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## BETWEEN HELL AND PARADISE: THE MOTIF OF THE DANTESQUE JOURNEY IN *THE PISAN* AND *POST-PISAN CANTOS*

### Abstract

The present article is an analysis of the dantesque Hell and Paradise represented in the literary output of the American poet Ezra Pound. The author of the article focuses on the interpretation of *The Cantos*, particularly *The Pisan Cantos* and *post-Pisan Cantos* created in the final phase of the poet's literary output (1954–1972) which reflects his personal crisis as an artist, thinker and man. *The Pisan Cantos* and *post-Pisan Cantos*, whose guiding motif is Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, were created during the poet's imprisonment near Pisa in 1945 after his indictment for treason and then his stay in St Elisabeth Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Washington D.C. The article examines the motif of Dante's Hell, Paradise and Purgatory in Ezra Pound's epic both with reference to the American artist's traumatic experiences as well as to his spiritual, artistic and philosophical journey during which he searched for inspiration, wisdom and internal harmony.

Ezra Pound is regarded as one of the most outstanding literary figures of twentieth century American literature, a powerful shaping force upon modern Anglo-American poetry, an adept expert in Romance culture and literature and the man who exerted an overwhelming influence on literary criticism worldwide. However, the poet's life and work have invariably generated huge controversy due to his political involvement and propagation of fascism in Europe during World War II as well as his racial prejudices, especially anti-Semitism.<sup>1</sup> Taking into account the artist's literary output it is worth stating that Ezra Pound derived his poetic inspiration from various sources and traditions, among others one may trace the influence of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizational legacy, mediaeval Italian and Provençal

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<sup>1</sup> Lewicki, Zbigniew (ed.): *A Handbook of American Literature for Students of English*. Warsaw: CulturalSection, U.S. Embassy 1990. P. 204.

literature, the culture and philosophy of the Far-East as well as Fraser's and Frobenius's anthropological studies.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this article is to examine Pound's most notable work, *The Cantos*, particularly *The Pisan* and *post-Pisan Cantos* composed in his third and last literary phase (1945–1972). The emphasis will be placed on the scrutiny of the artist's recreation of the past, especially his revival of the Italian tradition through the imagery of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, which, according to Pound, constituted the only means of communication and cultural cohesion amidst the chaos of the post-modern world. The author of the article is going to show the relationship between Pound's dramatic situation after World War II and gradual recuperation, his personal Hell and Paradise which he depicted in *The Cantos*, and the world presented in *The Divine Comedy*, in particular the Inferno and the Paradiso sections.

According to various critics and biographers, among others Leszek Engelking, Hugh Kenner, Michael Alexander, Ezra Pound's poetry after 1945, especially his lifelong epic, distinguishes itself though the artist's endeavour to recreate the old tradition, particularly the culture of mediaeval Italy and ancient Greece, and his search for classical models and principles of order.<sup>3</sup> In terms of its style, thematic unity and the use of classical allusions *The Cantos* closely resembles Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Homer's *Odyssey*. The two epics concentrate on the motif of journey as a symbol of life, human fate, search of knowledge and wisdom. However, in the light of the artist's situation after World War II, the theme of voyage in Pound's epic acquires a new, deeper significance. To an extent, it reflects the author's traumatic experience as a prisoner and political outcast along with his conflict with the authorities and struggle for poetic dignity and artistic harmony. Such a facet of the journey, particularly visible in *The Pisan Cantos*, bears marked resemblance to Dante's poetic voyage. On the other hand, Pound's travel embodies his quest for cultural and literary roots, knowledge and artistic improvement, and his search for identity as a man, philosophical thinker and poet. In view of this *The Cantos* is frequently regarded as a contemporary classical poem in which the author does not create any new poetic reality but instead refers to the most prominent writers from the past conveying their vision of art and literature.<sup>4</sup>

As was previously mentioned, *The Pisan Cantos* (74–84), Section Rock-Drill 85–95 de los cantares, Thrones: 96–109 de los cantares and Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX–CXVII are those sections of Pound's epic in which the allusions to *The Divine Comedy* constitute the most recurrent themes. It is visible in the author's references to the characters and places from Dante's epic, such as Ugolinodella Gerarchesca, Lucrezia Borgia (Canto 74), as well as in the syntactic and stylistic cor-

<sup>2</sup> Helsztyński, Stanisław: *Od Chaucera do Ezry Pounda*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1976. P. 184.

<sup>3</sup> Kenner, Hugh: *The Pound Era*. Santa Barbara: University of California Press 1971. P. 202.

<sup>4</sup> Pound, Ezra, Leszek Engelking, Leszek Koziol, Kuba Sosnowski, Andrzej Szuba (translation): *Pieśni*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 1996. P. 186.

respondence between these two works. *The Pisan* and *post-Pisan Cantos* distinguish themselves by structural diversity, alteration of tone, language and style. While reading attentively Cantos 74–116 one may notice a conspicuous difference between The Pisan Section, its pessimistic, dismal tone, thematic chaos, structural disintegration, which reflects the author's personal crisis, and the *post-Pisan Cantos* with their linguistic harmony, textual unity and integration. This thematic and syntactic division between Cantos 74–84 and 85–116 corresponds to Dante's distinction between "The Purgatory" and "The Paradise" Parts of his own poem.

Moreover, the contrast between *The Pisan* and *post-Pisan Cantos*, corresponding to Dante's division between Hell and Paradise, is enhanced by more visual, physical and realistic aspects of Cantos 74–84 and on the more symbolic, philosophical and mystical dimension of Cantos 85–116. Analogously to the Italian author, the American artist makes more allusions to his own life, exile, political oppressors and opponents in the Pisan Section, particularly in Canto 74, which correspond to Dante's hell, especially his Canti 10, 24 and 25, whereas in the remaining parts of *The Cantos* he focuses on the mystical and visionary facets of the epic, as well as reflecting on his own poetry, as does Dante in "The Paradiso." Subsequently, Pound frequently makes linguistic allusions to *The Divine Comedy*, quoting those phrases and expressions which play a pivotal role in the Italian epic. This process is illustrated in canto 74 where the American poet uses the phrase "*la torre di Ugolino*" / "Ugolino's tower,"<sup>5</sup> which refers to the incarceration of the mediaeval Italian count and his family, depicted by Dante in Canto 33. In a similar vein, the phrase "*m'elevasti*"<sup>6</sup> in Canto 90, which could be translated into English as "You raised me", here means "You saved me from ruin and degradation" and refers to Dante's Beatrice, to her grace, kindness and angelic power.

Taking into account the title of the article, *The Pisan* and *post-Pisan Cantos* mirror the author's spiritual journey from Hell to Heaven, to his struggle with depression, despondency, melancholy and artistic crisis which ends up in his regaining power and public recognition. Pound's emotional breakdown corresponds to the linguistic tension and the thematic confusion of Cantos 74–84, whilst his spiritual healing concurs with the stylistic harmony, syntactic symmetry and the serene, placid tone of Cantos 85–116.

At this point it is worth examining closely Cantos 74, 81, 90, 91 and 116 as instances of miscellaneous stages in the artist's spiritual travel from Inferno, through Purgatory to Paradise with reference to Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Canto 74 is perhaps one of the most crucial sections in Pound's epic since it marks the poet's greatest personal crisis. It is here that the author expresses his mourning for the conquest of Italy, the assassination of its fascist leader, Benito Mussolini, and makes various allusions to his imprisonment in Pisa and in Washington after World War

<sup>5</sup> Pound, Ezra: *The Pisan Cantos*. New York: New Directions 1948. P. 89.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander, Michael: *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1979. P. 213.

II. According to the poet, the year 1945 constitutes the termination of a great social, political and cultural epoch in Europe, the symbol of which was fascist Italy, and the commencement of social turmoil and literary crisis. Pound alleges that Italy has been betrayed (*"Italia tradita"/"Italy betrayed"*)<sup>7</sup>, defeated and humiliated after the war. Nevertheless, in the second part of the Canto the author cherishes his hope for the resurrection of Italy thanks to the restoration of its culture and literary heritage, especially renaissance art as indicated through the poet's references to the fifteenth century sculptor Matteo and painter Pisanello, their flight from contemporary Babilon, and the survival of their artistic legacy.<sup>8</sup> He similarly draws attention to meadiaeval literature depicted via allusions to Guido Cavalcanti's most renown sonnet *"Donna mi prega"*). The American poet strongly believed the resurrection of Italy to be feasible only thanks to the revival of its cultural and literary legacy.

Canto 74, one of the pivotal sections of *The Pisan Cantos*, distinguishes itself by thematic miscellany, fragmentary diction, structural and syntactic disintegration.<sup>9</sup> Among sundry motifs and issues raised in Pound's work the theme of *The Divine Comedy* comes to the fore. Here, Pound alludes to several protagonists of the Italian epic: count Ugolino, Guido di Montefeltro and Lucrezia Borgia. All of these characters, embodying human evil and guilt, such as treason of the state (Ugolino), murder (Lucrezia Borgia) and debauchery (Guido di Montefeltro, Lucrezia Borgia), are placed by Dante in Hell. By referring to these literary and historical figures, particularly to Ugolinodella Gerarchesca, the American author strives to portray the contemporary Purgatory, the calamity of the post-modern culture and society. Furthermore, by evoking the Dantesque figures the poet ruminates on his own personal crisis as well as on the complexity of human nature and the moral decay of contemporary society. It is especially conspicuous in the case of count Ugolino, to whom Pound refers when describing his prison in Pisa. As was mentioned previously, the author depicts Ugolino in the context of his tower in which he is confined and which stands for both his personal trauma and the tragedy of his family. Here, the American poet highlights the significance of the tower, the place where the Italian count was incarcerated prior to his being charged with treason and where he died together with his descendants, in order to mirror and ponder over his own detention while awaiting possible execution in 1945.

The two remaining figures Ezra Pound alludes to, Lucrezia Borgia (*"Madame Borgia"*)<sup>10</sup> and Guido di Montefeltro, epitomize licentiousness, intemperance and moral degradation. Nonetheless, when set beside the conspicuousness of Ugolinodella Gerarchesca, these characters, barely mentioned by the American author, signify the decadence of mediaeval Italianclergy (Guido) and of renaissance aristocracy (Lucrezia), and they are not as exposed and individualized as the Italian

<sup>7</sup> Pound, E.: *The Pisan Cantos*. P. 84.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*. P. 91.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander, M.: *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound*. P. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Pound, E.: *The Pisan Cantos*. P. 99.

count. By evoking Dante's most tragic, complex and controversial villains, Ugolino in particular, Pound underlines the decadence and calamity of the post-war/modern world. It is due to these portrayals that Canto 74 could be viewed as one of the most fatalistic and dramatic sections of the poem.

Canto 81 (one of the final sections of *The Pisan Cantos*) differs slightly from Canto 74 in its more lyrical tone and hopeful accent, conveying the author's more optimistic perception of the contemporary world and more favourable and mature attitude to his poetry, while offering recurrent allusions to the literary and cultural heritage of Europe (numerous references to Greek mythology, Italian history, art and poetry). This section of the poem is seemingly a prelude to Pound's mental recovery, though it is still saturated with the sensation of melancholy and desolation. At this stage of his spiritual journey the poet, torn between profound distress, anguish, fatalistic visions and confidence, faith in the power of the human mind symbolized by Confucian philosophy and Dante's mysticism, endeavours to finally perceive a glimmer of hope, the Dantesque light which pervades his closing cantos.

Pound's two conflicting personalities and a progression of his spirit from personal disharmony and bedlam towards optimism and tranquility, noticeable in Canto 81, initiate the advancement of his journey from Inferno through Purgatory into Paradise. Pound's hopefulness and confidence, apparent in the last lines of this section, as well as stylistic harmony, order and a mystical, reflexive tone to the epic betoken the artist's gradual approach to literary Heaven. Here, the poet makes indirect references to the Italian epic by using symbols, images and abstract notions instead of bringing up particular characters and milieu. In this respect Pound's text bears a close resemblance to Dante's Paradise.

While speaking of the symbols apparent in *The Divine Comedy*, one ought to examine some notions and images Pound uses in his text while referring to Dante's epic. One of them is the expression "inextinguishable flame"<sup>11</sup>, which stands for the Dantesque imagery of Heaven, a creative power of mediaeval Italian literature, and the artist's faith in the revitalizing function of his poetry. The flame fulfills the role analogous to "crystal" and "light", to which the author alludes in Cantos 90, 91 and 116. All of them epitomize Dante's Paradise and a healing, recuperative power of the Italian epic. The word "flame" may additionally denote the potential of any culture and literary tradition which can never be extinguished as long as it is preserved and handed down from one generation to another.

Canto 81 is one of the closing sections of *The Pisan Cantos*, whilst Canto 90 is among those which open up Section Rock-Drill. This part marks a genuine transformation of mood and subject, a progress from the spiritual darkness of the contemporary world into the illumination of mediaeval and renaissance neo-Platonic thoughts.<sup>12</sup> This thematic alteration of the canto, with its accent on the literature

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem. P. 100.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander, M.: *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound*. P. 213.

and culture of the Middle Ages, particularly on Italian and English poetry, as well as on the author's allusions to Odyssey's journey and to mediaeval mysticism reflects its linguistic change. At this point the artist speaks in a philosophical, metaphysical, at times occult language, he uses sublime tone and elevated style by means of which he dexterously links various historical and literary motifs, such as Greek myths, mediaeval Italian and English poetry. Among all of the themes saturating Canto 81 the motifs from *The Divine Comedy* play a pivotal role, especially Dante's vision of Paradise and angelic light, symbolized by Beatrice. Ezra Pound evokes this crucial Italian feminine figure citing the Dantesque expression "*m'elevasti*"/"You raised me, you saved me":

Sybilla  
from under the noble heap  
m'elevasti  
from the dulled edge beyond pain,  
m'elevasti  
out of Erebus, the deep-lying...<sup>13</sup>

The above excerpt from Canto 90 constitutes the author's daydreaming of mystical women who release him from his internal confinement, depression, melancholy and artistic lethargy. Both the female figures, Beatrice and Sybilla, personify brightness, hopefulness, an impressive spiritual victory over the dark, demonic side of Pound's character, the progress of his mental journey and the artist's approach to Paradise. Needless to say, according to Michael Alexander and Donald Davie, the word "light" which denotes enlightenment and wisdom, in this context also refers to the author's recently acquired knowledge after his traumatic war experience. The enlightenment, wisdom and judiciousness come to the poet from sundry founts, among others from occult sources, epitomized by Sybil. In this regard the above-quoted excerpt mirrors a paradox. More importantly, Pound's use of the occult symbol of light, as well as his other images, such as Erebus, grove, temple, altar appearing in the successive lines of the epic: "grove hath its altar under elms, in that temple, in silence a lone nymph by the pool"<sup>14</sup> reflects the obscurity of the Canto and marks the hermetic character of his poetry.

Speaking of the Dantesque motif of Paradise, one may notice the omnipresence of Beatrice, to whom Pound alludes without naming her, and who exemplifies God's grace, a spiritual victory over evil, world's malaise and bedlam, and who gives prominence to the poet's overcoming his mental breakdown. The celestial power of Dante's most beloved and worshipped female protagonist is enhanced by the American poet's recurrent use of the word "flame" which bursts from the altar into the sky, and by the crystal blast of air.<sup>15</sup> Pound closes the Canto through the images of "flame" and "crystal", exemplifying the terrestrial Paradise.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem. P. 213.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem. P. 213.

<sup>15</sup> Pound, E.: *The Pisan Cantos*. P. 112.



In the consecutive part, Canto 91, the author refers to Dante's vision of Heaven, as well as to the images of light and crystal, which are inextricably linked with the image of love, warmth, passion and delight. While scrutinizing this section one may notice that love and passion play a crucial role, which becomes visible in Pound's constant allusions to Dante's epic (Canto XXVI, Paradise) as well as to his depiction of love as the divine power and artistic potential. In Canto 91 the poet quotes the fragment from *The Divine Comedy* dedicated to love which becomes referred to as the divine, celestial, mystical feeling and spiritual power which sets human mind in motion: "*checonvienchemova la mente, amando*"<sup>16</sup>. Pound attributes the angelic function of love to Aphrodite (Cytherea) who governs the "third heaven"/"*il terzo ciel movete*"<sup>17</sup>. By evoking the instances of the ancient goddess of love and fecundity and the mediaeval Italian epic, particularly its vision of Heaven, the American poet combines heathen and Christian elements of the two cultures into one magnificent universe of love. In this vein, in Canto 91 passion, affection and devotion assume a cosmic dimension, similar to that in Dante's epic.

The image of love is explicitly linked to the representation of light and crystal, other afore-mentioned vital symbols of Dantesque Paradise. Both of the notions, recurring motifs in the canto, illustrate perfectly Pound's linguistic virtuosity which consists in the artist's blending various texts, among others, extracts from the Bible, Dante's epic, Greek and Egyptian myths, Italian (mediaeval) poetry or English and French philosophy. In all these themes the American artist refers to the images of light and crystal as the tokens of spiritual and physical purification. The author employs these Biblical and Dantesque concepts in order to underscore the artistic clarity, cohesion, stylistic harmony and symmetry in his poetic project.

Canto 110 and 116 are the ultimate sections of *The Cantos* which are to be scrutinized in this article. Both the Cantos constitute a significant part of the section *Drafts and Fragments*, illustrating the author's final days in Italy and reflecting on his lifelong poem, on its positive and negative sides. Here, the American artist also refers to Venice, mainly in Canto 110, to his most adored Italian city which embodies the poet's spiritual dwelling, source of wisdom and poetic inspiration. Interestingly enough, the artist's return to this city in the final phase of his poetic career mirrors the old man's going back to his roots, to the place of his birth and cultural formation. Albeit his American nationality, Ezra Pound has always felt greatly attached to the Italian city, its language and culture, which stemmed from his childhood and early university career and culminated after his banishment from the United States and return to Italy in 1958.

Furthermore, Canto 110 is dedicated to Olga Rudge, the poet's companion during the middle and last phases of his literary output. Here, the author presents his friend in the context of Italian cities, particularly his residence in Merano. Olga is depicted as the guardian of the hearth, embodiment of peace, tranquility and tenderness:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem. P. 114

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem. P. 119.

Thy quiet house  
 The crozier's curve runs in the wall,  
 The harl, feather-white, as a dolphin on sea-brink.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth noticing that the figure of Olga Rudge, albeit her playing a pivotal role in Pound's life and literary output, specifically after 1958<sup>19</sup>, appears infrequently in his poetry and Canto 110 is one of the very few poems devoted to her. This text marks the artist's momentary turning away from social, political and cultural issues towards a domestic subject matter. Miss Rudge performs a prominent role in the poet's spiritual passage from Hell to Heaven – on the one hand she could be associated with Beatrice, her graciousness and righteousness as well as spiritual protection, on the other hand she may epitomize Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey*, being a symbol of female faithfulness, loyalty and devotion.

When set beside Canto 110, in which the author focuses more on his personal life and domestic issues than on art and society, Canto 116 constitutes Pound's reflection on his poetry, especially on his epic and the presentation of his vision of the world. The author opens his section with the cosmic image of the earth. The expression "to make Cosmos" denotes the artist's yearning to improve the post-modern world and society, to find a cultural potential, harmony and social order in it. Pound's effort is to create a divine, mystical picture of the world, similarly to Dante's vision of the Paradise. In the successive extract the artist alludes to the concepts of "light" and "crystal", the Dantesque attributes of Heaven. Here, however, these phrases stand for Pound's poetry as well as for the author's attitude to his readers:

I have brought the great ball of crystal;  
 who can lift it?  
 Can you enter the great acorn of light?<sup>20</sup>

In the above Canto "the ball of crystal" and "the corn of light" mirror Pound's epic, its thematic diversity and linguistic complexity. The words "crystal" and "acorn" additionally symbolize the intellectual maze, the arcana of the creative process and the enigmatic ways through which the artist leads the reader to the apprehension and recognition of *The Cantos*. The illustration of this literary operation is the verb "to lift" meaning "to understand, to comprehend" which refers to the reader's strenuous effort to comprehend and interpret the poem. Notwithstanding this, "to lift" may also signify "to appreciate", "to accept", in this context, the readers' ability to decipher the central premise of Pound's epic. The author undeniably has doubts as to the audience's proper interpretation of *The Cantos*.

Last but not least, while reading the final lines of the epic one cannot fail to notice the artist expressing skepticism about his life, poetry and his entire literary output. Quite frequently Pound fails to see harmony, order and coherence in his epic:

<sup>18</sup> Alexander, M.: *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound*. P. 222.

<sup>19</sup> Stock, Noel: *The Life of Ezra Pound*. London: Routledge and Paul 1970. P. 546–547.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander, M.: *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound*. P. 195.



But the beauty is nit the madness  
 Thou' my errors and wrecks lie about me.  
 And I am not a demigod,  
 I cannot make it cohere.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, in the consecutive lines the author restores his faith in his artistic power which he gains from Dantesque Paradise light:

A little light, like a rushlight  
 To lead back to splendor.<sup>22</sup>

To conclude, Ezra Pound's poetry after 1945 reflected the author's return to the classics, especially to mediaeval Italian literature, which is reflected in *The Pisan* and *post-Pisan Cantos*. The epic, constituting the poet's major literary legacy in that period, marked the artist's serious personal crisis resulting from his distress and frustration about the post-war political and cultural reality, as well as mirroring the author's dramatic change of tone, style and language. It was in *The Pisan* and *post-Pisan Cantos* that Pound radically departed from the objective, impersonal delineation of history, art and politics towards a highly subjective perception of the world and society and personal reflection upon literature. It was then that Pound started to identify himself with Dante Alighieri and embarked on a spiritual journey through Inferno, Purgatory into Paradise, *The Divine Comedy*, constituting the major theme in *The Pisan* and *post-Pisan Cantos*, became the tokens of Pound's artistic potential, poetic fulfillment, fount of knowledge and wisdom.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibidem. P. 195.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem. P. 195.