

Christine Froula: On "Canto 81"

He describes what he sees: several pairs of eyes, in "half mask's space," interpassing, penetrating, shining with the colors of sky, pool, and sea. These eyes, like Chaucer's or Jonson's words, carry a message to the poet in the cage who has lost everyone and everything: "What thou lovest well remains." It is the same message Chaucer and Jonson bequeathed, a paradisaic message. The eyes, the "seen," bring "the palpable / Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell" - the mind's paradise that bears the "formèd trace" of all it has loved well. But with the assurance of that heritage, the eyes also bring an exhortation, the famous "Pull down thy vanity" passage which deflates the writer's romantic pretensions and ranks his creations in the larger-than-literary, larger-than-aesthetic context of "the green world." The self-accusations Pound has made before ("Les larmes que j'ai créées m'inondent") now take external shape as the vision becomes an oblique confession of wrongness and error - a confession which would have cost too much, there in the prison camp, had it not been simultaneously an affirmation of love and memory, and of a place in the green world.

At the end of the canto, the vision has vanished, and the shaken poet salvages from his self-accusations of vanity that part of his life which he had devoted to carrying on "a live tradition," gathering it from the "fine old eye" of a Blunt, a Yeats, a Hardy ("Swinburne my only miss," C, 523).

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