as the first line appears untranslated and decontextualized. The reader must work to recognize that this repeated line—which translates literally into “with the sweetness that comes to my heart”—quotes and synthesizes a number of different poems from the troubadour tradition (Terrell 545) before addressing the subsequent lines, which read as though a prayer offered by a priest for the salvation of a lost soul. Most notably, however, the canto has returned the reader
to his position of ignorance, as the abrupt shift from the end of Canto XC—in which the reader feels the text swell towards the heaven it describes as its lines shorten and its rhythm accelerates—reminds the reader once more that heaven “exists only in fragments,” and that movement between the two conditions can be as jarring and unexpected as the end of a clipped line of poetry.

Pound’s explicit and insistent invocation of Richard St. Victor in Canto XC advances a crucial interpretation of the function of intertextuality in the earlier-referenced “Sibylla” lines. More specifically, the density of Pound’s intertextual gestures inaugurates a progressive thought process that echoes Richard’s explicitly-mentioned three-tiered process of thinking: the mind initially “flits” from reference to reference, then begins to sense deeper relationships between those gestures, and finally recognizes an overall design. For example, scanning the lines re-printed above, Sibylla, Isis Kuanon (its a curious hybrid of two distinct cultural traditions), and the shortly-thereafter-referenced Castalia, little might be posited except for that he has listed four females. They merge in significance once one adds to that roster the intertextually implied presence of Dante’s Beatriz: suddenly, the reader recognizes that the refrain is not wholly directed at Sibylla, but rather at all love-inspiring figures that have enabled the individual to transcend his earthly conditions and approach a near-paradisal state. Here is an instance in which hard work, and a commitment to the love-inspired invocation of figures like Sibylla and Isis, truly pays off: a masterful mosaic with a winning message of fulfilling love emerges out of seeming textual chaos, as though “the stone taking form in the air” (628).
Pound’s correspondence with Marshall McLuhan suggests that Pound had similar aspirations for the entirety of the poem, in that he wished the final cantos to enact that materialization of order and clarity in a grander sense. This was his master plan, “to make a paradiso / terrestre,” as he puts it in his notes for canto CXVII, that might be accessed by the successful navigation of all his cantos. Thus, in response to McLuhan’s observation in 1957 that the later cantos “manifest more and more of their predecessors,” Pound responded: “precisely my otiose McL / THE UNITY of / the senso anagogico” (qtd. in Barton 196). This seems to have been Pound’s aesthetic agenda at the outset of the cantos, at least; the next chapter will more fully examine Pound’s gradual problematization of that epistemological move.
Chapter II

Epistemological Crisis and Intertextual Indeterminacy in the Later Cantos

Can you enter the great acorn of light?

But the beauty is not the madness

Tho’ my errors and wrecks lie about me.

And I am not a demigod,

I cannot make it cohere.

--Canto CXVI

In a December 1915 letter to his father, Pound referred to *The Cantos*, which he had just begun drafting, as his “big long endless poem” (qtd in Martz 18). He proved strangely prescient in this description, as he would persist in the writing and revision of the sprawling *Cantos* up until his death in 1972. If the reader seriously accepts Pound’s poetics, however, his premonition may not be as uncanny as it perhaps initially seems, as the poem’s open-endedness appears predicated upon his conceptualization of the way in which full meaning—order, intactness, and host of other words he often aligns with Elysium—can only be achieved intermittently. In this light, there is no hermeneutic need for an “ending”: theoretically, anagogic meaning can be accessed throughout the poem, not simply at its textual terminus. Accordingly, *The Cantos* is a poem that doesn’t—and perhaps can’t—know how to end; it only knows how to begin. The first canto might serve as an “ur-text” for the entire poem in this regard, as it grammatically thwarts the concept of a conclusion, leaving the reader with the hinged-open line: “So that:” before
moving on to Canto II. It becomes clear throughout the cantos that this disinclination toward endings arises from a model in which man’s experience of heaven and hell—or, to adopt the epistemological terms Pound ascribes to those conditions, enlightenment and ignorance—operates cyclically: as Pound writes in Canto CXIII, “the hells move in cycles / no man can see his own end” (807). Because of this inherent recursivity, endings are inconceivable—and perhaps irrelevant. Pound emphasizes that even the gradations of hell are unfathomable: the desire to know where one stands within the spectrum can never be predicted or logically deduced. As he writes in the first of his *Pisan Cantos*: “dry friable earth going from dust to more dust / grass worn from its root-hold / is it blacker? Was it blacker?... in short shall we look for a deeper or is this the bottom?” (458) The speaker wishes to know how much worse his experience might become—whether he is nearing the nadir—but this is a truth that can only be accessed experientially. Hell, like heaven, must be observed as periplum: as seen by the sailor approaching the sea coast rather than as the cartographer, scaling distances and assigning coordinates.

Pound gravitates towards beginnings rather explicitly throughout the cantos, as in Canto CX, where he asserts: “from time’s wreckage shored / these fragments shored against ruin / and the sun jih / new with the day” (801). The language hearkens back to Canto LIII, where he attributes his widely-celebrated axiom (“Make it new!”) to Tching, the founder of the Shang dynasty and a figure Pound positions as one of the few enlightened rulers in Chinese history: “Tching prayed on the mountain and / wrote MAKE IT NEW / on his bath tub / day by day make it new” (265). The phrase recurs throughout the text, consistently signifying the need for re-beginning. In the lines from
Canto CX referenced above, Pound casts this need in specifically artistic terms: the artist must renew his practice each day in order to counter the destructive progression of history. Similarly, in a 1913 essay titled “How I Began,” he writes: “The artist is always beginning. Any work which is not a beginning, an invention, a discovery, is of little worth. The very name Troubadour means a ‘finder,’ one who discovers” (*Early Writings* 211). In this context, the endlessness of *The Cantos* is unproblematic: for a poem so self-consciously invested in its own processes, it would be aporetical for the poem to come to an end.

Such a reading, however, may problematically overlook the fact that Pound constructed the majority of his cantos under the impression that a wholly-edifying, anagogic reading of his poem would be possible by the completion of his oeuvre. This was indeed the aim of his project at its outset: Pound had originally conceived of the poem as a set of 100 cantos, in which the last third or so would construct a paradiso comparable to Dante’s—a heaven, as Ronald Bush aptly describes it, “based on the state of being implied by the highest flights of the mind” (71). In this light, Pound’s urge to “begin again” (and again, and again) demonstrates a principle by which earlier attempts—earlier cantos, models, poetic forms—are experienced and then shed as imperfect or incomplete, though valuable in that they lead towards a more ultimate form in which the striving inner forces of the mind find resolution, or towards an ultimate spiritually-inflected meaning. This would explain why Pound responded to McLuhan’s observation that the later cantos “manifest more and more of their predecessors” by

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18 In the essay, Pound instantly acknowledges the irony of the title; the first line reads: “If the verb is put in the past tense there is very little to be said about this matter” (*Early Writings* 211), implying that the more pertinent title would be: “How I Begin.”
referencing the anagogic function of his art—its existence as a sort of prayer grounded in
the agony of ignorance and aspiring toward a spiritual order. Such a model operates
according to a schematic or dialectic progression of effect, such that a culmination
becomes necessary for success. Pound’s inability to conclude The Cantos exposes the
fact that, at some point over the course of the composition of The Cantos, he experienced
a breach of faith: he began to doubt whether he had the capacity to stimulate that spiritual
transcendence in the mind of his readers.

Canto LXXIV, the first of the Pisan Cantos, represents the turning point in this
regard: the textual moment at which the cantos begin to manifest a less-than-certain and
eventually downright humbled and apologetic attitude. This seems biographically
appropriate, as Pound drafted these cantos in pencil on scraps of notebook paper while
interned at Pisa, an experience that rattled Pound’s former intellectual confidence in two
significant ways. First, his internment demonstrated that what he considered sound
thought and reason (his defense of Mussolini and the Fascist regime of 1930s Italy) had
not, in fact, led to transcendence, but to the darkest sort of hell he could imagine: a
demeaning imprisonment\(^\text{19}\) and infringement upon his freedom of speech, that primary
liberty he depended upon for his entire poetic existence. He writes in Canto LXXIV:
“free speech without free radio speech is a zero” (446), indicating, as Mutlu Blasing has
demonstrated, “Pound becomes ‘no man’ with the loss of his voice…as his inscription of
‘Ezra’ in ‘as zero’ confirms, he has become a cipher, an 0 without a mouth; he has been
silenced” (163). Pound seemed to be reeling from the recognition that his own work—
his own thoughts—could deposit him in such a voiceless, dark place. In its roughest

\(^{19}\) Pound was placed in solitary confinement in a six-by-six-foot wire pen with a cement
base, which he referred to as “the gorilla cage” (Norman 456).
terms, then, his internment represented the failure of his own epistemological practice. Secondly, while interned, Pound repeatedly articulated his fear that he was on the brink of a mental breakdown, and he later told a psychiatrist that he felt “as though the upper third of [his] brain were missing” (qtd. in Bush 86). 20 Witnessing the frailty of his own mind, Pound became weary of his former assumptions as to the agility and strength of his mental faculties—a fundamental presupposition to the epistemological model he had earlier endorsed. His former confidence both in the epistemological model he subscribed to and the agent of that epistemology (his sound intellect) had been shattered.

He admits toward the end of his cantos, for example: “I lost my center / fighting the world. / The dreams clash / and are shattered – / and that I tried to make a paradiso terrestre” (822). Pound attitude here is markedly different from the earlier cantos: he articulates a frightened and saddened awareness that the epistemological principle he had relied upon throughout The Cantos may have been faulty. Perhaps, he confesses, there is no way to evince in language an ultimate Truth—or, if there is, he has not yet uncovered a successful formula. Accordingly, these last cantos are not “new beginnings” but rather the poet’s desperate gropings for an ending that might enable the poem to assume a deeply meaningful order when properly navigated by the initiated reader. This would explain his indefatigable attention to figures like Confucius and Richard St. Victor: he continued to entertain the possibility that he might discover a usable method.

Pound articulated his mounting sense of frustration and uncertainty in a 1962 interview on the subject of the poem. When asked: “Can you say what you are going to

20 Camp doctors in a sense corroborated Pound’s self-diagnosis, describing his symptoms as “violent and historical terror,” “claustrophobia,” “confusion,” “loss of memory” and so on (qtd. in Bush 86).
do in the remaining Cantos?”, Pound responded: “OK, I am stuck…in case I conk out, this is provisionally what I have to do…I must find a verbal formula to combat the rise of brutality—the principle of order versus the split atom” (qtd. in Gross 157). He adds, with mitigated optimism: “I hope that the order of ascension in the Paradiso will be toward a greater limpidity” (qtd. in Gross 157). While he here tempers his exasperation with tentative optimism, acknowledging that “a verbal formula” may exist, the final cantos reveal that he believed that he never did affect an order that represented the paradisal, or that would enable the keen reader to access a deeper Truth. He admits: “I cannot make it cohere” (816), suggesting that the textual chaos that the reader, operating under the assumption that a final, anagogic meaning might emerge at the poem’s conclusion, has faithfully navigated throughout the textual expanse, may be no more than an aesthetic experience.

That Pound could not conceive of a totalizing order or a means of effectively and permanently banishing the threat of Kimmerian ignorance does not challenge his vision of paradise, or his faith in its existence. By contrast, he reaffirms the understanding of paradise he elsewhere articulates as rational, reasoned, and orderly—though tragically short-lived—throughout the poem, asserting: “it coheres all right / even if my notes do not cohere” (817). That is, Pound is not questioning whether Truth exists, but expressing doubt as to whether he can ever properly figure the means to access that truth given the meager tools of language and the fallibility of the human mind. In these later Cantos,

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21 As earlier referenced, Pound initially “prepared to create in the last third of his projected hundred Cantos ‘un cielo sereno e filosofico’ (‘a serene philosophical heaven’)” (Bush 71). Pound here implies that he continued to believe that the final section of the poem would be comparable to Dante’s third (paradisal) section of the Divine Comedy.
order—and access to it—remain under the province of the Divine. In “Ezra Pound in Heaven,” Andrew Kappel articulates a similar reading of the poem’s attitudinal shift, claiming that Pound’s “belief in the coherence of things had taken the form, in the earlier stages of his poetic quest, of an assumption to be proved,” but that “toward the end he simply granted that assumption; it took the form of a given from which to proceed” (75).

As Kappel (perhaps unwittingly) implies, the move represents an abandonment of the model he’d earlier devised: he has relinquished the hope of tracing the epistemological steps from ignorance to knowledge, and simply reaffirmed his belief that a state of enlightenment exists.

This late discovery has significant implications for Pound’s self-conscious intertextuality throughout the final Cantos. If Pound admits that he “cannot make it cohere,” that in fact he has not been capable of divining the way to deeper insight and constructing a textual path that will permit his readers to follow him, one of the primary tools he has developed in order to figure this process—the intertextual gesture—is called into question. That is, Pound’s faltering faith in the neoplatonic model as a mode of enlightenment also implies that Pound no longer considers himself in complete control of the poem’s intertextual operations: if the process that they figure has been challenged, perhaps individual instances of intertextuality fail to yield textual meaning as well.

The issue of whether Pound loses this control has been elsewhere articulated as an issue of whether The Cantos represents a heteroglossic form of the lyric—whether it

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22 M.M. Bakhtin, who coins the term “heteroglossic” in The Dialogic Imagination, insists that the lyric, in contradistinction to the novel, can never be heteroglossic, as it is categorically structured by one central consciousness or unified subjectivity. Contemporary scholars have taken issue with this claim; see Mara Scanlon’s “Ethics and the Lyric: Form, Dialogue, and Answerability” for a generalized rebuttal and Line
unleashes a multiplicity of distinct, ideologically-differentiated consciousnesses that can collude with or rebel against the author’s perspective—or whether, as M.M. Bakhtin writes, “all fully signifying authorial interpretations are sooner or later gathered together in a single speech center and a single consciousness; all accents are gathered together in a single voice” (204). In other words: is Pound capable of orchestrating the chorus of voices the reader finds in the late *The Cantos*? Or did he realize, late into the cantos, that the forms and figurations of his poetry could never draw his audience closer to an understanding of cosmic order, and thus relinquish control of the intertextual gestures he had once used as a literalized version of that process?

Proponents of the former view might point to the poet’s objectionable political, economic, and social beliefs, insisting that his ideological biases permeate the entirety of *The Cantos* and are readily identifiable throughout. In this light, there is no escape from Pound’s fascist, Douglasite, and anti-Semitic rhetoric, and readers should beware of mistaking multivocality, or the author’s ability to pitch his voice in a certain way, for heteroglossia. T.S. Eliot, Pound’s close colleague and friend, for example, had developed an alternate title for “The Waste Land”—“He Do the Police in Different Voices”—that illustrates this distinction clearly. Critics like Line Henriksen, on the other hand, unequivocally claim that *The Cantos* represents a heteroglossic poetic model. Henriksen points out that Pound often erases quotation marks in a way that leaves the speaking

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Henriksen’s *Ambition and Anxiety: Ezra Pound’s Cantos and Derek Walcott’s Omeros as Twentieth-Century Epics* for a more specific discussion of the way in which Pound’s Cantos represent a shift to a more heteroglossic model.

23 From an early point in his career, Pound believed that economics shaped the progress of history, and sought to study the subject closely. He became a discipline of C.H. Douglas and his theory of social credit, a concept he consistently enshrines within *The Cantos*. 
voice “always also that of someone else,” that there are often unclear shifts between voices—making it impossible to decide “when one voice stops talking and another takes over,” and that Pound’s ambiguous use of personal pronouns, which at times seem to refer to more than one antecedent, are all “syntactic features that refuse to take an authoritative or monologic stance” (159).

While compelling, Henriksen neglects to account for the technique of juxtaposition, which offers the reader some traction in determining shifts in voices; as Christopher Beach argues, Pound’s “ideogrammatic or collage-like juxtapositions of utterances, discourses, and languages in The Cantos reflect in their formal configurations the boundaries which he wishes to establish between various modes of speech and writing, each of which presupposes a clear sense of origin” (221). Further, Henriksen fails to evaluate or fully acknowledge the way in which The Cantos often requires the reader to draw from copious textual memory in order to gloss a particular quote or discern the tonality of a particular line. Frequently, seemingly ambiguous phrases assume meaning when one recognizes that it has occurred earlier, and draws from his memories of its original context in order to comprehend its later iteration. This is, of course, a formidable challenge for a poem of such length, but one must still recognize that in his early cantos, Pound provides the exegetical tools necessary for comprehension if one is willing to retrace his steps. A review of Henriksen’s examination of a pair of Pound’s cantos—his widely anthologized “Usury Canto” (Canto XLV)\textsuperscript{24} and Canto LI (which reprises much of the language in Canto XLV)—might clarify these issues. Henriksen argues:

\textsuperscript{24} The canto frequently appears as a distillation of one of the poem’s principle themes.
Canto 45 has been absorbed among the other elements of which Canto LI is constructed…[it] has been appropriated by the poem’s heavily novelized diegesis, just as Napoleon’s remark has lost its quotation marks and thus its identity as mimesis introduced by the diegetic “said Napoleon”…the mimesis within it remains so free that we cannot identify any “simple narration.” The many voices have taken over the monologue. (153)

Henriksen here refers to the opening of Canto LI, in which Pound writes:

Fifth element; mud; said Napoleon

With usury has no man a good house

made of stone, no paradise on his church wall (250)

The lack of quotation marks and the problematic syntactic positioning of the phrase “said Napoleon,” Henriksen argues, “refuses to stabilize meaning” (153). However, the reader has encountered the phrase “the fifth element: mud” in Canto XXXIV, where Pound clearly attributes it to Napoleon. Further, Pound has previously presented Napoleon as a usurer and poor leader, and the leap from Napoleon’s quote to a description of usury reinforces Pound’s moral evaluation of the French emperor. Thus, when Pound has Napoleon claim in Canto LI that “mud is the fifth element,” the potentially apocryphal comment attributed to him after he discovered that mud (rather than water, air, earth, or fire) was presenting a peculiar challenge to his troops, he is constructing a sequence in which nature punishes man for his usury. In the subsequent lines, after all, Pound

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Pound writes: “‘The fifth element: mud.’ said Napoleon” (166). The lower-case “s” of “said,” the period, and the line break after “Napoleon,” unequivocally credit the line to the French emperor.

The phrase has been documented and attributed to Napoleon by several historians, including Alistair Home in his How Far from Austerlitz: Napoleon 1805-1815 (see page 217). Pound may have assumed that readers would have understood this connection.
repeatedly figures usury as a disruptively unnatural practice: “Usury brings age into youth; it lies between the bride / and the bridegroom”; “Usury is against Nature’s increase”; “under usury no stone is cut smooth”; and so on (250). In this light, the Napoleon quote does not truly represent an instance of textual instability; a careful reading reveals its utility to and resonance with Pound’s overall argument, suggesting that a speech center behind the voices does exist.

The problem with those arguments claiming that *The Cantos* represents a heteroglossic model of the lyric (like Henriksen’s) is that they misrecognize or overlook the fundamental change that occurs towards the end of his cantos: the sudden introduction of his doubt as to whether the epistemological model he had advanced throughout his earlier cantos actually works. It is only in those cantos he drafted on scraps of notebook paper while in his internment tent—the first drafts of his *Pisan Cantos*—that he introduces intertextual indeterminacy to his verses. These cantos begin to manifest, as he writes in Canto LXXII, a “confusion of voices as from several transmitters, broken / phrases, / and many birds singing in counterpoint” (436). For example, in Canto LXXIV, Pound imitates the dialect of the African-Americans that share his internment tent after explaining that one of them was executed:

And Till was hung yesterday

For murder and rape with trimmings plus Cholkis

Plus mythology, though he was Zeus Ram or another one

Hey Snag wots in the bibl’?

wot are the books ov the bible?

Name ‘em, don’t bullshit ME (450).
A rigorous reading of the entire canto offers no traction by way of determining his tone towards the quote: is it parodic? Derisive? Inflected by a kind of racism? The fact that the reader cannot determine by whom and to whom the questions are addressed collaborate in this indeterminacy. Is it Till to another prisonmate before his death? Or Till to Pound? Or another prisonment to Till? The lines seem to suggest that Pound has simply registered in verse the fragment of conversation that he absorbed from the world around him. The quote calls further attention to this indeterminacy as it also literally conveys intertextual confusion: the inability to recall or determine the contents of the Bible.

Similarly, later in the same canto, amidst a reflection on the intersection of financial and legal matters, the speaker suddenly notes the appearance of hands under the corner of his tent-flap and then abruptly resumes his earlier discussion, as though the interruption has been thoughtlessly transcribed:

From the law, by the law, so build yr / temple

With justice in meteyard and measure

A black delicate hand

A white’s hand like a ham

Pass by, seen under the tent-flap

On sick call: comman’

Comman’, sick call comman’

And the two largest rackets are the alternation

Of the value of money
This sequence reveals that there are instances in the later cantos in which Pound no longer exhibits the immaculate and attentive craftsmanship needed to shape an exacting poetry that might guide readers from a condition of confusion to a state of enlightenment. If he is here permitting the bric à brac of his quotidian life to enter, unfiltered, into the realm of his poetic universe, there is a fundamental cog in the seamless epistemological model he has earlier advanced. Pound was keenly aware of this problem, writing to his wife, in the notes that accompanied his hand-written versions of the Pisan Cantos: “The form of the poem and main progress is conditioned by its own inner shape, but the life of the D.T.C. passing OUTSIDE the scheme cannot but impinge, or break into the main flow” (qtd. in Seiburth xx). The inclusion of such fleeting observations as the “white man’s hand” that is “seen under the tent flap” suggests that there may be dead-ends in the subsequent verses, and that the poet may not wield confident control over their content. Thus, Line Henriksen’s hypothesis that Pound’s Cantos represent a shift to a heteroglossic lyric is not entirely false: he just fails to recognize that the shift literally takes place within the scope of the poem itself.

In this context, one wonders what to make of lines like:

Manet painted the bar at La Cigale or at Les Folies in that year
she did her hair in small ringlets, à la 1880 it might have been,
red, and the dress she wore Drecol or Lanvin
a great goddess, Aeneas knew her forthwith

27 The U.S. Army’s Disciplinary Training Center, where Pound was interned.
by paint immortal as no other age is immortal

la France dixneuvième

Degas Manet Guys unforgettable

A great brute sweating paint said Vadnerpyl 40 years later

Of Vlaminck (455)

These lines testify to a fading memory: the speaker cannot recall whether Manet painted “the bar at la Cigale or at Les Folies,” whether the painter’s subject wore “Drecol or Lanvin,” or the exact year of its composition (“1880 it might have been”). The inexactitude stands in sharp contrast with the clipped, trim intertextual references of the earlier cantos, where the reader never witnesses the strain of memory. In the earlier cantos, the poet has drawn a taut line between the occurrence of a name or phrase in the poem and its originary source. These lines, by contrast, arguably seem to represent the cogitatio in Richard’s model: the flitting of the mind as it attempts to hone in on a particular image. The text itself fails to focus, however, and the reader can no longer place unquestioning faith in Pound as the “seer” among the sightless, building those “bridges and devices” that enable deeper insight. The speaker’s decision to group Edouard Manet with Edgar Degas and Constant Guys, and, as nearly an afterthought, Maurice de Vlaminck, suggests a stream-of-consciousness-style progression of thought, the mind’s painful and protracted attempt at calling to mind a particular Manet painting. The intertextual move is much sloppier a transaction than ever before, a delayed rather than suddenly intuitive approach to meaning. Further, his final invocation of Vlaminck and the strange and seemingly irrelevant description of him seems less an invitation to chase Vlaminck intertextually than a manifestation of Pound’s way of remembering
another painter from the era—a sort of personal mnemonic that does little to advance readerly understanding.

Burton Hatlen articulates a similar observation, noting that, beginning with Canto LXXIV, Pound seems to be “leaping from one point to another as he goes” (151) rather than painstakingly directing the reader according to some preconceived pattern:

One thought or perception leads to another. Pound records each of them as they emerge, so that the page becomes the record of his mind moving through time—without forethought, for he no longer knows where he is going, but with a determination to stay with the process, and with a faith that all this must be carrying him somewhere. (151)

Hatlen connects this change in poetics to Charles Olson’s “projective verse” model,28 in which the poet “go[es] by language,” allowing the spontaneous process of composition to sustain his poetic enterprise. In this analysis, Hatlen overlooks the way in which the shift in Pound’s poetics does not represent some sort of liberation, or willing adoption of an open process. Pound seems to come to the change by necessity—by discovering that he no longer possesses the means to shape an exacting poetry that might live up to its promise of enabling an anagogic meaning. Still, Hatlen’s observations illustrate the extent to which Pound The Pisan Cantos diverge from the earlier cantos, particularly by their way of exposing that Pound is no longer carefully crafting a texture of voices and poetic patterns that will direct the reader to some significant deeper meaning. As Hatlen

28 Charles Olson (1910-1970) conceived of poetry as “projective” or “open”; he advocated what Jahan Ramazani has termed “an aesthetic of sprawling energy, loosened structures, and unpredictable didacticism, all of which ran counter to…principles of unity, balance and subtle indirection” (1).
writes: “Pound is not piecing these materials together bit by bit, through a series of conscious choices, the way he had composed Canto IV, or the other early cantos” (151).

As earlier cited, Pound describes in canto LXXII his witnessing of “a confusion of voices as from several transmitters” (436). These lines were drafted just prior to Pound’s entry into the internment camp, and are therefore appropriately followed by: “and through their twitterings a sauve tone” (436). In his Pisan Cantos and beyond, the “suave tone” cutting through the confusion is no longer identifiable; the reader finds it increasingly difficult to identify a central, ordering consciousness behind the verses, as stray phrases and intertextual dead-ends amass and clutter the verses. In the middle of Canto LXXIV, for example, Pound writes:

I have forgotten which city
But the caverns are less enchanting to the unskilled explorer
than the Urochs as shown on the postals,
we will see those old roads again, question,
possibly
but nothing appears much less likely,
Mme Pujol,
and there was a smell of mint under the tent flaps
especially after rain (448)

The passage again exposes the speaker’s struggle to remember: he cannot remember the name of the city with the caverns he visited, and he expresses saddened uncertainty as to whether revisiting past experiences is possible (“we will see those old roads again, question, / possibly / but nothing appears much less likely”). Whereas in earlier cantos,
journeying into historical eras long-since-past and borrowing from obscure mythological
tropes seemed immediate and unproblematic, here, the reader witnesses the trying
distance between the present self and his past memories, and the formidable challenge of
bridging that gap. The reader must now observe the speaker offering somewhat
extraneous information in order to activate his own memory, as in the lines “but the
caverns are less enchanting to the unskilled explorer / than the Urochs as shown on the
postals”: here, he attempts to describe the place he can no longer recall instead of naming
it directly. The gesture feels inexact, hazy; it relies upon a comparison between a
postcard representation and the image he held (but no longer seems capable of accessing)
in his memory.

Similarly, when Pound suddenly interjects “Mme Pujol” midway through the
sequence, the diligent reader will chase the allusion only to find Madame Pujol to be the
landlady of an inn Pound frequented while traveling through the troubadour country of
Southern France in his younger years. Pound’s inclusion of her name appears again as a
mnemonic device for recalling the name of the city that is home to the taverns he initially
referenced. Ronald Bush proposes that “the force of this recovery (caught in a syntax
that simultaneously and deliberately deploys her name both as something remembered
and a call to her presence—‘Mme Pujol’!) enters the inspiriting ‘smell of mint under the
tent flaps’…it is in such quotidian scenes that Pound stages the renewal of his will to
survive” (88). The intertextual gesture, then, is no longer the figuration of an
epistemological process that will lead the reader to a previously accessed state of
enlightenment: here, it serves as Pound’s literalized recovery of a memory that he seems
horrified at forgetting.
The issue of memory and the mind’s knowledge-storing capacity has thus displaced the poem’s earlier emphasis upon the knowledge acquisition process. In these later cantos, Pound is less interested in recreating the conditions for the perception of deeper truth than he is in battling the loss of his most cherished literary and cultural memorabilia to oblivion. As Hatlen remarks in the quote included above—though he intends it slightly differently—“the page becomes the record of [Pound’s] mind moving through time” (151): his poetry, after LXXIV, transcribes the functioning of his memory, his desperate strain to recall. For Pound, the potential loss of his memories seemed a real threat: he worried, day by day, that he might lose his mind and the rich stores of literature, history, and personal experience he there held. Upon receiving the hand-written drafts of the Pisan Cantos, Dorothy thus aptly responded by writing that—in contrast to his earlier cantos—they seemed to be comprised of “the memories that make up yr. person” (qtd. in O. Pound and Spoo 131). His Pisan Cantos in some ways serve as a personal repository for his imperiled memories—a way of ensuring that, as he writes powerfully in Canto LXXXI: “What thou lovest well remains” (541). The Pisan Cantos, as Peter Making writes, represent “first, simply a cry of pain and, second, a naming-over of what has been known” (239). This mode of compulsive memorializing differs drastically from the poem’s earlier emphasis on directing the reader away from the blind tribulations of the flesh, and toward a privileged spiritual vision, and thus reflects his seeming disengagement with the epistemological principles on which he had formerly focused so strongly.

Pound’s fear of losing that which he valued most from his own studies and experiences was deeply linked to his belief that that Allied forces had been leading a
campaign of calculated cultural iconoclasm in Italy. Ronald Bush points out that Pound believed that the Allied air raids were not only militarily strategic, but aimed at “an ‘enforced forgetting’ linked to the premeditated destruction of architectural traditions whose aim is ‘the erasure of memories, history and identity attached to architecture and place’” (72). In particular, the Allied bombings of 1943 and 1944 had destroyed a number of Italian monuments, and this destruction “forced Pound back upon the cords of his personal memory frayed by the stresses of the war” (Bush 72). Deeply persuaded by late-war Fascist propaganda, Pound conceived of his remaining cantos as a means to combat not only the threat of a breakdown-induced amnesia, but the evil forces of cultural terrorism.

As Pound turns away from his initial didactic project in figuring the epistemological process he believed would lead to deeper Truth, his cantos fittingly manifest an increasing loss of control over the verses’ intertextual operations. First, as previously noted, he has begun to include stray, overheard phrases that “impinge” themselves (in his own words) upon the central body of his poetic oeuvre (the hand under the tent); second, he has come to include intertextual gestures that no longer lead the reader to a more intact meaning, but simply remind the reader of the poet’s own struggles to fully recall or reconstruct for himself a particular moment. Pound’s inclusion of the name “Mme. Pujol” in the midst of Canto LXXIV, for example, alerts the reader to the

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29 Bush here quotes from Robert Bevan and his recent book, The Destruction of Memory.

30 See Bush’s essay for a thorough explanation of the propaganda that Mussolini’s Ministry of Popular Culture deployed, as well as Pound’s unquestioning acceptance and internalization of it. The campaign, in its broadest terms, attempted to draw ordinary Italians to the Fascist enterprise by suggesting that the “senseless Allied bombing” had destroyed—and was continuing to destroy—much of “Italy’s cultural patrimony” (Bush 74).
poet’s failing memory rather than to a deeper truth that her presence might assist the reader in understanding. In this light, *The Cantos* can no longer be fully conceived of as a purified, streamlined, and carefully-crafted text in the way that his earlier cantos, with their provocative figuration of the anagogic process, promised, as they now manifests voices overheard and memories forgotten. His intertextual references in the later cantos seem to construct something of a cherished index of lost names, places, texts, and so on; their presence no longer serves an instructive or retro-cognitive purpose. That is, they are no longer intended to require those interpretive processes that Pound believed essential to enabling metaphysical transcendence. Pound seems to have discovered that the path to order he aimed to enshrine in his poetry is, in the fullest sense of the word, “unknowable”: the mind cannot possibly register it.

In short, the epistemological process advanced earlier in the cantos has been problematized and—however unwillingly—he abandoned. His final canto summarizes his discovery neatly: he admits to his “errors” in relying so heavily and unreflectingly on the model—confessing that his cantos “go wrong” and that he “cannot make it [the light of serenitas] flow thru” (817)—and yet continues to marvel at man’s ability to witness moments of lucidity and paradise. In this way, he can “confess wrong without losing rightness”: he can admit that his model has failed, yet “affirm the gold thread in the pattern” still exists (817). Thus, his final line—“A little light, like a rushlight / to lead back to splendour”—insists that modest moments of enlightenment occur, but makes no attempt at explaining how those moments arrive: like the line itself, paradise exists in fragment form, dangling unexplained and unqualified, resisting context.
Conclusion

This project began by rejecting the claim that the difficulty of Pound’s poetry—the laborious decoding that it requires—should be primarily understood as a manifestation of Pound’s “contemptuous social and aesthetic attitudes” and “morbid passion with the antithetical social role as prophet and teacher which Pound claimed for himself in his attempt to dislodge his culture from petrified attitudes and fixed responses” (Kyburz 7). However, the pointed social purpose behind Kyburz’s argument—and those that other critics sharing his perspective on Pound tend to make—must here be addressed: in attacking Pound’s dense intertextuality as a symptom of his elitist and condescending artistic credo, these scholars are able to connect his poetry to the equally contemptuous and prejudicial socio-political ideology he advocated. Thus, Primo Levi has written:

I am tired of the praise lavished on Ezra Pound, who perhaps was even a great poet, but in order to make sure he would not be understood at times even wrote in Chinese. I am convinced his poetic obscurity had the same root as his beliefs in supremacy, which led him first to fascism and then to self-alienation: both germinated from his contempt for the reader. (59-60)

Levi’s insistence that Poundian scholarship cease its absolving differentiation between Pound’s aesthetic and social attitudes is well-considered, and this project is not intended as yet another work that exonerates Pound from his dangerous ideology. By contrast, in linking Pound’s intertextual practice to his conceptualization of epistemology, the foregoing chapters suggest an alternate means to address Pound’s questionable politics: by considering the way in which his neoplatonic epistemological principles may have provided him with a model serviceable to totalitarian and anti-Semitic ideology.
This is to say that Pound’s dense intertextuality in and of itself should not be primarily construed as Pound’s way of directly assaulting the reader. The suggestion that Pound translated lines of his poetry into Chinese “to make sure that he would not be understood” seems particularly simplistic and unjust to a poet of such undoubted talent and intellectual power. Such comments ignore the interpretive function Pound wished to elicit from his readers and foreground in his poetry as the centerpoint of the knowledge-acquisition process. However, Pound’s conceptualization of that process exposes his dangerous proclivity towards a model that values and indeed aims at—as he wrote in *Guide to Kulchur*—a “rappel à l’ordre” or “the new synthesis, the totalitarian” (95). In other words, Pound’s appropriation of the neoplatonic model of epistemology seems to have led him to valorize those political regimes attempting to realize a centralized and meticulously-organized nation—regardless of how repressive, autocratic, or absolutist they might be. In fact, Pound explicitly admired such uniformity of command, considering it a testament to the will of the ruler, or, as earlier referenced, what he termed the “*directio voluntatis.*” Pound wrote that “the whole of the *Divina Commedia* is a study of the ‘directio voluntatis’ (direction of the will)” (*Jefferson and/or Mussolini* 17) and that this volitionist state of mind and spirit is the key component to accessing transcendence; as he writes in Canto XCVIII, through the voice of the fifth-century BC philosopher Ocellus: it is “our job to build light” (703). Thus, the *directio voluntatis* of the ruler becomes a precondition for any movement towards a better social or political order. Just as he advises his readers to exercise their powers of concentration and will in order to access the truths beyond the text in his introduction to *The Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti*, he insists, time and time again, in his politically-oriented essays, that
access to a more utopian model of society requires an impressive force of conviction. In *ABC of Economics*, for example, he writes:

The science of economics will not get very far until it grants the existence of will as a component; i.e. will toward order, will toward ‘justice’ or fairness, desire for civilization, amenities included. The intensity of that will is definitely a component in any solution. (*Selected Prose 1909-1965* 240)

Pound’s understanding of that “will toward order,” as Liebregts points out, is thus not Nietzschean, as his detractors and critics might wish to propose, but rather in line with “the Neoplatonic belief in *to kalon* as a principle of order in the practical politics” (226)—a belief that Pound had earlier detected and celebrated in his study of Renaissance-era politics.

Indeed, Pound’s valorization of Mussolini and his fascist state seems rooted in his belief that the dictator had, in the words of Liebregts, “the will and intelligence to translate thought into the active creation of social-economic order as the basis of a new civilization” and the ability to “provide Italy with a new Renaissance” (227). As Pound wrote in a 1944 letter: “fascism was the only movement, the only party of action, capable of putting into effect monetary justice. (It does not matter one damn bit what form of monetary justice; what does matter is the DIRECTION OF THE WILL)” (qtd. in Redman 266). The neoplatonic model he so readily absorbed in his early studies thus structured and provided him with an intellectual framework that rendered fascism not only a desirable political order, but the *ultimate* political order.

Pound’s renowned anti-Semitism corresponds deeply with these political beliefs, and the neoplatonic framework that supports them, and was perhaps intensified by
Mussolini’s propaganda in the late 1930s. A.D. Moody has convincingly argued that Pound came to his anti-Semitism through his economic beliefs—through his insistence upon the need for order and economic justice, and his vehement arguments against usury, which he defines in a *nota bene* to Canto XLV as “a charge for the use of purchasing power, levied without regard to production; often without regard to the possibilities of production” (230). Pound rails against usury throughout *The Cantos* though most notably (and famously) in Canto XLV, where he presents the practice as a “sin against nature” (229) and even an affront to artistic integrity: “no picture is made to endure nor to live with / but it is made to sell and sell quickly / with usura” (229). In many ways, Pound’s way of understanding usury—as the corrupt, unnatural, chaos-inducing opposite to the ordered and rational economics he advocates—once again points out the way in which a neoplatonic framework structured much of his thought, in that he conceived of the practice as among the forces of darkness and destruction that must be overcome by the anointed individual, bent on accessing paradise. In his critical writings (particularly his impassioned prose from the 1930s and beyond) he begins to call upon the stereotype of the usurious Jew as a means of directly confronting a figure he believed responsible for the propagation of the abominable financial practice. In these essays, he seems to use anti-Semitism as a sort of propaganda, in much the same way that Mussolini did in the late 1930s, where his offensive racial slurs become a means of rallying his readers around his views and of constructing an “Other” to argue against. His anti-Semitic rhetoric intensified as he became more and more outspoken about what he considered

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In 1938, Mussolini passed a series of anti-Semitic laws that banned Jews from holding public office and denied them access to education, presumably in order to bolster Italy’s axis alliance with Nazi Germany, and to solidify control over his constituents.
sound economics, and ultimately led him to his shockingly virulent Radio Rome talks, in which he unequivocally asserted: “you lose by not thinking about this problem [the usury problem] as RACIAL” (qtd. in Tryphonopoulos and Adams 252).

In this light, an awareness of Pound’s conceptualization of epistemology becomes a crucial element to understanding how his offensive political and social views intersect with his artistic work, and sheds light on the ways in which a mind capable of such astounding craftsmanship and aesthetic expressivity could also support a politics of intolerance and repression. From this vantage point, perhaps his intertextual practice—as representative of a conceptualization of epistemology inclined toward the absolutist—might be considered an even more serious threat than Levi suggests, as it represents not just an elitist attitude that seems to go hand-in-hand with supremacist ideologies, but the extent to which those ideologies may have permeated his poetics.

And yet, there is something antithetical and inexplicable about the tenacity with which he clung to his fascist and anti-Semitic beliefs even after the crises he underwent while interned at Pisa (described in Chapter II). These crises seemed to have exposed to him the limitations of his construct; it would seem logical for such a radical shift in thinking to impact his conviction that fascism represented the most expedient path to a millenarian political and social re-birth. In other words, why, if he seemed to doubt the epistemological process he had formerly advocated, was he capable of maintaining—indeed, hardening—his belief in fascism, an ideology in many ways rooted in his understanding of epistemology? How can one possibly reconcile the fact that Pound’s later cantos adopt a humbled, apologetic—even chastised—tone, while his political prose becomes increasingly virulent and dogmatic? Perhaps it was easier for him to simply
place his faith in those ideologies that shared his desire for conditions of order and avoid a discussion of the process by which those conditions would be attained altogether than it was to maintain the belief that he might achieve that order through his own poetry—so shaken was his faith in his own mental faculties. In this light, his political and artistic agendas seem to diverge in his later years, an observation that perhaps reveals his greatest failing: that the concessions he makes toward the end of The Cantos—his admission that he did not believe himself capable of fully constructing a path to deeper insight—never fully carried over into his late-life politics, in which he not only failed to acknowledge the potential error of his espousal of fascism, but seems to have preemptively closed his mind to alternatives, and unreflectingly fallen back upon familiar propaganda. Perhaps those critics who reasonably insist upon reading his poetry in relation to the problem of his politics might re-consider their methods of approach. They might examine the ways in which Pound the political polemicist failed to follow his artistic intuition, or the means by which his poetics permitted him the space to acknowledge and re-examine certain problems, but his politics did not.
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