

## Paul Smith: On "Canto 81"

The first stages of Pound's personal tragedy occur when the gods in the shape of the American liberation forces in Italy had punished him for his hubristic bent by imprisoning him in the DTC camp at Pisa. There he is supposed to have learnt the humility that is often taken to pervade the Pisan cantos. Yet even in those cantos, where the aridity and arrogance of some of the earlier work are apparently replaced by the repentant lyrical voice, there emerges a clear indication of Pound's refusal to do anything but trust completely and rely upon the correctness of his perception. The famous lyrical passage at the end of 'Canto 81', the 'Pull down thy vanity' section (520-522), is given to the reader as the utterance of an enlightened oracle, as the lesson that has been rescued from historical process by careful and privileged contemplation, so that it is now available for transmission as truth. In 'Canto 81' Pound refers to the appearance of the tangible goodness and enlightenment he seeks in the form of seventeenth-century English music - especially that of Henry Lawes and John Jenkyns. That music, the leaf that rises from the root of Waller and Dowland, is capable of establishing a proper tradition, but Pound sees after it 'for 180 years almost nothing'. In fact the revival of interest in that enlightenment was only finally brought about by himself and Arnold Dolmetsch. This perception of his, or his realisation of that beauty, comes with the by now familiar appearance of a 'new subtlety of eyes into my tent', a version of the great epiphany of clarity. This epiphanic moment, not the 'full EoãV', but what Michael Schuldiner calls the possibility of 'affective knowledge', gives way to the bland statement of its lesson, its import. The 'what thou lovest well remains, the rest is dross' section of this canto conveys nothing other than Pound's knowledge and his confidence in that knowledge. It can be related to the opening of 'Canto 52' which I have just quoted: it embodies the knowledge that man's errors and vanities result from his inability properly to 'Learn of the green world what can be thy place'.

Here, then, the EoãV has actually made its way into the poem and Pound even congratulates himself on the actual enactment of that knowledge in the prosecution of his poem; he reminds us that 'to have done instead of not doing / this is not vanity'. The claims of the final few lines of the canto seem to cast an ironic light on the assumptions of the whole passage and on the critical attentions it has received: as well as encouraging us to 'Pull down [our] vanity', our emptiness, the passage contains its own vanities, those of self-congratulation. The voice which rhetorically attacks man as a 'beaten dog beneath the hail', as 'Rathe to destroy, niggard in charity' and full of 'mean hates / fostered in falsity' makes an almost comical and certainly brazen, self-righteous epilogue to its attack:

To have gathered from the air a live tradition  
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame  
This is not vanity. (522)

Such a paradoxical movement in the text's direction presents another sort of fissure in Pound's rhetorical confidence: as I have already shown, he regards truth to be the ineluctable

component of the correct and proper handling of the language. Language for him has the innate ability to close up the gap between its signifier and its signified and so refer directly to the referent. That attitude is plainly enough expressed in a footnote to the essay on Cavalcanti, written as far back as 1910. Referring to the thirteenth-century use of the word 'rhetoric', he says that it 'must not here be understood in the current sense of our own day. "Exact and adequate speech" might be a closer rendering.' The cratic confidence that I have pointed out before in relation to this theoretically rigorous use of language is surely not missing from this canto either: 'the unconquered flame' that emblemises the establishment of 'a five tradition' from historical process contains all the necessary phallic qualities to allow it to stand as the champion of 'thy true heritage' - the richness of natural generation.

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