

## READING POUND : SIX

### 1. THE COMING OF WAR; ACTÆON

An image of Lethe,  
    and the fields  
Full of faint light  
    but golden,  
Gray cliffs,  
    and beneath them  
A sea  
Harsher than granite,  
    unstill, never ceasing;  
High forms  
    with the movement of gods,  
Perilous aspect;  
    And one said:  
"This is Actæon."  
    Actæon of golden greaves!  
Over fair meadows,  
Over the cool face of that field,  
Unstill, ever moving  
Hosts of an ancient people,  
The silent cortège.

Ezra Pound, first printed in *Poetry* (Chicago), V,6 (March 1915); first collected in *Lustra* (London, September 1916), reprinted in *CSP*, p. 117 and (this text) *Pers* (1990), pp. 109-10; *Poems and Translations*, ed. Sieburth, p. 285, indents all 6 of the final lines. For comment see K.K. Ruthven, *A Guide to Ezra Pound's 'Personae' (1926)* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1969), pp. 53-4. For its origin in an earlier (not then published) war-poem, also written while Pound was residing with Yeats in Sussex, see James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage; Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York, 1988), pp. 118-26, and *Personae*, pp. 253-4; for discussion see Vincent Sherry, *Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Radical Modernism* (New York, 1993), pp. 63-6, (69-74). For 'we who have passed over Lethe' see also the conclusion to the first Pisan Canto (LXXIV), written 1945, published 1948.

The image of Actæon here has muted down the violence of his story in favour of a suspended moment, viewed across the Elysian fields; despite latent harshness this is an aesthetically distanced prospect, a spectacle of rôle-reversal where the central figure is only by the last ceremonious word transformed from hero to victim, elated triumph resited as funerary procession: the unspoken ritual word is 'sacrifice'. The balance of poised alternate indentation holds its energy as a charge within the shape of its own motion, suggesting an Ovidian transformation scene from early Italian painting such as by Antonio del Pollaiuolo (c.1431/2-1498), 'Apollo and



(Such was his cursed cruell fate) saw *Phebe* where she washt.  
 The Damsels at the sight of man quite out of countnance dasht,  
 (Bicause they everichone were bare and naked to the quicke)  
 Did beate their handes against their brests, and cast out such a shriek,  
 That all the woods did ring thereof . . . .

Arthur Golding (trans.), *The xv. Bookes of P. Ouidius Naso, entytuled Metamorphosis* (1576), ed. W.H.D. Rouse (London, 1904; reprinted, London, 1961), III, 168-81, 192-212 (pp. 66-7); see also Stephen Hinds, *The Metamorphosis of Persephone; Ovid and the Self-conscious Muse* (Cambridge, 1987), esp. pp. 90-6 (on parallel narratives and transformation). 'Cadmus Nephew' is, of course, Actæon. Compare Pound: 'The mood, the play is everything; the facts are nothing. Ovid, before Browning, raises the dead and dissects their mental processes; he walks with the people of myth' (*The Spirit of Romance*, London, 1910, revised 1952, 1970, p. 16). For the myth and its classical realisations see Nigel Spivey, *Understanding Greek Sculpture; Ancient Meanings, Modern Readings* (London, 1996), Chap. 8; for Renaissance handlings, see Alastair Fowler, *Renaissance Realism; Narrative Images in Literature and Art* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 36-8. In the *ABC of Reading* (London, 1934) Pound gives a passage from Ovid's account of Cadmus, and comments: 'Though it is the most beautiful book in the language, I am not here citing it for decorative purposes but for the narrative quality. It should be read as natural spoken language' (p. 127); see also Pound's extended quotations from Golding's *Ovid* in his 'Elizabethan Classicists', originally serialised in *The Egoist*, IV-V (1917-18), reprinted as 'Notes on Elizabethan Classicists' in *Literary Essays*, pp. 227-48). Golding's metre is couplet-rhymed fourteeners, in Pound's eyes pointedly *not* iambic pentameter. For the Elizabethan treatments of this theme compare H.E. Rollins (ed.), *A Handful of Pleasant Delights (1584)* (Cambridge, Mass., 1924), pp. 25-31, 91-6. For Pound's use of Ovid in relation to Dante, see Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, *The Metamorphic Tradition in Modern Poetry* (1955; New York, 1972), pp. 34-40; Peter Makin, *Pound's Cantos* (London, 1985), pp. 79-85 and ff. For a darker view of metamorphosis in the *Cantos* see Jerome J. McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Oxford, 1989), Chap. 4: 'The *Cantos* of Ezra Pound, the Truth in Contradiction', pp. 103-5. And to tune the modern reader's ear, all the woods that ring of such cries in Golding's version of the Ovid are answered by a later and more accordant line, 'that al the woods them answer and their eccho ring' (1595, sig. G7<sup>v</sup>).

3.       And by the curved, carved foot of the couch,  
               claw-foot and lion head, an old man seated  
 Speaking in the low drone...:  
               Ityn!  
 Et ter flebiliter, Itys, Ityn!  
 And she went towards the window and cast her down,  
               'All the while, the while, swallows crying:  
 Ityn!  
               'It is Cabestan's heart in the dish.'

'It is Cabestan's heart in the dish?  
 'No other taste shall change this.'  
 And she went towards the window,  
     the slim white stone bar  
 Making a double arch;  
 Firm even fingers held to the firm pale stone:  
 Swung for a moment,  
     and the wind out of Rhodéz  
 Caught in the full of her sleeve.  
     ...the swallows crying:  
 'Tis. 'Tis. Ytis!  
     Actæon...  
     and a valley,  
 The valley is thick with leaves, with leaves, the trees,  
 The sunlight glitters, glitters a-top,  
     Like a fish-scale roof in Poitiers  
 If it were gold.  
 Beneath it, beneath it  
 Not a ray, not a slivver, not a spare disc of sunlight  
 Flaking the black, soft water;  
 Bathing the body of nymphs, of nymphs, and Diana,  
 Nymphs, white-gathered about her, and the air, air,  
 Shaking, air alight with the goddess,  
     fanning their hair in the dark,  
 Lifting, lifting and waffing:  
 Ivory dipping in silver,  
     Shadow'd, o'ershadow'd  
 Ivory dipping in silver,  
 Not a splotch, not a lost shatter of sunlight.  
 Then Actæon: Vidal,  
 Vidal. It is old Vidal speaking,  
     stumbling along in the wood,  
 Not a patch, not a lost shimmer of sunlight,  
     the pale hair of the goddess.  
  
 The dogs leap on Actæon,  
     'Hither, hither, Actæon,'  
 Spotted stag of the wood;  
 Gold, gold, a sheaf of hair,  
     Thick like a wheat swath,  
 Blaze, blaze in the sun,  
     The dogs leap on Actæon.  
 Stumbling, stumbling along in the wood,  
 Muttering, muttering Ovid:  
     'Pergusa... pool... pool... Gargaphia,  
 'Pool... pool of Salmacis.'  
     The empty armour shakes as the cygnet moves.

Ezra Pound, from Canto IV, lines 13-68. First published in October 1919 though already being drafted during 1917-19, while Pound was working on

Propertius and annotating Eliot's new poetry; see John Steven Childs, *Modernist Form; Pound's Style in the Early Cantos* (Cranbury, N.J., 1986), pp. 43-56 (esp. pp. 50-2); 95-8; also Ronald Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Princeton, 1976), pp. 175-80, 197-205. There are small non-trivial differences of spacing and punctuation between the Faber and New Directions texts. For full reconstruction of the textual genetics see Christine Froula, *To Write Paradise: Style and Error in Pound's 'Cantos'* (New Haven & London, 1984), pp. 53-136, but note also the critique lodged in Lawrence S. Rainey, *Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture; Text, History, and the Malatesta Cantos* (Chicago and London, 1991), pp. 141ff. For commentary see: C.F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (2 vols, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1980-4), I, pp. 11-12; Guy Davenport, *Cities on Hills; A Study of I-XXX of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1983), pp. 127-136. For road-map see Maud Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality; T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Brighton, 1987), pp. 170-77; for fuller detail see George Kearns, *Guide to Ezra Pound's 'Selected Cantos'* (New Brunswick, N.J., and Folkstone, 1980), pp. 26-40. Froula shows that in earlier versions of the text above, 'stone bar' was 'stone-bar', 'church roof' was 'church-roof' (pp. 117-8): thus are syllabic/semantic autonomy and ideogramic compaction re-balanced, leading to 'firm | pale | stone', plus colon (but in the New Directions ed., this colon is a semi-colon).

For the repeated swallow-cry compare the allusional multiplicities of the nightingale laments in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, discussed in J.P. Riquelme, *Harmony of Dissonance; T.S. Eliot, Romanticism, and Imagination* [Baltimore, 1991], pp. 67-70 and esp. note 27 (p. 313); the differences between Pound and Eliot here are reciprocally diagnostic. Also, the connection of swallow to nightingale in the mythic subtext is close: after the terror done to Philomela, Procne escapes vengeance by transformation into a swallow, his sister Philomela by like shift into a nightingale. Thus the swallow twitter, 'tis, 'tis, imitates the punning affirmative, spilling the secret which cannot be spoken, the connection between parallel layers of fable stitched close by shared horror below the surface of moving beauty: 'Vidal is poet and protagonist; his mind, like Pound's, produces a shorthand of correspondences . . .' (Kearns, *Guide to Ezra Pound's 'Selected Cantos'*, p. 29; the whole discussion is acute and intelligent). Amid the matching of one extended form in the contours of another there are also minute local confirmations: the double arch of the stone window replayed in the billow of her sleeve, already fanning and waffing, this last term itself a tacit homage to Gavin Douglas:

For Venus efter the gys, and manor there  
Ane active bow, apoun her schulder bare  
As sche had bene, ane wilde huntreis  
With wind waffing, hir haris lowsit of trace.

(Ezra Pound, 'Elizabethan Classicists', reprinted in *Literary Essays*, p. 246; compare *OED2*, s.v. **waff**, *v.*<sup>1</sup>, which cites this [textually doubtful] use.) For Douglas's own vigorous and graphic version of Diana's revenge upon Actæon see his 'The Palice of Honour' (c.1501), ll. 310-336, in *The Shorter Poems of Gavin Douglas*, ed. Priscilla J. Bawcutt (Edinburgh, 1967), p. 28; or (with helpful cribs) *The Palis of Honoure*, ed. David Parkinson (Kalamazoo, Mich.,

1992), pp. 24-5, 86.

For a somewhat lurid characterisation of Eliot's horror-story undercurrents see Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel; Intersections of Life and Art* (New York, 1999), p. 124. For Eliot's unpublished 1918 paper on 'The Interpretation of Primitive Religion' see Ronald Bush, 'The Presence of the Past; Ethnographic Thinking / Literary Politics', in Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (eds), *Prehistories of the Future; The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford, Cal., 1995), pp. 36, 377. For the method of construction by myth and the control that this may (or may not) bestow, see Eliot's celebrated essay 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth', review of James Joyce, *Ulysses*, in *The Dial*, LXXV.5 (Nov. 1923), reprinted e.g. in Frank Kermode (ed.), *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London, 1975), pp. 175-8, which pointedly invokes Yeats and *The Golden Bough* as precursors of 'the mythical method' while making no mention at all of Pound. Pound had discussed *Ulysses* in his 'Paris Letter' for *The Dial*, LXXII.6 (May 1922), reprinted in *Literary Essays*, ed. Eliot, pp. 403-9. Pound's precursors for Joyce here were Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* and *Tristram Shandy*, with the emphasis on technique; the Homeric parallels are 'chiefly his own affair, a scaffold, a means of construction, justified by the result, and justifiable by it only' (*Literary Essays*, p. 406); in like spirit: 'Joyce has set out to do an inferno, and he has done an inferno' (p. 407). But Pound's 'technique' is not less than Eliot's 'control': 'the aim of technique is that it establish the totality of the whole. The total significance of the whole' (*Guide to Kulchur*, p. 90). On Eliot's essay see also Michael North, 'Eliot, Lukács, and the Politics of Modernism' in Ronald Bush (ed.), *T.S. Eliot; The Modernist in History* (Cambridge, 1991), esp. pp. 175-77. For a condensed retrospect on the idea of the modern, quoting 'No other taste shall change this', see George Oppen's poem 'Memory at "The Modern"', dating from October 1963 (when Pound is still alive), collected in George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York, 2002), p. 295, and see also p. xxxv, n. 5; Pound's 1934 Preface for Oppen's *Discrete Series* is printed on pp. 3-4, and this collection is briefly described on pp. 357-8.

Pound's early views about myth and the 'structure' of myth are regularly referred to the psychology of vital perception, often erotic or luminous with sudden clarity: 'I believe in a sort of permanent basis in humanity, that is to say, I believe that Greek myth arose when someone having passed through delightful psychic experience tried to communicate it to others. . . . Certain it is that these myths are only intelligible in a vivid and glittering sense to those people to whom they occur' ('Psychology and Troubadours', in *The Spirit of Romance*, Chap. V, p. 92). Compare Pound's catechism, 'Religio, or The Child's Guide to Knowledge' of 1918: 'When is a god manifest? / When the [eternal] states of mind take form'; *Pavanes and Divisions* (New York, 1918), reprinted in *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (London, 1973), p. 47; and see also p. 50, Sect. III.

Further on the Vidal/Actæon parallel see 'Piere Vidal Old'; *Exultations* (London, 25 October 1909), reprinted in *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. M.J. King (London, 1977), pp. 109-111 and also (with errors) in *CSP*, pp.

44-6; Peter Makin, *Provence and Pound* (Berkeley, Cal., 1978), p. 79. Bilingual selections in Alan R. Press (ed. and trans.), *Anthology of Troubadour Lyric Poetry* (rev. ed., Edinburgh, 1985), pp. 193-215; on Vidal's erotic vocabulary see Moshe Lazar, 'Fin'amour', in F.R.P. Akehurst and Judith M. Davis (eds), *A Handbook of the Troubadours* (Berkeley, Cal., 1995), pp. 61-100 (p. 77); for the story of Vidal torn by dogs, as was Actæon, see p. 191. For discussion of such intertextual 'subject rhymes' see Sanehide Kodama, *American Poetry and Japanese Culture* (Hamden, Conn., 1984), pp. 101-4, and J.S. Childs, *Modernist Form: Pound's Style in the Early Cantos* (Cranbury, N.J., 1986), pp. 50-2.

There is a fine discussion of Ovidian themes in twentieth-century poetry in Charles Tomlinson, *Poetry and Metamorphosis* (Cambridge, 1983), and of this Canto on pp. 66-71. Compare Kearns: 'Ovid, mistakenly thought of as a prettifier, never turns away from horror or from passion' (*Guide to Ezra Pound's 'Selected Cantos'*, p. 29). On whether the generic frame of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is properly grand epic, or not, see Hinds, *The Metamorphosis of Persephone*, pp. 115-134.

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