

Mutlu Konuk Blasing: On "Canto 81"

Pound's "resuscitation" of dead languages (P, 187) is both literally a translation of texts and a passage of "air" through abiding patterns or codes. The patterns are abiding not because they carry the authority of the past but because tradition only carries on the form/force that inheres in the nature of things. His use of a global tradition in the Cantos is neither an exoticism nor an archaism. It is meant to show that "'as a wind's breath / that changing its direction changeth its name'" (106:752), different languages, literatures, and ages variously name the same breath animating all life. Because the tradition records the shape of things, the poet's language is naturally allusive. Poetic ontogeny repeats phylogeny; organicism rewrites the tradition. In Whitman's words, "See?as the annual round returns the phantoms return" (LG, 299).

Such knowledge underwrites the chant of creaturely "humility" in canto 81:

Pull down thy vanity, it is not man
Made courage, or made order, or made grace,
Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.
Learn of the green world what can be thy place
In scaled invention or true artistry [81:521]

The pun on "scaled invention" is Pound's axis here: the poet bows before nature and scales down his pride before the artistry of scaled creatures, the "green casque" that has outdone his "elegance." Yet the entire canto 81, which reiterates "(To break the pentameter, that was the first heave)" (518), is also an extended homage to the scaled music of the English lyric tradition and indeed scales the very climax of its "awakening" to the pentameter:

What thou lovest well remains,
the rest is dross
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage. [520-21]

In the same move, Pound scales his "vanity" to both nature and tradition yet concludes by reaffirming, in clear speech rhythms and diction, that his attempt to "make it new," to gather "from the air a live tradition," was not "vanity." The Cantosextol such a community of nature, tradition, and the individual poet. The signatures in nature, the seeds that carry its mystic cipher, are borne on the wind, just as the verbal tradition is borne on the breath. And just as

the "whole tribe is from one man's body" (99:708), its whole long tale is from one "man's" breath.

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