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The Cantos and Pedagogy

"Pound had no relationship that was not pedagogic and wrote no poetry or prose that did not consciously instruct."[1] This claim from Gail McDonald's *Learning to be Modern* (1993) represents the consensus view in Pound studies. As Steven G. Yao and Michael Coyle assert, in their introduction to *Ezra Pound and Education* (2012), "from beginning to end, in specific content and characteristic form, Pound's verse was thoroughly pedagogical."[2] *The Cantos*, they affirm, is an "'epic of instruction.'"[3]

In this essay, we challenge this view. *The Cantos*, we argue, is not pedagogical. More specifically, we contend that the poem is not compatible with any conceivable model of education—from what Paulo Freire calls the "banking concept of education" to his emancipatory alternative, "the problem-posing concept of education."[4] In *The Cantos*, Pound is not a teacher and we are not his students. The poem is not an attempt to help us acquire new knowledge about the world or ourselves, or to think critically about the knowledge we already possess.

Our argument, if valid, has significant implications for how we read *The Cantos* and evaluate its utopian ambitions. If the poem is not pedagogical, how should we

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[1] Gail McDonald, *Learning to be Modern: Pound, Eliot and the American University* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 61.

[2] Steven G. Yao and Michael Coyle, "Introduction," in *Ezra Pound and Education*, ed. Steven G. Yao and Michael Coyle (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 2012), xiii.

[3] Yao and Coyle, xiii–xiv.

[4] Paolo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Continuum, 2000), 109.

approach its bewildering array of references, languages, and facts? How should we make sense of its political and social aims—its desire to initiate a new *paideuma*? These questions are especially acute for Pound scholars—those of us who devote much of our lives to interpreting and teaching the poem.

This essay has two parts. In the first, we examine the relation between *The Cantos* and pedagogy. Ultimately, our focus, here, is Pound's ideogrammic method, and the incompatibility between his anti-philological poetics and most scholarly approaches to the poem. In the second part, we examine Pound's conception of *The Cantos*' efficacy. Here, our focus is how we, as readers and scholars, might learn to become more attentive to Pound's intentions for the poem (and whether we should).

I

It is easy to understand why so many readers assume that *The Cantos* is pedagogical. From "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" and "Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" to *ABC of Reading* (1934) and *Guide to Kulchur* (1938) Pound was obsessed with teaching, and with teaching us how to become better readers and citizens. As he wrote his former teacher, Felix Schelling, "It's all rubbish to pretend that art isn't didactic."[5]

Yet it remains unclear just how *The Cantos* is supposed to teach us anything. James Laughlin, in his essay "Pound's Pedagogy," claims that "Pound was a born teacher […] He could not keep himself from teaching. In one way or another he was always

[5] Ezra Pound, *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907–1941,* ed. D.D. Paige (Faber: London, 1950), 180.

teaching."[6] Laughlin then discusses Pound's pedagogy in a range of genres: essays, anthologies, translations, letters, etc. Yet aside from noting that *The Cantos* is "a kind of teaching," Laughlin does not discuss the poem at all.[7]

Laughlin's omission is less an oversight than a tacit admission that *The Cantos* does not fit easily with Pound's other work—especially his prose, which has its own complicated connection to pedagogy. Education *as a topic* certainly features intermittently throughout the poem, but in such instances Pound subjects various forms of pedagogy to rebuke. As all readers of *The Cantos* know, philology, in particular, as both a "peculiar tone of study" and a teaching strategy, receives sustained abuse.[8] In "Canto 14," he describes:

> The slough of unamiable liars,
> bog of stupidities,
> malevolent stupidities, and stupidities,
> the soil of living pus, full of vermin,
> dead maggots begetting live maggots,
> slum owners,
> usurers squeezing crab-lice, pandars to authority,
> pets-de-loup, sitting on piles of stone books,
> obscuring texts with philology[9]

Philology, here, is tantamount to usury. (Usurers prevent the circulation of money; philologists prevent the circulation of ideas.) In "Canto 96," Pound laments the "unprepared young burdened with records." Counterintuitive as it may seem, Pound's

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[6] James Laughlin, *Pound as Wuz: Recollections and Interpretations* (London: Peter Owen, 1985), 34.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ezra Pound, "Provincialism the Enemy," in *Selected Prose, 1909–1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York, New Directions, 1973), 197. For discussions of philology as a kind of pedagogy, see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 55–118*;* Haruko Momma, *From Philology to English Studies: Language and Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2013), 152–84*;* Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 68–88; and James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 147–66.

[9] Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1998), 63; lines 68–76. All quotations from *The Cantos* are taken from this edition. Henceforth, canto and line numbers will be indicated in parenthetical references.

explication of unfamiliar texts in *The Cantos* is not an invitation to do the same, but an attempt to relieve us of that obligation. The "New Method in Scholarship" (also called "the method of Luminous Detail") announced in "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" (1911–1912) is an attack on the idea that knowledge is in any way compatible with academic study—the "method of *multitudinous* detail." "[W]e should read less, far less than we do," Pound writes; "the best knowledge is 'in the air.'"[10] For Pound, mediated knowledge is, at best, imprecise and easily corruptible; at worst, it is spurious.

Pound's attack on pedagogy is often read as an attack on academia. According to this view, Pound objects to the institutionalization of scholarship, not scholarship as such. (Indeed, he respects scholars such as "old Lévy" in "Canto 20.") Universities are especially anathema—insofar as they consolidate conventions governing the organization and dissemination of knowledge. Yet all scholarship is institutional insofar as it adopts a repeatable method of inquiry, and respects and revises earlier research. Pound's "New Method in Scholarship" is, thus, not scholarship at all. He is not interested in systematic inquiry or in the accumulation of knowledge. In "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris," he compares accumulated knowledge to mud obscuring a precious jewel. Pound's aim is to strip away the mud to reveal jewel underneath.

The Cantos clearly wants to tell us many things: don't start wars, say what you mean, pay your debts, admire beautiful art, cultivate trust between friends. Few would dispute the validity of these admonitions. But they are platitudes—as Pound himself almost admits in "Canto 93." (When speaking of a good and beautiful soul, he writes: "All ov which may be a little slow for the reader / or seem platitudinous / und kein

[10] Ezra Pound, "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris," in *Ezra Pound: Selected Prose, 1909–1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973), 23.

Weekend-Spass" (93.123–125).) Are Pound's admonitions an attempt to teach us how to improve our knowledge of right and wrong? Our answer is no. Pound's admonitions are not an effective form of teaching—this is obvious. But neither do we believe that he intended them as such.

What then does Pound mean when he instructs us *to know* something in *The Cantos?* In "Canto 52," for example, he writes:

> Know then:
> Toward summer when the sun is in Hyades
> Sovran is Lord of the Fire
> to this month are birds.
> with bitter smell and with the odour of burning
> To the hearth god, lungs of the victim
> The green frog lifts up his voice
> and the white latex is in flower
> In red car with jewels incarnadine
> to welcome the summer
> In this month no destruction
> no tree shall be cut at this time
> Wild beasts are driven from field
> in this month are simples gathered. (52.50–63)

These lines, in stark contrast to the ones that precede them, are remarkably lyrical. But what are we, as readers, meant to know? That "Sovran is Lord of the Fire"? That "no tree shall be cut" in late spring? The lines are a paraphrase of the *Li Ki* or *Book of Rites*, one of the five classics of the Confucian canon. The *Book of Rites*, and Pound's appropriations of it, contains a plethora of instructions relevant to Chinese peasants living before the common era. But what use are they to us? Certainly the poem is not a "school book for princes" (or peasants) as some critics suggest.[11] Far from offering a quaint but ineffectual set of instructions, the lines point to a deep antipathy to education. Even in their original contexts, these instructions are not teachings—they are rites.

[11] J.J. Wilhelm makes this claim in *Ezra Pound: The Tragic Years, 1925–1972* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 167.

By definition, "rites" require that certain things be done in a certain way. Knowledge is redundant. Action alone matters.[12] The canto's use of the imperative voice makes the point: "leave no fire to southward"; "Offer to gods of the hearth"; "take all great lizards, turtles, for divination"; "let no false colour exist here"; "now gather millet" (52.79, 86, 96, 121). Those directed to "Know then" are not being asked to learn anything—they are being told how to behave.

How should we read the scenes of education in *The Cantos*—especially the descriptions of conversations between teachers and students?[13] In "Canto 13," for example, Kung asks his disciples how best to achieve renown. (The question is actually about governance and order.) The disciples give their answers and we read:

> And Kung smiled upon all of them equally.
> And Thseng-sie desired to know:
> "Which had answered correctly?"
> And Kung said, "They have all answered correctly,
> "That is to say, each in his nature." (13.26–30)

The "correct" answer has little to do with what the disciples have learned—or even what they know. The canto does not represent a *maieutics*—a Socratic dialogue. Kung does not challenge his disciples to learn new facts, revise their opinions, or adopt new points of view. What matters is that their speech is consistent with their characters—that each student has answered according to "his nature." Ontology, here, overrides epistemology. Such essentialism permeates the poem.

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[12] To be precise, knowledge—as "knowledge-that"—is redundant. Knowledge—as "knowledge-how"—is relevant. To perform rites one must know how to perform them—yet Pound rarely supplies this information. For an account of the difference between knowing that and knowing how, see Gilbert Ryle, "Knowing How and Knowing That," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 46 (1945–1946): 1–16.

[13] The following examples (by no means exhaustive) demonstrate Pound's interest in education: 20.21–56 ("old Lévy"); 34.131–3 ("Education of boys"); 74.63–77 ("Ouan Jin / or the man with an education"); 74.301–3 ("Teach? It cannot be done"); 85.96–109 ("leave 'em without understanding"); 91.109–16 ("Freud, Marx and the american beaneries"); 99.465–74 ("established that everybody got some education"); 108.153–9 ("the brocars of Rome promote caitifes / learning decayeth").

(Not surprisingly, the moral core of this "lesson," namely that anyone who answers in accord with his essential nature answers correctly, distorts the original, in which Kung qualifies his response by declaring, in James Legge's version, "I give my approval to Tien." The distortion is deliberate: in his translation of the *Analects* (1951), Pound augments Confucius's comment, "What harm, let each say what he wants," by adding a parenthetical aside: "*directio voluntatis*.")[14]

But when most scholars discuss *The Cantos* and pedagogy, they usually have one thing in mind: parataxis—and specifically, the "ideogrammic method." To explain this "method," Pound analyzes an ideogram in *ABC of Reading*:

> But when the Chinaman wanted to make a picture of something more complicated, or of a general idea, how did he go about it?
>
> He is to define red. How can he do it in a picture that isn't painted in red paint?
>
> He puts (or his ancestor put together) the abbreviated pictures of
>
> ROSE CHERRY
> IRON RUST FLAMINGO
>
> That, you see, is very much the kind of thing a biologist does (in a very much more complicated way) when he gets together a few hundred slides, and picks out what is necessary for his general statement. Something that fits the case, that applies in all of the cases.
>
> The Chinese 'word' or ideogram for red is based on something everyone KNOWS.[15]

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[14] Ezra Pound, *Confucius* (New York: New Directions, 1951), 243.

[15] Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 22. Pound illustrates the significance of the Chinese written character with an example that is not, in fact, from Chinese. The most common word for "red" in modern Mandarin Chinese is gong^{2}紅 (sometimes transliterated as hong^{2} in Pinyin and as hung^{2} in *Mathews*, 2383), composed of the 120th radical si^{1} or mi^{4} 糸, meaning silk and the phonetic gong^{1} 工, meaning labor(er) or work(er). These components have complex etymologies, but they do not have much to do with the four terms Pound presents. Pound's source for his account of "red" is Ernest Fenollosa. Written on the verso of Fenollosa's "final" 1906 notebook draft of what was then titled "The Chinese Written Language as a Medium for Poetry," and subsequently omitted by Pound, is a diagrammed note reading in part: "rose / sunset / iron rust / flamingo / cherry," with each term connected by a straight line to the word "red(ness)." See YCAL MSS 43, Box 101, Folder 4248, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale Collection of American Literature, Yale University; or Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*, ed. Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 85.

In theory, the ideogrammic method juxtaposes discrete facts to make complex connections and communicate abstract ideas. It exemplifies a process of induction: concrete particulars ground general concepts.

How is the ideogrammic method pedagogical? A. David Moody argues that "the method […] has the virtue of forcing the mind to attend to the detail and to the various possible relations of the things that concern it; and thus of keeping the mind free from powerful and dangerously simplifying generalisations and abstractions."[16] This is why it is pedagogical: it prevents the "one-eyed or closed mind"—and, as a result, promotes a new (and, for Pound, more just) way of seeing the world.[17]

At root, the ideogrammic method is a hermeneutic based on intuition and immediate insight. It advances a theory of interpretation fundamentally at odds with philology's attempts to achieve a comprehensive and accountable understanding of its object. The poetics that underlie Pound's so-called method—its tendency to insinuate connections between unconnected or barely connected things—exacerbates and exploits the lacunae that philologers attempt to repair and explain. (Criticism of *The Cantos* is often an attempt to identify the ligatures of sense that Pound has purposefully withheld.) Indeed, Pound's poetics might be described as the intentional *de*formation of philological work. Philological reading strategies—identifying fragments, editing texts, writing commentaries, historicizing—are explicitly rejected in *The Cantos*.[18]

Without wishing to make too grand a claim about literary interpretation, we propose that most texts communicate a sense of their authors' intentions. Readers then

[16] A. David Moody, *Ezra Pound, Poet,* vol. 2. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 167. Note the contradiction between "forcing the mind" and "keeping the mind free."
[17] Ibid.
[18] Gumbrecht, 4.

use this "sense" to determine the text's meaning.[19] *The Cantos* reverses this process: knowing what Pound intended is a condition for knowing what his poetry means. Put otherwise, understanding precedes interpretation, not vice versa. As Pound tells the translator and pedagogue W.H.D. Rouse, "taint what a man sez, but wot he *means* that the traducer has got to get across."[20]

This disconnect between saying (or writing, in this case) and meaning puts readers (and scholars) in a precarious position. To begin to get a sense of Pound's intentions, we must violate them. To begin to access the unmediated truth of his poetry, we must adopt various forms of scholarly mediation. Consider an extreme case: the first ten lines from "Canto 104"—

> Na Khi talk made out of wind noise,
> And North Khi, not to be heard amid sounds of the forest
> but fit in with them unperceived by the game,
> But when the young lout was selling the old lout
> the idea of betraying Mihailovitch
> The air of the room became heavy so that young S.
> Resigned from the F.O. and "went into the City"—
> Banners they took after Lepanto
> but now obtain "control of the outlets"
> to keep down printed quality (104.1–10).

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[19] For a famous and controversial defence of this claim, see Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (Summer 1982): 723–742.

[20] Pound, *Selected Letters*, 271. In an essay for *Hound & Horn*, Pound makes a similar, yet less radical claim: "THE SANE METHOD OF STUDYING HISTORY," he writes, "consists (or wd. if it were ever practiced, consist) in learning what certain great protagonists intended, and to what degree they failed in forcing their program on the masses." See Ezra Pound, "Newspapers, History, Etc.," *Hound & Horn* 3.4 (July–September 1930): 578. Tim Redman discusses Pound's belief that "all that matters is the purity of intent." See Tim Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 267. The correspondence between Pound and his German translator Eva Hesse further emphasizes the necessity of establishing Pound's intentions prior to interpreting the poem. As Hesse translates *The Cantos*, she sends Pound "Fragebogen" (questionnaires) about his intentions. On a superficial level, the questionnaires highlight the fact that "a translator into an inflected language must be able to comprehend the text more thoroughly than an ordinary critic, or her declensions will get into a helluva mess." But more significantly, the questionnaires demonstrate how *The Cantos* does not communicate Pound's intentions. Terrell bases many of his entries in the *Companion* on information Hesse solicited from Pound. See Eva Hesse, "Letter to Ezra Pound," 6 December 1951, Eva-Hesse-Archiv, Bayrische Amerika-Akademie. This archive is not catalogued. The Beinecke, however, holds Hesse's original letters to Pound from 27 April 1952 onwards.

This "ideogram" consists in three basic terms: discourse about the language of the Nakhi people; the geopolitical manoeuvring in the Balkans during World War II; and the 1571 Battle of Lepanto. The absence of any connection among these terms points to the problem we mean to identify—namely, the ideogrammic method's reliance on baseless assertion.[21] To make sense of this passage, readers must reconstruct the reasons that motivated Pound to connect the terms in the first place. (Following Terrell, we suspect that Pound thinks that the terms represent the evils of international banking.)[22] Such passages frustrate readers who attempt to evaluate the poem according to objective criteria and known facts. As Carroll Terrell advises in a different context, readers must attend to "what Pound sees," rather than what they see or "what philologists see."[23] Ultimately, the kind of reader the poem requires is not a philologer, but a psychic.[24]

For Pound, the paucity of substantiating fact often galvanized his conviction in the accuracy of his intuitions. (Indeed, the *presence* of substantiating facts would

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[21] Girolamo Mancuso discusses the significance of Pound's use of "'reasonless' juxtaposition." See Girolamo Mancuso, "The Ideogrammic Method in *The Cantos*," trans. Peter Makin, in *Ezra Pound's* Cantos*: A Casebook*, ed. Peter Makin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 65-80. Hugh Kenner put this matter another way, describing Pound's arrangement of facts as "resistant to propositional formulation and derived from observed particulars that have no syllogistic connection with one another." See Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1951), 84.

[22] To ground the connection in some semblance of historical reality, Terrell reverts to a combination of sympathetic identification and extreme generality. He notes that the F.O.'s [Foreign Office's] decision to side with Josef Tito against Draja Mihailivitch, and Joseph Rock's work on the Nakhi people occurred around 1941. He also argues that the juxtaposition of geopolitical maneuvers in the Balkans and the Battle of Lepanto indicates "'the same old story'" about banking. As we argue below, Terrell is at his best when he avoids such synthetic arguments. See Terrell, 675–676.

[23] Terrell, 469.

[24] Psychic, not psychoanalyst: Pound would never accept a model of reading that would allow a critic to know more about a work of art than its creator. Just try to imagine Pound responding to an inventive reading of a canto by saying, "I never thought of it that way." In one of the few psychoanalytic readings of *The Cantos*, Jean-Michel Rabaté suggests that the poem invites us to understand Pound's work as projecting "model intentionalities consciously mastering their worlds." See Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Language, Sexuality and Ideology in Ezra Pound's* Cantos (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1986), 143. Our larger point: Pound does not believe in an unconscious. He rarely mentions Freud—and when he does, he disparages him. For example, the famous outburst that interrupts "Canto 91": "Democracies electing their sewage / till there is no clear thought about holiness / a dung flow from 1913 / and, in this, their kikery functioned, Marx, Freud / and the American beaneries" (91.109–113).

undermine his intuitions by connecting them to the false positivism of philology.) For example: as early as 1945 (as evidenced by a letter to his daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz), Pound identified Ecbatana, the "city of Dioce" ("Canto 74"), as a holy, paradisal city ("la Città di dio").[25] Pound later went so far as to describe the ideal *polis* as one of the poem's "constant themes."[26] In a 11 February 1952 letter to his German translator Eva Hesse, Pound gives Dioce a pseudo-Chinese heritage: "Rawl/ sees story is exotic, but goes, as I see it, the wrong way. pr[onounced]/ Di o say / which I suppose wuz Tai Wu Tzu." Hesse balked at the association: "Explanation re Dioce don't seem quite kosher to me as far as Wu is concerned. Don't see how, by any stretch of the imagination, it could possibly have remotest connection with Wu family, (not even as parallel)." In response, Pound wrote: "The text does NOT affirm that Dioce was de facto Tai Wu Tze." Nevertheless, "Canto 94" affirms the connection:

> by the Kingdom of
>
> T'ai 太
>
> Wu 武
>
> Tzu 子
>
> as mentioned in Rollin (94.6–10)

The passage can only be rationalized at the most tenuous level of homophonic relation (and even this is inaccurate: in the Wade-Giles system of Mandarin Chinese pronunciation, the unaspirated dental initial "t" is pronounced "d," while "t'" is aspirated

[25] Ezra Pound, "Letter to Mary de Rachewiltz," YCAL MSS 43, Box 62, Folder 2707, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale Collection of American Literature, Yale University.

[26] Ezra Pound, "Letter to Eva Hesse," 10 March 1952, Eva-Hesse-Archiv, Bayrische Amerika-Akademie. The following string of quotations cites passages from an exchange that took place in unpaginated letters dated between February and March. "Rawl" is George Rawlinson, the editor of the 1858–1860 English language edition of Herodotus's *Histories*, Pound's source.

and pronounced "t"). Terrell suggests Pound "may not have recalled" this difference.[27] Consciously or not, Pound's desire to assert an aural resemblance is all that matters. In doing so, he emphasises poetic volition instead of actual fact. Put otherwise, the knowledge the poem seeks to override is precisely that which might be said to exist outside Pound's own mind: "the kingdom of T'ai 太 / Wu 武 / Tzu 子" only makes sense if we already know Pound's intentions.

The ideogrammic method, thus, is not a method at all: it does not present an objective, replicable program for achieving specific results.[28] Its purpose (and its novelty) is to make connections for which there is no program. Pound's idiosyncratic beliefs are paramount—and the only guide to the poem's meaning. Accordingly, Laughlin is wrong when he suggests that Pound "presents verities and compares them so that students can judge for themselves."[29] *The Cantos* is not an open text and there is no standard that would allow readers to "judge for themselves."[30] As Kathryne V. Lindberg writes:

> Pound does not grant a constitutive role to the reader, nor does he formulate a hermeneutic which might recover a writer's initial intuition. […] Quite simply, his notion of language forbids either binary or dialectically resolved models.[31]

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[27] Terrell, 570.

[28] As Bob Perelman writes, "The stability of Pound's faith ultimately rests on its being untestable." See Bob Perelman, *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein, Zukofsky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 57.

[29] Laughlin, 35.

[30] For the qualities of an "open text," see Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure," in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 40–58.

[31] Kathryne V. Lindberg, *Reading Pound Reading*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 38. In an essay for *Ezra Pound and Education*, Peter Nicholls argues that the late cantos betray the poem's promise to present knowledge and understanding as dialogical. But we might read the trajectory differently: the poem is not a betrayal of first principles, but a demonstration of the impossibility, for Pound, of such a poetics. In Pound's view, the truth does not "emerge," it does not "become" or require any kind of formation. It pre-exists. It is. See Peter Nicholls, "'You in the dinghy astern there': Learning from Ezra Pound," *Ezra Pound and Education*, ed. Steven G. Yao and Michael Coyle (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 2012), 152.

The ideogrammic method, in other words, is not predicated on dialogue, but prejudice—radically so. Apparent verities are arranged to corroborate interpretations that must be understood in advance. This is also true for Pound's famous presentation of his ideogrammic method in *ABC of Reading:* are we really supposed to believe that a such a display of exempla will lead to an interpretation independent of the framing material Pound supplies?[32]

This is not to criticize the poem. We are not William Gardner Hale pointing out Pound's "blunders."[33] (Pound's idiosyncratic beliefs are central to the poem's power.) Rather, we are attempting to think critically about the assumptions and practices that guide Pound scholarship. Reading *The Cantos*, it is easy to take our bewilderment as evidence of the poem's pedagogy—to believe that in the face of confusion we are meant to identify the poem's sources, translate its foreign languages and, especially, rationalize its relentless juxtaposition of "facts." This mistake has yielded some of the best literary criticism we know. But it is a mistake—or at least a violation of Pound's conception of the poem. What and how we learn from *The Cantos* have little to do with what the poem wants and expects.

"You don't argue about an April wind," Pound writes in "The Serious Artist."[34] Nor will he argue about beauty. Even at his brow-beating best—which Alec Marsh has tried to justify as a "pedagogy of yelling"—Pound, in *The Cantos*, is not trying to

[32] *The Cantos*, we should make clear, is not a speculative poem. For Pound, writing is a medium for disseminating the truth—not an instrument of discovery or conjecture. Speculation about the connection among an ideogram's terms would be fatal to its value. The ideogram for red, for example, does not ask readers to speculate about the meaning of its nexus of terms. Its meaning is already established.

[33] William Gardner Hale, "Pegasus Impounded," *Poetry* 14.1 (April 1919): 52–55. "Mr. Pound is incredibly ignorant of Latin. He has of course a perfect right to be, but not if he translates from it. The result of his ignorance is that much of what he makes his author say is unintelligible […] If Mr. Pound were a professor of Latin, there would be nothing left for him but suicide." See also Pound, *Selected Letters*, 230–231.

[34] Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 45

convince anyone of anything.[35] To distinguish, as Pound does often, between "stuffed" ideas and "live" ones, is to distinguish between facts "you can look up in a phone book or library" and those "which are in one as one's stomach or liver, one doesn't have to remember them."[36] For Pound, knowledge, like a liver, is part of who you are. Neither can be easily imparted to others.

II

> Great poetry does not teach us anything—it changes us.
>
> —W.B. Yeats[37]

The overarching argument of this essay is that *The Cantos* is not a pedagogical poem—it does not teach (or attempt to teach) its readers how or what to think. More specifically, we argue that the poem rejects the idea that a methodological approach to knowledge is either desirable or expedient. *The Cantos* cares much more about who we are (and what we can become) than what we can learn.

How then does the poem attempt to influence who we are? We think Alan Golding is right when he describes the "presentation and juxtaposition" of the poem's self-evident truths as a kind of magic.[38] Carroll F. Terrell is also right when he calls *The*

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[35] Alec Marsh, "Ezratic 'Reeducation': Pound and the Solons," in *Ezra Pound and Education*, ed. Steven G. Yao and Michael Coyle (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 2012), 126.

[36] Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 57. Similarly: "The domain of culture begins when one HAS 'forgotten-what-book.'" See Pound, *Guide*, 134.

[37] W.B. Yeats, "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson—I," *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, vol. 9, *Early Articles and Reviews*, ed. John P. Frayne and Madeleine Marchaterre (New York: Scriber, 2014), 6

[38] Golding, 192. Golding writes: "By presentation and juxtaposition, the 'relative weights' of the artworks in question will magically reveal themselves, presumably on some unspoken but universal scale, becoming their own form of luminous detail."

Cantos "a religious poem" and "a revelation."[39] Pound himself uses the latter term in the letter to Schelling quoted above. After declaring that "It's all rubbish to pretend that art isn't didactic," he writes: "A revelation is always didactic."[40]

The concept of the "paideutic spell," a touchstone for Pound scholars, comes close to capturing Pound's conception of the poem's efficacy.[41] In "The Psychology of the Poetic Performance," from *The Preface to Plato* (1963), Eric A. Havelock writes:

> You did not learn your ethics and politics, skills and directives, by having them presented to you as a corpus for silent study, reflection and absorption. You were not asked to grasp their principles through rational analysis. You were not invited to so much as think of them. Instead you submitted to the paideutic spell. You allowed yourself to become 'musical' in the functional sense of that Greek term.[42]

What is this "paideutic spell"? For the Greeks, it was a practice of memorization and submission. "The learning process," Havelock writes, "was not learning in our sense but a continual act of memorisation, repetition and recall. This was made effective by practising a drastic economy of possible linguistic statements, an economy enforced by rhythmic patterns both verbal and musical." The key terms, for Havelock, are "surrender," "indoctrination," "hypnosis." "The audience," he argues, "found enjoyment and relaxation as they were themselves partly hypnotised by their response to a series of

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[39] Terrell, viii.

[40] Pound, *Selected Letters*, 180. In *Guide to Kulchur*, Pound elaborates on his conception of "revelation." He writes: "At last a reviewer in a popular paper (or at least one with immense circulation) has had the decency to admit that I occasionally cause the reader 'suddenly to see' or that I snap out a remark…'that reveals the whole subject from a new angle.' That being the point of the writing. […] The newness of the angle being relative and the writer's aim, at least this writer's aim being revelation, a just revelation irrespective of newness or oldness." See *Guide*, 51.

[41] See, for example, Peter Nicholls's remarks on the paideutic spell in *Ezra Pound: Politics, Economics and Writing, A Study of* The Cantos (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1984), 200–201; and "'You in the dinghy astern there,'" 156.

[42] Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 159.

rhythmic patterns, verbal, vocal, instrumental, and physical, all set in motion together and all consonant in their effect."[43]

With respect to *The Cantos*, the "paideutic spell" is not a method—it is a metaphor. The context that would make such a "spell" a method of cultural continuity is absent. We are not in ancient Greece listening to Homer perpetuate values we all share. Indeed, Pound's aim is not the continuation of an established culture. It is the constitution (or projection) of a culture that never existed. Nevertheless, this is how *The Cantos* is designed to work: by casting a spell that transcends or exorcises "rational analysis."[44] Pound imagines that the poem will awaken who we truly are—that it will free us from the corrupting influence of usury, linguistic indeterminacy, and abstraction.[45]

This account of the poem's aspirations is not new. It should be familiar to all Pound scholars. Yet it is radically incompatible with how most scholars read and write about the poem. It is an outright contradiction to recognize Pound's commitment to casting a "spell" and then studiously rationalize his self-evident truths. In Pound's view, understanding is not necessarily dependent on knowledge. (Indeed, Pound attempts to separate knowledge and understanding—to cultivate the latter without recourse to the

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[43] Havelock, 152.

[44] As Peter Makin observes (and as our essay demonstrates) rational analysis is necessary insofar as it reveals its own insufficiency. "If a rational discourse is required of the post-war Cantos," he writes, "it must often be found by searching the sources, not only in the wake of the obvious indications but trawling large areas of adjacent text, footnote, and […] logically irrelevant dictionary entry. To understand how this poem became what it is, the rational discourse must indeed at some point be teased out. Only thus can one understand the strange gap between Pound's aims and his results." See Peter Makin, Review, *Modern Language Review* 83.2 (April 1988): 436.

[45] Plato's concept of "anamenesis" may be relevant to Pound's conception of the poem's efficacy. In an encyclopedia article on innate knowledge, Jerry Samet writes: "The issue first comes up in the *Meno*, where [Plato] puts forth the doctrine of anamnesis, which holds that all learning is recollection, that everything we will ever learn is already in us before we are taught." (In the *Meno*, Socrates helps an uneducated slave "recollect" the Pythagorean theorem by asking a series of leading questions.) *The Cantos* seems interested in latent knowledge of this kind, but refuses to replicate Plato's model for making it manifest: maieutics. See Jerry Samet, "The Historical Controversies Surrounding Innateness," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), accessed November 25, 2015, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/innateness-history/>>.

former.)[46] Reading the poem, we are not students at the Ezuversity, taking notes about the relative merits of Herrick and Milton. We are initiates awaiting revelation.

One reason it is so difficult to accept this fact is that it minimizes our agency as readers and scholars, and as human beings. *A revelation cannot be forced*. No matter how much we might learn about the poem, we cannot ensure that we will fall under its spell. Indeed, strenuous study might impede its magic. The poem does not tell us how to access its mysteries. This is the deep truth of D.S. Carne-Ross's related claim that "Not merely does the thing, in Pound's best verse, not point beyond itself: *it doesn't point to us*." According to Carne-Ross, this "thing"—the word, the image, the discrete fact—is not an appeal to readers. "[I]f man matters," he writes, "it is because […] he too is part of the seasonal, sacred life of nature. But only a part."[47] The book illuminates *us*; we do not illuminate *it*. "Man reading shd. be man intensely alive. The book shd. be a ball of light in one's hands."[48] To read *The Cantos* faithfully is to relinquish our power. Submission, not mastery, is required.

How then should we read the poem? Donald Davie describes one way of respecting the poem's self-conception. In his second book on Pound, he recommends reading "many [cantos] at a time, and fast"—

> And this is the sort of reading we ought to give them—not just in the beginning either. This, indeed, is what irritates so many readers, and fascinates an elect few—that the *Cantos*, erudite though they are,

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[46] In *Guide to Kulchur*, Pound discusses the relation between knowledge and understanding: "it does not matter a two-penny damn whether you load up your memory with the chronological sequence of what has happened, or the names of protagonists, or authors of books, or generals and leading political spouters, so long as you understand the process now going on, or the processes biological, social, economic now going on, enveloping you as an individual, in a social order […] Knowledge is or may be necessary to understanding, but it weighs as nothing against understanding, and there is not the least use or need of retaining it…" See *Guide*, 51–2, 53.

[47] D.S. Carne-Ross, "The Music of Lost Dynasty: Pound in the Classroom," in *Ezra Pound's Cantos: A Casebook*, ed. Peter Makin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006),199.

[48] Pound, *Guide,* 55.

> consistently frustrate the sort of reading that is synonymous with "study," reading such as goes on in the seminar room or the discussion group. It is hopeless to go at them cannily, not moving on to line three until one is sure of line two. They must be taken in big gulps or not at all. This means reading without comprehension? Yes, if by comprehension we mean a set of propositions that can be laid end to end. We are in the position of not knowing "whether we have had any ideas or not." Just so.[49]

In Davie's view, we should submit to the poem's rhythms over repeated readings.[50] True comprehension is not a matter of learning propositions, translating unfamiliar languages, or explaining ideograms. True comprehension is an experience of awe—"not awe at the poet's accomplishment, his energy, or his erudition but awe at the energies, some human and some nonhuman, which interact, climb, spiral, reverse themselves, and disperse…"[51] Davie's choice of "elect" to characterize the poem's devotees is telling. His account of awe parallels accounts of election in Christian theology.[52]

Another model of faithful reading is Terrell's practice of annotation. This may sound wrongheaded. Isn't Terrell's practice exactly the kind of philology *The Cantos* critiques? Yes and no. Although his long glosses are an exception, the *Companion* (1980–1984) rarely attempts to "solve" Pound's ideograms. At its best, the book explicates each discrete reference. This is one reason why the *Companion* is so

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[49] Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound* (New York: Viking, 1975), 84.

[50] In a letter to Norman Holmes Pearson, Hugh Kenner discusses the importance of repeatedly rereading *The Cantos*: "Problem of teaching a work like the *Cantos* is that one can't begin to get the hang of 35 years' work in a semester; I suppose the danger must be that the student either collapses into source-hunting as a mode of reading, or gets snooty." See Hugh Kenner, "Letter to Norman Holmes Pearson," 30 September 1953, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale Collection of American Literature, Yale University. ZA Pearson.

[51] Davie, 85.

[52] Quoting Bob Perelman, Alan Golding argues that "Pound divides readers between the few initiates into the sacred realm of poetry who see by the light of immediate, self-evident truth and the many laboring in dullness, who both need poetry's instruction and yet, because of Pound's 'denial that sacred knowledge can circulate' are refused it or seen as immune to it." One could read this "division" (as Golding does) as an example of Pound's elitism: Pound thinks that only certain readers are worthy of his poem. But one could also read the division as the inevitable effect of religious poetry. The poem, one could argue, has universal aspirations, yet the magic only happens to a few. Pound's elitism, in this latter reading, is beside the point. He does not divide readers; his poem does. See Golding, 184.

frustrating—especially for readers approaching *The Cantos* for the first time. It seldom illuminates what the poem is trying to accomplish. Compared to William Cookson's *A Guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (1985), which provides an overview of each section or suite of cantos, the *Companion* is, at once, more reticent and more exhaustive.[53] Cookson's *Guide* might be more helpful, but Terrell's is more faithful to Pound's conception of the poem's efficacy.

The *Companion*, in this way, exemplifies two incompatible reading practices. The first and most obvious, might be described, following Jerome McGann, as "radial reading." According to McGann, radial reading "involves decoding one or more of the contexts that interpenetrate the scripted and physical text. It necessitates some kind of abstraction from what appears most immediately." (As an "emblem of radial reading," McGann imagines "a person who rises from reading a book in order to look up the meaning of a word in a dictionary or to check some historical or geographical reference.")[54] This kind of reading is what all scholars do. For Pound scholars, the *Companion* is the key instrument of "interpenetration"—the most obvious way to abstract from "what happens most immediately" on the page.

But the *Companion* also exemplifies a different practice. In *Freud and Philosophy* (1965), Paul Ricoeur contrasts a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (which he famously associates with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud) with a "hermeneutics of recollection" or faith—

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[53] We only partially agree with Peter Makin's claim that Terrell's shorter glosses are sometimes so reticent that they becomes useless. Indeed, when Terrell's glosses are most useless, they are also the most consistent with Pound's intentions—insofar as they avoid rational scholarly explanations of difficult passages. See Peter Makin, Review of *A Companion to* The Cantos *of Ezra Pound*, *The Modern Language Review*, 83.2 (April 1988): 436.

[54] Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 119.

> The contrary of suspicion, I will say bluntly, is faith. What faith? No longer, to be sure, the first faith of the simple soul, but rather the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics, faith that has undergone criticism, postcritical faith. […] It is a rational faith, for it interprets; but it is a faith because it seeks, through interpretation, a second naïveté.[55]

Such a hermeneutics, Ricoeur argues, attempts "to describe and not to reduce." "One reduces," he writes, "by explaining through causes (psychological, social, etc.), through genesis (individual, historical, etc.), through function (affective, ideological, etc.)." The aim is to "surrender to the movement of meaning," not demystify it.[56] Ricoeur's "second naïveté" is another name for receptivity. This, we believe, is what the *Companion* tries to do: provide an interpretation that exorcises the need for interpretation.

Ultimately, we do not think that there is a "correct" way to remain faithful to the poem. (And we are wary of suggesting that readers should, in fact, remain faithful. In many respects literary criticism is and should be an adversarial undertaking—*especially when reading Pound*.) We can, of course, argue about the most interesting and satisfying ways to read the poem. And we can point out practices that are contrary to Pound's intentions: philology, paraphrase, assertions of indeterminacy. We can also embrace these practices and argue about their results. (As we have noted, philological readings of the poem are some of the best we have.) Finally, we could argue, following Charles Bernstein, that Pound's intentions are at odds with the poem—that the poem manifests intentions of its own. (Bernstein advises that we should "read *The Cantos* with the full incredulity it demands.")[57] This is a provocative theoretical claim: Bernstein is not only arguing that Pound's intentions and the poem's effects diverge. He is arguing that the

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[55] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 28.

[56] Ibid., 28, 29.

[57] Charles Bernstein, "Pounding Fascism," in *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 126.

poem means something different than what Pound intended it to mean.[58]

Eventually we might have to acknowledge that the question how to read *The Cantos* might be "wrong from the start." For two reasons. First, the poem successfully attacks prevailing scholarly methods, poetic methods, historical methods, economic methods, indeed "method" itself. A definitive account of *The Cantos* is permanently impossible—as Terrell himself concedes and even celebrates.[59] (The *Companion*, Jim Powell argues, demonstrates "how little good, finally, such exegesis does, how small a stage it advances us toward an understanding of the *Cantos.*")[60] Second, the question might be wrong because it assumes that we, as readers, have power that we do not in fact have. It assumes that the poem's ambitions are individual, not structural—that the poem aims to change our behavior by *convincing* us to behave in a certain way.

In comparison, the question how was the poem read is answerable. Indeed, the question illuminates a history of scholarship—and, more importantly, a history of influence. Hugh Kenner is an ideal resource here—insofar as has his work captures the impact and significance of Pound's "revolutionary poetic" (to adopt Leon Surette's phrase).[61] But it would be a mistake to identify this revolution as Pound's aim. He wanted to revolutionize poetry, but he also wanted to revolutionize society.

(That this revolution failed does not mean that the poem is a failure. Does a

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[58] Pound would reject Bernstein's claim. For Pound, a text is a necessary evil that intervenes between author and audience. A text might distort an author's intentions, but it cannot have intentions of its own. It always means what its author intended it to mean.

[59] "It is not possible now—nor will it ever be—to make a complete statement about all the themes in *The Cantos.*" See Terrell, viii.

[60] Jim Powell, "A Conspiracy of Scholars, a Tribe of Poets," *The Threepenny Review* 10 (Summer 1982): 11. Powell continues: "Once we have learned what those Greek words mean, who this personage was, which myth, which poem these lines alluded to, what background clarifies this fragment of anecdote, we have to still confront the question: what does Pound mean by the details he gathers and presents? What division of significance informs them? What order of value do they inform? Frequently exegesis and a little thought will combine almost at once to answer such questions, but frequently they will not."

[61] Leon Surette, *A Light from Eleusis: A Study of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 2.

religion fail because its initiates fail to believe? For Pound, the truth and value of a poem has little to do with its acceptance by readers.)

The Cantos may "contain" history, as Pound claimed and critics constantly repeat, but it is not an historical document. The poem is proleptic—predicated on the assumption that what is presently obscure will be brought "into some sort of design or architecture later." Put otherwise, the poem will only make sense in an as-yet-unrealized context. Outside this context, efforts to read the poem in a way that is consistent with Pound's intentions may prove fatal to the critical intelligence. Just as the early cantos were conceived of as a "preparation of the palette," so too is the entire poem geared toward a utopian horizon. [62] If this utopia is ever realized, it won't be through the education or re-education of the poem's readers.

[62] Pound, *Selected Letters*, 180.