

George Kearns: On "Canto 81"

The canto moves almost imperceptibly through the early morning hours, as Venus and her stars give way to an "aureate sky" and finally to a light by which we can observe "the green world." Yet one hardly notices the movement of light and time, for the intensity of focus is on the mind within the tent. The shape of the canto dramatizes its own meaning, risking, for the first half, an imitative fallacy to do so. The three major sections (interior monologue, libretto, and final chant) mark a movement from egotism (me, my life), through participation in traditions of craft and song, to humility and a sense of the prisoner's true scale within nature.

After a prelude in which a natural world alive with mythological lovers emphasizes the prisoner's isolation (no Althea at his grates), we hear a rambling, prosy interior monologue touching on events of four-and-a-half decades, memories of Wyncote, Madrid, London, Paris, Frankfurt, and Italy. Toward the end, the monologue, which has at least moved from concentration to concentration, becomes deliberately thinned-out and chatty in the lines about George Horace and Beveridge, its discursiveness reflected in the image of the loose rabbit.

Suddenly - with the mysterious cry that forms the refrain of *The Song of Roland*, "AOI!" - he appears to understand what is happening to himself and to his verse: "a leaf in the current." Through the mediation of poetry, and with the help of Speare's *Pocket Book of Verse* discovered in the latrine, the canto makes its "turn." There is a kind of heroic gesture to it, as if by an effort of will (yet the results are artistically effortless) he draws on the deepest resources of his craft to compose a "traditional" lyric in which the history of song is reconstructed. For all his ill fortune, he is still *il miglior fabbro*.

It is this act, this homage to the marriage of words and music, more than the prayers and invocations beard in earlier cantos, that brings the spirits at last. The appearance of the eyes within the tent is the closest thing to a mystical moment in the *Cantos*. The presence of the eyes, an event not willed by the prisoner, then releases the great moral-religious chant with which the canto ends. The chant, like the "libretto," draws on traditional poetic language, imagery, and sentiments (and is marked, as Kenner has noted, by the very iambic pentameter Pound has just boasted of breaking); yet it is unmistakably written in the twentieth century.

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The chant against vanity springs both from the presence of the eyes and from the demonstration that the finest poetry is produced through loss of oneself in tradition (though paradoxically, as Eliot intended, the libretto is a brilliant display of individual talent). The opening pages of the canto, by contrast, are ingenious modernism.

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