

Jean-Michel Rabaté: On "Canto 81"

At the end of the previous Canto, Pound had managed to overcome a vehemently expressed despair ('Je suis au bout de mes forces/'); the image of a drowning Odysseus saved at the last moment by the redeeming power of lyrical poetry was succeeded by a nostalgic evocation of England culminating in the surprisingly grandiose or flippant conclusion, 'sunset grand couturier'. This stemmed from the mention of 'her green elegance', connecting Nature as Gea-tellus in her spontaneous artistry with the conventional world of fashion suggested by the evocation of London. Thus it is no real surprise to find the name of Paquin, a well-known dress-designer at the turn of the century, spliced into the famous penitential hymn to the real source of love, contrition and atonement. Anyhow, the biblical rhetoric of lustration, taking its impetus from a private vision of eyes in the Camp's tent, has so much grandeur in its obsessive repetitions that Paquin's name has struck certain commentators as being slightly irrelevant. For my part, I knew of Paquin only through a popular bawdy song of the 1910s, 'Je suis braiseuse chez Paquin', increasing the negative connotations of lust, luxury and vanity, while Pound's American pronunciation of the name with a strong plosive 'p' would make it sound almost like 'faquin' (meaning cad, knave).

When we manage to learn more about Paquin, relevant features may be found, some of which destroy the web of speculative associations each reader is likely to spin for himself; for instance, the fact that she opened a house in London in 1912, at a time when Pound lived there but felt attracted by whatever came from Paris ("We" in London 1911-14 were subsequent to a great deal of Paris'), strengthens the connection between the end of Canto LXXX and Canto LXXXI. But, on the other hand, she was the wife of a rich banker, Joseph Paquin, and exploited her entries into the higher echelons of Parisian society. Did Pound know of this, and is she meant to represent beauty bought by usury? Besides, she was not only a gifted designer, but also her own mannequin, and knew how to promote, advertise and manage her house in a very modern and efficient way. Is she a symbol of grace and elegance, or of corruption and decadence? The only other explicit mention of her by Pound seems to go in the direction of a negative view: 'the mode Paris 1892-1910 is over. It is as uninteresting as a Paquin model for 1894.'" Is Paquin's name a kenning for what Williams calls 'obsolete'? Or is she a symptom of pure complacency and idolatry, since we learn that she exhibited a wax figure of herself at the Paris Exhibition of 1900? Pound seems to have known that green, along with white and gold, was one of her favourite colours for her much-admired evening gowns.

In the Cantos, the 'green casque' of Paquin has been undone by the elegance of nature, just as the pink casque of Stuart Merrill's 'baladines' assert hope and resilience. And we thus are brought back to the text itself in order to ascertain the full impact of Paquin's association with Pound, and the real intention of the forceful anaphoric link 'Paquin' -- 'Pound' -- 'Pull down'. The passage opens with a description of a vision which may have been real or dreamt, since the atmosphere is suffused with a half-light, a chiaroscuro bordering on hallucination. Pound may allude to Dorothy's visit to the DTC, or may wish to fuse the three women who haunt him ('Tre donne intorno alla mia mente' -- LXXVIII, p. 483). The subtle conceptual framework situates 'stance' between the two antagonistic terms 'hypostasis' (meaning foundation, support, to stand under) and 'diastases' (meaning separation, division, disintegration,

displacement). An earlier passage had already introduced the scene with almost mystical overtones:

?nor is this yet atasal
nor are here souls, nec personae
neither here in hypostasis, this land is of Dione
and under her planet
to Helia the long meadow with poplars
to K n p r i V

Reticence and denegation manage to call up a scene which is not there, since it is in the negative, although here as elsewhere the rhetorical impetus of the verse transforms negation into affirmation: thus invocation replaces the absent 'presentation'; the hymn and prayer are the logical outcome of such a process. 'Hypostasis' takes on the clearly neo-Platonic sense of fusion with the nous or world-soul, just as 'atasal' hints at full reunion with the divine. However, a separation of the eyes is necessary as the real condition for the sublimation of love and reunion, just as the interpenetration of glances binds Donne's lovers in 'The Ecstasy', a poem on which Pound commented: 'Platonism believed.' The nous is seen in spite of obstacles, but also because of the obstacle of division.

And Paquin? Her presence acquires greater justification as soon as we are alerted to the intertextual overtones, which derive from the relatively strange orthography of *eidos*: *eidos* is grammatically a noun in Pound's sentence, but he spells it with an omega (w), which dissociates it from the normal form with an omicron (o), meaning form, vision, beauty. We have therefore moved away from the Platonic *eidos* and are confronted with *eids s*, a participle meaning aware, knowing. Indeed, Pound is quoting from the Homeric 'Hymn to Aphrodite', which stresses that the union between a mortal and a goddess can never be achieved in full light, in the full knowledge of the action; when Anchises sleeps with Aphrodite, she disguises her divine nature: 'Then by the will of the gods and destiny he lay with her, a mortal man with an immortal goddess, not clearly knowing what he did.' *Ou sapha eids s*, which implies semi-consciousness, is reserved for mortals, while in the following hymn to Aphrodite the gods can be 'amazed at the beauty [*eidos*] of violet-crowned Cytherea'. The omega makes the difference between awareness, knowledge, perception and pure form or beauty. The lyrical impulse behind Pound's purgatorial prayer starts from an awareness of the limits of physical beauty, be it human or divine. The phenomenology of consciousness outlined here ('first came the seen, then thus the palpable') acquires its full importance when related to the conditions surrounding it ('Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell'). Paquin appears then as the necessary mediator between Nature and culture, man and goddess, above all between the poet's lonely fight and the forces of adversity, directly embodied by the victorious American armies (for whom she might pose as a dated pin-up).

There are clearly two worlds, the world of the 'live tradition' mastered at the cost of a life's dedication to beauty, and the world of anonymous barbarians: 'Whose world, or mine or theirs/ or is it of none?' The suggestion that the goddess might only appear to a 'No one', or blinded--castrated--mute *Ou tis*, has been explored before, but here the dialectical turn of the lustration

brings back the vision and the awareness to the poet's own eyes:

A fat moon rises lop-sided over the mountain

The eyes, this time my world,

But pass and look from mine

between my lids

sea, sky, and pool

alternate

pool, sky, sea

In Pound's unequal struggle, Paquin has to be punned into the feminine complement of 'No one', since she is *pas qu'un*, 'not just one': a feminine hand extended from the heavens or a tent's canvas, reawakening desire only to lead to sublimation, expiation and purgation. This is why the ending is so surprisingly triumphant:

But to have done instead of not doing

this is not vanity

To have, with decency, knocked

That a Blunt should open

To have gathered from the air a live tradition

or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame

This is not vanity.

Here error is all in the not done,

all in the diffidence that faltered ... (LXXXI, pp. 521-2)

In the same way as a name was necessary to illustrate the point about beauty and fashion, a poet's name is given as another example of moral integrity (Pound alludes to Blunt's strong pacifist position during the First World War). The pairs of feminine eyes have taught other eyes to master their diastases and find the 'old flame' of a tradition conveyed through glimpses and conversation. The substitution of Blunt's eyes for women's eyes reveals Pound's masculine bias, but also overcome the position of an aesthete such as Mauberley, who had remained 'inconscient' (like Anchises) of the 'diastases' of 'wide-banded irides'; his belated connection between eyes and sexuality, crudely invoked by the pun on 'orchid', flower and testicle, has been replaced by the latent play on 'casque', helmet, and flower of the genus of the orchis; the 'green casque' has indeed 'outdone' both Paquin and Mauberley.

'The error would only have been not doing, not acting -- Mauberley's sin of 'drifting' to an estrangement; here this is expressed by a complicated mixture of negatives and positives: 'all', 'not done', 'all', 'diffidence that faltered'. The error would have consisted in maintaining a modesty, a lack of confidence which hesitates, wavers: if the way to reference leads through difference, the way to difference leads through conquered diffidence, or, in other terms, reverence. For, while Williams wrote that there were 'no ideas, but in things', Pound could state that there is 'no presence, but in Names'.

From Language, Sexuality and Ideology in Ezra Pound's Canto. Macmillan, 1986. Copyright © 1986 by Jean-Michel Rabaté.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

Ezra Pound [2]

Author:

Jean-Michel Rabaté [3]

Poem:

Canto 81 [4]

Source URL: <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/jean-michel-rabat%C3%A9-canto-81>

Links

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/ezra-pound>

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/jean-michel-rabat%C3%A9>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/canto-81>