

Joseph G. Kronick: On "Canto I"

Think of how Pound's Cantos is constrained by such arbitrary events as his chance happening upon Andreas Divus' *Odyssey*. In Canto 1, Pound writes in several languages?Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Greek, English?every language but his own. The Nekyia traces the voyage of the poet into the realm of death and mourning. Odysseus discovers among the dead the unmourned Elpenor, who bids him

"remember me, unwept, unburied,

"Heap up mine arms, be tomb by sea-bord, and inscribed:

"A man of no fortune, and with a name to come.

"And set my oar up, that I swung mid fellows." (1:4)

Odysseus is to undertake what Freud calls the work of mourning. Through assimilation?introjection, in psychoanalytic terms?he is to sustain the memory of his shipmate and free his libido to attach itself to a new object of affection. But what can this tale be but an allegory of Pound's theft of Divus' translation of Homer's *Odyssey*, which is itself a theft? In fact, Pound carries into his text Divus' corrupted text that reads "?A second time?" The whole canto is riddled with repetitions that mark the failure to carry over into Pound's own language the translation unmarred by the presence of death. For as Pound repeats the text in another language, he seeks to assimilate the Homeric epic into his own poem, but like Elpenor in the underworld, Divus, and with him Homer, arises from the grave. Thus, Pound tells Divus to "Lie quiet." The resurrection, though, is a partial one. A remnant always stays beyond the grasp of translation, hence the absence of the proper name on the tomb. But it is the absent name that allows the continuation of the journey and the narrative. The name Elpenor will be translated in later cantos when Pound puns on the el in Sordello, Elizabeth, Helen, and Eleanor. He even steals from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* a series of puns on Helen?"helandros," "helenaus," and "heleptolis" ("man-destroying," "ship-destroying," and "city-destroying")?which he then applies to Eleanor of Aquitaine (7:24,25). Pound also weaves the epitaph on Elpenor's tomb into this complex of puns when in the Pisan Cantos he too becomes "a man of no fortune and with a name to come" (74:439; 80:513, 514). Finally, the man with no name is Odysseus himself, who tells Polyphemus that he is called "No-man."

Pound's periplus takes him back to the books and places he has already visited, just as Odysseus, after his second visit to the underworld, must return to Circe's island to bury Elpenor on the sea-bord. Indeed, the sea-bord is but the border between texts and between languages that sets Pound's text afloat upon a sea of texts. Another text embroiled in thefts and translations?so much so that it sinks beneath the burden?is Eliot's *Waste Land*, more specifically, "Death by Water." In its rather lengthy early version, it is a web of allusions to the Ulysses canto of Dante's *Inferno*, Tennyson's "Ulysses" and *In Memoriam*, the *Odyssey*, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and, most important, "Dans le Restaurant," a poem by Eliot written in French from which he translates the Phlebas passage that forms the final version of

this section. (We might also say that "Death by Water" looks forward to the Four Quartets, as it contains Eliot's first mention of the Dry Salvages.) "Death by Water" consists of false starts? does it begin in "Dans le Restaurant," the manuscripts he sent Pound, or in the published version? Does it end in the Four Quartets? Eliot's final decision to follow Pound's advice to keep only the Phlebas section from "Dans le Restaurant" in the poem suggests his own inability to keep afloat in/on the edges of his text.

If the Cantos lives on, it is as translation, as a poem that never begins but only "starts": "And it 'starts' only with living on (testament, iterability, remaining [restance], crypt, detachment that lifts the strictures of the 'living' rectio or direction of an 'author' not drowned at the edge of his text)." What comes before the "And" of line 1 is not, as Kenner claims, an ancient past "reclaimed by Homer as he [Pound] reclaims Homer now." In his Eliotesque reading of Pound, Kenner interprets Pound's translations and quotations as a rejuvenation of the past; consequently, his dissociation of the poem from its language allows him to posit a metalanguage that would guarantee translation without remnants. When he quotes approvingly Pound's advice, "Don't bother about the WORDS, TRANSLATE the MEANING," he ignores Pound's comments about interpretative and exegetical translation. In a note to Cantos LII-LXXI, Pound says that the foreign words add little to the text and merely serve as underlinings. The foreign words serve neither as an expansion of the English (or is it American ?) text into a universal language nor as an archaeological recovery of the past. The foreign words are the supplement that reveals the irreducible untranslatability of all languages, thus marking the limits of a humanism that maintains national boundaries while insisting on internationalism as well.

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