

READING POUND : EIGHT

1. Plura diafana
Heliads lift the mist from the young willows
there is no base seen under Taishan
but the brightness of 'udor *u_wp*
the poplar tips float in brightness
only the stockade posts stand
- And now the ants seem to stagger
as the dawn sun has trapped their shadows,
this breath wholly covers the mountains
it shines and divides
it nourishes by its rectitude
does no injury
overstanding the earth it fills the nine fields to heaven
- Boon companion to equity
it joins with the process
lacking it, there is inanition
- When the equities are gathered together
as birds alighting
it springeth up vital
- If deeds be not ensheaved and garnered in the heart
there is inanition
- (have I perchance a debt to a man named Clower)
- that he eat of the barley corn
and move with the sun's breath
- the sun as a golden eye
between dark cloud and the mountain.

Ezra Pound, from *The Pisan Cantos* (1948), Canto LXXXIII, lines 81-107; written c.1945. For commentary see C.F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (2 vols, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1980-4), II, pp. 460-1; George Kearns, *Guide to Ezra Pound's 'Selected Cantos'* (New Brunswick, N.J., and Folkstone, 1980), pp. 172-81; and Peter Makin, *Pound's Cantos* (London, 1985), pp. 247-50. For the active context of 'plura diafana' (= 'many transparencies') compare *Literary Essays*, p. 161 or (better) David Anderson, *Pound's Cavalcanti* (Princeton, 1983), p. 213, where Pound is glossing Cavalcanti's 'risplende in sè perpetuale effecto' (= 'shineth out / Himself his own effect unendingly')--see also Canto XXXVI. For heliads, see Canto LXXIX, 'The sea is not clearer in azure / Nor the Heliads bringing light' (217-8; compare the whole concluding section); in Greek mythology the Heliads, sisters to Phaeton, came to weep at his tomb

and were changed into poplar trees. For floating without base, see Canto XXI, 'the palazzo, baseless, hangs there in the dawn / With low mist over the tide-mark; / and floats there nel tramonto' (91-3; and compare to the end of the canto; in Canto XXV we are given the history of the stairs and arches which support this flotation); for discussion, see Peter Nicholls, *Ezra Pound: Politics, Economics and Writing; A Study of 'The Cantos'* (London, 1984), pp. 179-80. For the floatational syntax and prosody here, note the tacit grammaticality of the indents, half-implicy apposition or even subordination, the line-breaks following speech or sense pause, the inserted blank line-spaces mostly followed by upper-case letters to commence the following line (old-style stanza formatting); this feature replacing sentence-end full stops so that phrasal utterance floats in open array across and down the page (firm closure provided by spondaic stressing, e.g. *stockàde pòsts stànd*, the expert floating reference-ambiguity of 'it' keeping the reader's construal alert).

For the conflation of Taishan, Chinese sacred mountain in Shandong Province, with a Carrara peak visible from within the DTC stockade at Pisa, see Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character; The Life of Ezra Pound* (London, 1988), pp. 660-1, and Guy Davenport, *Cities on Hills; A Study of I-XXX of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1983), pp. 95-6, 121-2. For a possible/probable psalmic resonance, see Donald Davie (ed.), *The Psalms in English* (Penguin, London, 1996), p. 300 Also: 'ants' (Canto LXXXI--'The ant's a centaur in his dragon world'); 'birds' (Canto LXXIX--'4 birds on 3 wires, one bird on one'; Canto LXXXII--'Three birds on the wire', and 'three solemn half notes / their white downy chests black-rimmed / on the middle wire'). This passage of Canto LXXXIII is quoted as exemplary in the 'Editorial Declaration' appended to the first book-publication of Sophokles, *Women of Trachis; A Version by Ezra Pound* (New York, 1957), pp. 59-60. For a recent comment on 'the process' see Ronald Bush, "'Quiet, Not Scornful"? The Composition of The Pisan Cantos', in Lawrence S. Rainey (ed.), *A Poem Containing History; Textual Studies in 'The Cantos'* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1997), pp. 169-211--an even-tempered and intelligent essay.

For the working outlines of Confucian equity in Pound's view, see the fourth of the China Cantos (written 1937-9): Canto LV (second half), on tithes and harvests and the reforms of 'Ouang-Ngan-ché' (Wang An-shih, A.D. 1021-86). Makin reads there a direct comparison between Chinese imperial autarchy and Pound's view of Mussolini (*Pound's Cantos*, pp. 215-23); for wider discussion, see Nicholls, Chap. 5. Pound's 'Ngan' (as he calls him) is certainly a type of the enlightened strong man whose justice is a personal idea rather than part of a political process; but for Wang An-shih's practice of social equity see J. Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilisation* (Cambridge, 2nd ed., 1996), pp. 303-8. As well as being a major agricultural and social reformer (appointed Prime Minister in 1070), Wang An-Shih was also a major literary figure and prolific, influential poet; see a selection of poems in translation in W.-C. Liu and I.Y. Lo (eds), *Sunflower Splendor; Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry* (Garden City, N.Y., 1975), pp. 333-39; there is a more sneeringly *pc* reference in Stephen Owen (ed. and trans.), *An Anthology of Chinese Literature; Beginnings to 1911* (New York, 1996), p. 691. For what might be called the aesthetic sublimation of 'equity', compare the 'Seven Lakes

Canto' (Canto XLIX, published in 1937; for discussion see Makin, op. cit., pp. 206-10 and his refs in n. 9).

This shift from ethics to aesthetics can be traced also in Confucian thought and practice: see, e.g., D.L. Hall and R.T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (New York, 1987), pp. 264-8. For the pictorial tradition from which the 'Seven Lakes' material derives, see Max Lohr, *The Great Painters of China* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 225-7, and Sanehide Kodama, *American Poetry and Japanese Culture* (Hamden, Conn., 1984), pp. 105-19; for a deeper view of the tradition itself, see James Cahill, *The Lyric Journey; Poetic Painting in China and Japan* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), *passim*. In the text of Canto XLIX note that 'snow scur' (line 20) is a word-echo and idea-rhyme with Pound's 'Seafarer' translation; 'hail-scur flew', rendering 'hægl scurum fleag' (line 17); 'scur' is listed in *OED* 2 as an early form of mod. Eng. 'shower' but no modern use of 'scur' in this sense is there recorded. Likewise 'a blurr above ripples' (Canto XLIX, line 10) looks back to Canto VII (first published 1921), 'shimmer of rain-blur', and further back to 'Separation on the River Kiang' in *Cathay* (1915): 'The smoke-flowers are blurred over the river' (line 2; compare Canto IV, 'Dawn, to our waking, drifts in the green cool light; / Dew-haze blurs, in the grass, pale ankles moving'); Pound's double-consonanted noun ('blurr') both mimics his 'Northumbrian' voice-burr and remembers the double-r in the *Cathay* verb-form. Such a voice-sound may also remind of the 'strong tincture of the northern *burr*, like the crust on wine' which the young Hazlitt noticed on his first meeting with Wordsworth (William Hazlitt, 'My first Acquaintance with Poets', *The Liberal; Verse and Prose from the South*, II [1823], 23-46 [p. 40]).

2. (a) 'May I ask what your strong points are?'
 'I have an insight into words. I am good at cultivating my "flood-like ch'i".'
 'May I ask what this "flood-like ch'i" is?'
 'It is difficult to explain. This is a ch'i which is, in the highest degree, vast and unyielding. Nourish it with integrity and place no obstacle in its path and it will fill the space between Heaven and Earth. It is a ch'i which unites rightness and the Way. Deprive it of these and it will collapse. It is born of accumulated rightness and cannot be appropriated by anyone through a sporadic show of rightness. Whenever one acts in a way that falls below the standard set in one's heart, it will collapse. . . .'
- (b) 'What do you mean by "an insight into words"?'
 'From biased words I can see wherein the speaker is blind; from immoderate words, wherein he is ensnared; from heretical words, wherein he has strayed from the right path; from evasive words, wherein he is at his wits' end. What arises in the mind will interfere with policy, and what shows itself in policy will interfere with practice. . . .'
- (c) The Duke sent Pi Chan to ask about the well-field system.

'Your prince,' said Mencius, 'is going to practice benevolent government and has chosen you for this mission. You must do your best. Benevolent government must begin with land demarcation. When boundaries are not properly drawn, the division of land according to the well-field system and the yield of grain used for paying officials cannot be equitable. For this reason, despotic rulers and corrupt officials always neglect the boundaries. Once the boundaries are correctly fixed, there will be no difficulty in settling the distribution of land and the determination of emolument. . . .'

Mencius (Meng-tzu, 2nd half of 4th cent. B.C.), recounting a dialogue between Kung-sun Ch'ou (who asks the questions) and Mencius (who answers), followed by an exchange between Mencius and Pi Chan; D.C. Lau (trans.), *Mencius* (bilingual ed., 2 vols, Hong Kong, 1984), II.A.2 (Vol. I, pp. 57, 59); III.A.3 (Vol. I, pp. 99, 101). For a well-focussed discussion of Mencius in the post-Confucian context see A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao; Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Ill., 1989), pp. 107-37, and for a detailed analysis of this context see also Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action; Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (Oxford, 2003), Chap. 5 and esp. pp. 153-7. Pound undertook intensive study of Confucius and Mencius in the late summer of 1937 and published a polemical overview of Mencian ethics in *The Criterion* for July 1938; see 'Mang Tsze', *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (London, 1973), pp. 95-111. In Canto LXXXIII the 'breath' which 'fills the nine fields' is this 'flood-like ch'i' or vital energy from Mencius; see further Graham, op. cit., pp. 126-7; B.I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), pp. 179-84 and esp. 274 (also on 'insight into words', pp. 274-5 and ff). Nicholls argues (pp. 118-23) a connection in Pound from Mencius back to Cavalcanti, and via both to a newly directing principle of formal hierarchy. There is a full background to the context of this segment of the *Cantos* in the Introduction to Richard Sieburth (ed.), *Ezra Pound, The Pisan Cantos* (New York, 2003), but the detailed notes to this passage are wholly inadequate.

The 'nine fields' or the 'well-field system', also from Mencius, refer to his advocacy of dividing according to tradition a piece of agricultural land into a ninefold square, with the central plot worked by the eight participating families for the common good (taxation and/or self-help; the term well-fields derives from the Chinese character  *jing*³, which graphically represents the field-diagram but which means 'well'). Pound almost certainly read the explanatory note to this passage in James Legge (trans.), *The Chinese Classics: Translated into English*, Vol. II: *The Life and Works of Mencius* (London, 1875), p. 203. For the after-life in Chinese history of these 'estates of equity' (*i-chuang*) see J. Gernet, op. cit., who comments of new developments in the Sung dynasty that 'the term *i*, which can be translated approximately by 'equity', is in fact applied to all relationships involving mutual help and free assistance' (p. 319; see also p. 95). A simplified schema discerned as underlying this topic maps out in Poundian terms a defence of self-balancing but historically static agrarian

social structures against the development of the newly predatory commercial metropolis (e.g., middle-men cornering the market in grain futures at times of poor harvests); this diagram then maps on to indignation against secondary finance capitalism ('usury') and singles out the Jewish scapegoat (for succinct review, consult e.g. Bernard Semmel, *The Liberal Ideal and the Demons of Empire; Theories of Imperialism from Adam Smith to Lenin* [Baltimore and London, 1993], Chap. 5 and esp. pp. 85-7).

In his *Criterion* essay (which commends medieval Catholic and Chinese hierarchies and senses of proportion, against 'semitic immoderation'), Pound gives the well-field diagram and compares the system with Rossoni's politica of *ammassi* in 'present-day Italy'; Rossoni (editor of *La Stirpe*, 'Race'), reappears in the *Guide to Kulchur* (1938; reprinted 1966, pp. 40, 166-8, 274-7) and in Canto CI (set beside Delcroix, a Fascist war veteran and credit-crank), and alongside the by then virulent anti-semitism of 'What is Money For?' of 1939 (*Selected Prose*, pp. 103-5; 270); 'ammassi' (tithes in kind) appear also in Cantos LIII, LVI, LXI (1940): see E[zra] P[ound], 'Ammassi', *The Townsman* (London), III.11 (June 1940), p. [11], and III.12 (November, 1940), p. 26; also Tim Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 267-8; David D. Roberts, *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979), pp. 14-15 & passim (on Italian anti-Semitic propaganda in the later 1930's see also pp. 323-4 and ff); and Zeev Sternhell et al., *The Birth of Fascist Ideology; From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton, 1994), pp. 189-91 (for the relations of vorticism to Marinetti and the emergence of Italian fascism see also pp. 233-58). Detailed low-down on Rossoni in John J. Tingham, *Edmondo Rossoni; From Revolutionary Syndicalism to Fascism* (New York, 1991).

For a generally harsher view, see Lawrence S. Rainey, "'All I Want You to Do Is to Follow the Orders": History, Faith, and Fascism in the Early Cantos', in Lawrence S. Rainey (ed.), *A Poem Containing History; Textual Studies in 'The Cantos'* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1997), pp. 63-114, and esp. pp. 101-103 where a transfer of identity from Malatesta to Mussolini is propounded; see also pp. 123-4. At this point compare also Jerome J. McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Oxford, 1989), Chap. 4: 'The Cantos of Ezra Pound, the Truth in Contradiction': 'Pound's anti-Semitism and fascism are important, in this context, because they can serve readers of the *Cantos* as convenient excuses not to read and not to think, and to believe that Pound--when he writes as an anti-Semite and a fascist--is unthinking as well. This is a great and a typical mistake among readers of the *Cantos*' (pp. 120-1); for related argument, see McGann's *Social Values and Poetic Acts; The Historical Judgement of Literary Work* [Cambridge, Mass., 1988], pp. 238-40) and Ronald Bush, 'Modernism, Fascism, and the Composition of Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*', in *Modernism/Modernity*, 2 (1995), 69-87. A more searching view of the ideological construction of anti-fascist historiography is argued in Paul Morrison, *The Poetics of Fascism; Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Paul de Man* (Oxford, 1996); see, e.g., pp. 10-15 and 150 n. 29; 48-55 ff.

The lines from Canto LXXXIII concerning deeds when not 'ensheaved and garnered in the heart' also derive from the thinking of Mencius, in his

argument against Kao-tzu who had maintained that right behaviour had no source in any innate moral propensity. Mencius counter-claimed that 'Benevolence, dutifulness, observance of the rites, and wisdom do not give me a lustre from the outside, they are in me originally.' The difference between men 'is due to what ensnares their hearts' (VI.A.6-7; ed. cit., Vol. II, p. 229). The passage immediately following develops an analogy with the growth and ripening of barley, by the means of sun and rain and the human effort devoted to tending it. Arthur Waley's grasp of these arguments is typically somewhat casual and uninformed; see his *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (London, 1939), e.g. p. 194. On the grand debate about innate virtue see also Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, pp. 117-32; Schwartz, *World of Thought in Ancient China*, pp. 184-5, 266-70, and Slingerland, *Effortless Action; Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China*, pp. 135-53.

ENVOI:

'Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein.' ('There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.')

Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' (1950); *Gesammelte Schriften*, I.2 (2nd ed., Frankfurt a. Main, 1978), p. 696.

'Just as there is no document of history which is not also a document of barbarism, there is no historicist who is not also constructing a monument to barbarity.'

Drew Milne, "'The Function of Criticism": A Polemical History', *Parataxis*, 1 (1991), p. 41.

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PDF file created on 20 August 2007