

Mary Ellis Gibson: On "Canto 81"

. . . in Canto 81 the poet excoriates vanity, and invokes the "beaten dog." McGann has asserted that in the famous declaration "Pull down thy vanity," Pound addresses as a "beaten dog" not himself but the U.S. Army (Toward a Literature of Knowledge, 114). Certainly it would make sense that Pound might characterize the army by the very sort of bestiality and illegitimate mixtures he mocked in *The Fifth Decade of Cantos*. The army is after all the American partially integrated army:

Pull down thy vanity

Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail,

A swollen magpie in a fitful sun,

Half black half white

Nor knowst'ou wing from tail

Other commentators have seen this as Pound's address to himself, and the identification with dogs as victims gives a certain probability to this reading. Ultimately, I think Pound leaves any such identification between the poet and the beaten dog, the poet and the black-and-white army, at best ambivalent; the poem is left to the reader's charity.

In Canto 81, the poet claims to have acted without vanity in the service of his art: "to have done instead of not doing / this is not vanity" (535). An uncharitable reader? or one who identifies more solidly with the dogs than Pound does and who doubts Pound's self-identification with the soldiers? would not be comforted by the poet's claim to sins of omission: "Here error is all in the not done, / all in the diffidence that faltered" (81.536). If Pound is to be seen as the "beaten dog," it is in admitting errors of omission and in claiming to be himself a victim.

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