

## MAKING ITALIAN NEW: POUND'S ITALIAN BETWEEN DANTE AND PROPAGANDA

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### 1. *E.P. and Italy: Life and Contacts*

Pound's interest in and knowledge of the Italian language and culture are mainly, but not exclusively, literary. From his early enthusiasm as a young poet to the *polùmetis* and mature artist, Pound never quenched his thirst for things Italian – Vivaldi, Medieval and Renaissance painting, San Zeno and the signed column in Verona, the bas-reliefs of the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini, to mention but a few of his passions. However, little “Ray” probably experienced his first contacts with Italians via the Philadelphia “Wops” in the early 1900s, but no doubt also through his father's dedication to charity organizations raising money for the poor, in particular for poor Italian immigrants. In fact, in a letter dated 5-6 June 1905 from Hamilton College, Pound writes to his father: “glad your Italian fund is filling.”

At the University of Pennsylvania, Pound was introduced to the Italian literary tradition from its origins, Guido Cavalcanti and Dante Alighieri. As his critical writings on Italian literature

and writers are extensive, suffice it to mention chapters 6 and 7 of *The Spirit of Romance* (“Lingua Toscana” and “Dante”) as examples of his passionate interest in Italian. Since the beginning of his “periplum” in 1908, his poetic exordium *A Lume Spento* coincided with his Venetian period. Shuttling between Venice and Sirmione, on Lake Garda, where he spent numerous holidays from 1910 to 1913, Pound seems to have picked up expressions of the Veneto dialect, as in the poem “The Study in Æsthetics” (*Lustra*):

The very small children in patched clothing,  
 Being smitten with an unusual wisdom,  
 Stopped in their play as she passed them  
 And cried up from the cobbles:

*Guarda! Ahi, guarda! ch'è be'a!*

(*Personae* 97)

Later, in the early 1920s, Pound studied Cavalcanti codices in many Italian libraries and archives (Malatestiana in Cesena, Laurenziana in Florence, Vaticana in Rome, Ambrosiana in Milan, Capitolare in Verona, Marciana in Venice, etc.). Apart from his knowledge of several Italian regions, once he settled in Rapallo in 1925, Pound used Italian daily, as he met all sorts of people from every walk of life, as shown by canto 72, the first of the two Italian cantos.

However, before approaching his Italian in the published works, it is worth examining an interesting exercise in a letter to his mother Isabel (2 March 1923). In some twenty humorous lines, Pound expresses his frustration over the gender of Italian words. For example the word *letter* poses a dilemma for the writer who ironically wonders: “lettera – dev’essere femminile ?? o no? semp[r]e questo questione di sesso!...” Referring to his father Homer’s temporary inability to walk distances, he comments: “mi duole che il padre non puote scender’ il collino?” (“I’m sorry father can not walk down the hill?”). The question mark indicates his uncertainty: “collina” is in fact female in Italian, whereas

Pound's "collino," though non-existent, may well be a hybrid born of "collina" (feminine) and "colle" (masculine). In any case, of more importance here is Pound's use of archaisms, of the "Dantesque touch": "puote" (from the verb "potere") is a reminiscence of Dante (*Inf.* III, 95-96). Other passages of this letter contain misspellings, hesitations and idiosyncrasies, but it is especially replete with doubts concerning the gender of words.

As it is impossible here to retrace the history of Pound's lifelong admiration for Dante and Cavalcanti, suffice it to say that these two Florentine masters remain the "unwobbling pivot" of Pound's Italian literary heritage and the bedrock of his linguistic formation in Italian, both spoken and written.

## 2. *The ABC of Italian*

Here are a few quotations from Pound's critical essays, giving the reader a better approach – through his own method of Luminous Detail – to some characteristics of canto 72:

Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. ("How to Read," LE 23)

Knowledge cannot be acquired without knowledge of various tongues. (LE 24)

Different languages – I mean the actual vocabularies, the idioms – have worked out certain mechanisms of communication and registration. No one language is complete. A master must be continually expanding his own tongue, rendering it fit to bear some charge hitherto borne only by some other alien tongue... (LE 36)

Another prevalent error is that of dealing with Italian hendecasyllables as if they were English "iambic pentameter." One is told in college that Italian verse is not accentual but syllabic but I can't remember anyone's having ever presented the Anglo-American reader with a lucid discrimination between the two systems of measurement. ("Medievalism," LE 169)

Finally, in "Lettera al Traduttore, *L'Indice*, 12 Oct. 1930, Pound directly writes in Italian:

L'italiano è pieno di germogli di opportunità, questa durezza nuova ed efficace che voglio, non si fa di mozziconi, ma si fa di parole dure, martellate, una contro l'altra. Risorsa negletta è l'eredità. Non si adopera abbastanza la luce e le punte ironiche che nascono fra significato latino e significato corrente. (Italian is rich in opportunities, this new and effective hardness I long for, is not made up with stumps/fragments, but with hard words hammered one against the other. Heritage is a forgotten resource. The light and the ironical points springing from a Latin meaning and the current meaning are not sufficiently exploited.) (OS 1263-64)

### 3. "If this be Italian": Canto 72 – Text, Pretext, and Context

Canto 72 displays Pound's major effort with the Italian language *sub specie poesiae*, through several of its registers, from the lofty tone of literature, culture, poetry and poets (mainly Dante, Cavalcanti, but also other authors: Albertino Mussato (1262-1329) and Manlio Torquato Dazzi (1891-1968), together with the classics and the Bible), to the lower register of everyday popular speech (slang, invective, vernacular, flavored with local dialects of various Italian regions), to the current register of the historical moment, the fascist period and its language of propaganda. It is an exemplary illustration of his knowledge, interest, lexical choices, semantic nuances, and musical gusto for the Italian language.

Furthermore, in the drafts one can follow the development of the three main rhetorical stages, i.e. *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*. As far as the first is concerned (the invention/creation of words) a few examples will be offered, and some reflections suggested, to emphasize the highly exhilarating moments and episodes that must have occurred during the drafting of this canto.

3.1. *From Epos to Bathos – Ìncipit*

Purché si cominci a ricordare la guerra di merda  
 Certi fatti risorgeranno. Nel principio Dio  
 Il grande esteta, dopo avere creato cielo e mondo  
 Dopo il tramonto vulcanico . . .  
 Cacò il gran' usuraio Satana-Gerione... (72/425)

Here is Massimo Bacigalupo's translation, which I will be quoting throughout unless otherwise stated:

Provided you begin to remember the shit war  
 Certain facts will reemerge. At the beginning, God  
 The great aesthete, after making heaven and earth,  
 After the volcanic sunset . . .  
 Shat the great usurer Satan-Geryon... (9)

Abruptly, we meet the myth of Genesis and the present degradation of the world. The first word that strikes the reader is “guerra di merda” (“shit war”) – register: low-slang-vulgar-scatological. Mixed with it, both the allusion to the evocative power of Poetry (“Purché si cominci a ricordare . . . certi fatti risorgeranno”): that is a new and unconventional, anti-traditional, and para-epic invocation to the Muses as in classical poems. But the poet does not address his prayer directly to the Sisters of Parnassus – he simply reaffirms the necessary ritual of evocation/invocation. Only after that ritual has been accomplished, can the bard begin *ab origine*: “Nel principio Dio / Il grande esteta, dopo avere creato cielo e mondo . . . cacò Satana-Gerione.” Again, a bitter-sweet mixing of low and lofty, epos and bathos. See Genesis I, 1: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,” and St. John I, 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Then, to maintain metonymic and semantic coherence with the “merda” of line one, the poet employs the corresponding verb: “cacò” (shat). Theologically

and philosophically speaking, a touch of de-mythicized Gnosticism that won't do any harm. The same scatological register reappears later, when the poet contemptuously defines the advancing Allied Army: "Lo sterco sale fino a Bologna . . . ed altra immondizia" (72/428) – "Excrement climbs as far as Bologna . . . and other garbage."

As far as language is concerned, this *incipit* looks eloquent enough. As for the personae, the first is Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. After the mixture of low and lofty, it is now the turn of the local and the literary: this passage is in fact the richest both in Italian dialect forms and in literary echoes. To begin with, the dialects:

E mi viene ora a cantar'  
In gergo rozzo (non a (h)antar 'oscano)

The hard guttural "c" of "cantar" is substituted, at least graphically, by the aspired "h" typical of Tuscan pronunciation = "(h)antar". By improper analogy and proximity, also the dental "t" of "toscano" undergoes elision and aspiration in "'oscano": the first masterly touch of the poet imitating local Italian.

A few lines later one meets the second example:

"Ma se vuoi ancora combattere, va, piglia qualche giovanotto;  
*Pigiate hualche ziovinozz'* imbelle ed imbecille . . .  
Nei *ziorni* del crollo."

This is the dialect of Emilia, a region close to Tuscany but with entirely different pronunciation, cadence and rhythm of speech (softer and more melodic, unlike the more nervous and harmonic Tuscan): *ziovinozz* and *ziorni* are indubitably pronounced in Emilian dialect, the dialect, by the way, of the "Boss" Mussolini. But Pound mixes again pronunciation and "aspirations" (in every sense), so that even "*hualche*" (for "qualche") is again an arbitrary Tuscanization of the pronunciation of "q."

A brief inter-textual comparison as regards the phrase “nei *giorni del crollo*.” In the 1932 opera *Cavalcanti* (Act III), the old Guido is exiled to Sarzana (an area which, linguistically and geographically, borders on three regions – Liguria, Emilia and Tuscany, being therefore influenced by all of them). Approaching his end, Guido is trying to teach his cousin and page Ricco the exact pronunciation of the word *giammai* in his famous ballata: “Perch’io non spero di tornar *giammai*” (Eliot’s “Because I do not hope to turn again” in *Ash-Wednesday*). The uncouth young man sings “Perch’io non spero di tornar *ziammai*” so that the old poet violently scolds him:

Non storpiare la Z. non pronunciare la G come una Z. Gesssù, uno passa metà della sua vita a cercare di far splendere la lingua e il proprio paggio, uno di famiglia, ha la pronuncia di un macellaio. (DON’T buzz up your z’s. Don’t pronounce a G like a Z. JeeZuss a man spends half a lifetime trying to shine up the language, and his own page in his own family pronounces it like a butcher.) (Hughes-Fisher 147)

But in canto 72 the modern poet is justified: he is offering his readers a wide spectrum of the languages and dialects (Tuscan and Emilian) he has heard and learnt.

The third example, very brief, comes from Ezzelino’s speech:

Mi tradì chi il tuo amico ha tradotto  
Cioè Mussato, che ha scritto  
Ch’io *son fiol* d’Orco (72/429, my emphasis)

I was betrayed by the one your friend translated  
I mean Mussato, who wrote  
That I am an ogre’s son

While the play on translation/treason needs no explication, it is worth noticing that “*fiol d’Orco*” is “son of Dis/Hades/Pluto,”

from the latin “Orcus,” not “son of an ogre” (Bacigalupo). “Fiol d’Orco” derives from the Venetian phrase “fiol d’un can,” which is said to come from “son of a Khan” (Tartar chief), as a symbol of violence and roguery (and not, as popularly understood, from “can(e),” i.e., son of a dog).

The conversation between Pound and Marinetti is full of literary echoes, of personae hiding behind literary allusions:

“Ma ti darò un posto nel Canto, ti darò la parola, a te . . .  
 Lascia a me la parola.  
 Lascia a me ch’io mi spieghi,  
     ch’io faccia il *canto* della guerra *eterna*  
 Fra luce e fango.” (my emphasis)

But I will give you a place in the Canto . . .  
 Let me speak.  
 Let me explain myself  
     For I sing the eternal war  
 Between light and mud.

Two classical *topoi* and literary echoes are evident here – on the one hand the Horatian theme of the immortalizing power of poetry; on the other hand a personal re-inscription of the famous *incipit* of Virgil’s *Aeneis*: “Arma virumque cano...”

Thus, in these examples, great epics look more respectable than at the very beginning of this canto, and the lofty is mixed with the local of Italian dialects.

### 3.2. *A Meeting with Spirits – Personae and Language*

As regards other literary echoes, the following quotations prove the close interweaving between language and persona/ae. This occurs with the appearance of Ezzelino III da Romano, the Medieval tyrant (1194-1259) of the Marca Trivigiana. It is here impossible to dwell on the relationship between Pound, Ezzelino da Romano, the Paduan pre-humanist Albertino Mussato (who wrote the Senecan tragedy *Ecerinis*

between 1311-1315), and Pound's friend Manlio Torquato Dazzi, who in turn translated into Italian Mussato's tragedy six hundred years later, in 1914, with the title *L'Ecerinide*. This chain of literary and linguistic connections is evidence of a continuous interchange of personae and of language (see Casella 2000 and 2001). Suffice it to say that Ezzelino's spirit (the canto being, in Pound's own words, "a meeting with spirits") reveals and identifies himself through the very language of the tragedy whose protagonist he is, and more precisely through a couple of direct quotations from Dazzi's translation:

Finché un altro tono della gamma

Uscì dalla diafana del cavo vuoto:

*"Vomon le nari spiriti di fiamma." . . .*

Ma l'altro spirito tornò al suo ritornello

Con:

"poco minor d'un toro"...

(che è verso dell'*Eccerinus*

tradotto dal latino)

Until another note of the gamut

Emerged from the diafan of the void cavity

"The nostrils vomit spirits of flame." . . .

But the other spirit returned to his refrain

With:

"little less than a bull"...

(which is a line of the *Eccerinus*

Translated from the Latin).

Thus, Ezzelino's ghost gives his modern counterpart the clue to understand who is really speaking: not Dazzi, but his (and Mussato's, and Pound's as well) hero: thanks to the language (in this case that of allusive quotation) the persona takes shape, voice, and life.

Along with the literary and the lofty, the low and the slang, the local and the dialect, one finds examples of the language

of poetry (Dantesque) and of propaganda. Once more, there are two different and remote registers.

As for poetry, canto 72 undeniably represents a poetical homage to Dante (as canto 73 is an homage to Cavalcanti), mainly from the stylistic, metaphorical and topological (ritual and mythical meeting with *umbræ*) points of view. One should carefully listen to the music and cadence of the lines. The modern ephebe writes *à la manière de son maître*: in canto 72 through tercets rhyming at a distance, smooth and fluent hendecasyllables, and always with the awareness that the Italian hendecasyllable does not and cannot correspond to the English iambic pentameter. The verses are an attempt at reformulating a Dantesque language in cadence, in lexical choice (see, for example, the many archaisms), in syntactic constructions and wordplay:

Sovra voler produce sovra effetto  
 Purtroppo troppo, egli distrugger volle...  
 Se mai l'imperator quel dono fece  
 Bisanzio fu la madre del trambusto  
 Lo fece senza forma e contra legge,  
 Scindendo sé da sé e dallo giusto;  
 Né Cesare se stesso mise in schegge,  
 Né Pietro pietra fu prima che Augusto. (72/426, 429-30)

– where also the rhyme scheme looks remarkably felicitous.

In the meeting with the “familiar compound ghost” of “Little Gidding” II, T. S. Eliot tried to write

a passage which is intended to be the nearest equivalent to a canto of the *Inferno* or the *Purgatorio*, in style as well as content . . . The intention, of course, was the same as with my allusions to Dante in *The Waste Land*: to present to the mind of the reader a parallel, by means of contrast, between the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, which Dante visited, and a hallucinated scene after an air-raid. But the

method is different: here I was debarred from quoting or adapting at length – I borrowed and adapted freely only a few phrases – because I was *imitating*. My first problem was to find an approximation to the *terza rima* without rhyming. English is less copiously provided with rhyming words than Italian... (128)

Pound, instead, dares to vie with the very master of the Italian language. Success? Failure? Let his critics speak.

Massimo Bacigalupo has written several times about the Italian cantos: “his [Pound’s] vocabulary and syntax are a foreigner’s, i.e., elementary and occasionally erratic to the point of obscurity . . . It is the telling consummation of Pound’s long standing commerce with things Italian, and a precise measure of the limitations (intellectual, linguistic, moral) of his approach – that of the aesthetic traveller” (1984: 72-73, 79). Then, seven years later: “Far from being an irrelevant and embarrassing digression, cantos 72 and 73, we may safely conclude, are central to Ezra Pound’s poem. For they lead directly to the Italian drafts” (1991: 28). More recently, in the introduction to *Canti Postumi*: “They are extraordinary texts from every point of view: an American writing in fourteenth century Italian . . . What strikes the reader is passion, and passion is what gives these text their vigor.” And in the *Pound Encyclopaedia*: “though Pound’s Italian is occasionally clumsy, canto 72 is a cogent performance, full of his combative spirit and his message . . . Very simple in its emotions, canto 73 is nevertheless effective and connected by many themes to the rest of the poem . . . Cantos 72 and 73 should be read in Italian” (2005: 40).

Maria Luisa Ardizzone stresses the ideological aspects of the Italian Cantos: “These two Cantos are evidence of Pound’s fascist faith and of the metamorphosis to which he has subjected it. . . as a matter of fact they are indisputable evidence of fascist ideology, but also of the mythical and transfigured dimension within which Pound saw it...” Peter

Makin does not waste his time, and dismisses them quickly: “They are not a successful piece of writing” (234).

Finally, let us consider the “dialect of the tribe” as regards the language of fascist propaganda, mouthed by Marinetti and Ezzelino, the two revolutionaries *par excellence* of the Middle Ages and of the present (for Pound) “era.” The rhetorical apparatus and imagery of the official speeches of the Fascist Ventennio, of its language of persuasion, propaganda, and instigation are here exhibited. It is in fact quite remarkable and revealing that both Italian cantos close with the same linguistic register, and with similar images of final victory. From a lofty *incipit*, rich in literariness, allusions and echoes, to a bathetic *explicit*, in the dialect of *that* tribe Pound had mistaken as his own.

#### 4. *Drafts and More Luminous Details*

Apart from their enormous importance for a philological and chronological reconstruction of the genesis of cantos 72 and 73, and of the following sequence numbered 74 and 75 written in Italian (see Bacigalupo 1984, 1991, 2002, 2005; Bush 1996/97), Pound’s many drafts offer insights into his daily work with Italian. The leaves and notebooks (especially the one with the green cover) are filled with lines and lines of poetry, discarded variants of a single line or stanza, and marginal glosses offering further variations on the theme, and sequences of apparently disconnected rhyme words. Of countless examples, perhaps the most puzzling for an Italian reader is a repeated annotation in the speech of Ezzelino da Romano, when the tyrant denounces the literary (and consequently historical) betrayal he has been a victim of:

Mi tradì chi il tuo amico ha tradotto.  
 Cioè Mussato, che ha scritto  
 Chi’io son fiol d’Orco,  
 E se tu credi a simile pastocchia

Ogni carota può ben farti ciuco. (72/429)

In the drafts one reads:

- *se puoi dar fede a un tal pastoia / chi farebbe / si faria il ciuco dietro ogni caretta;*
  - *si tu dai fede a un tale pastoia / ogni caretta di te farà il ciuco;*
  - *e se tu crede a simile pastoia / ogni caretto può ben farti ciuco;*
  - *ogni caretta può ben farti ciuco;*
  - *e se tu crede a tal pastoia / ogni caretta può ben farti ciuco,*
- (Pound Papers, Mss. cantos 72 and 73)

Fundamentally: if you believe in/trust such a fib any cart will make an ass of you.

In all these examples the key word is always “caretta/caretto” (cart, that in Italian may be both feminine and masculine: “carretta” or “carretto”), the typical means of transportation usually drawn by an ass. But, all of a sudden, in the final text, it becomes a “carota,” whereas the ass remains unchanged. Pound seems to prefer the former (“caretta/o”) but finally chooses the latter, and does not confound the two words and their meaning. However both of them are perfectly connected with the pack animal: the proverb says, in fact, that to teach an ass it is advisable to use the stick and the carrot (an excellent pedagogical rule, but also charged with political and practical overtones typical of the Fascist era, when beating political opponents was common practice). Thus either a carrot or a cart would be perfect, as far as logic is concerned, but we may wonder, after comparing the drafts and the final text: is it a carrot or a cart that makes an ass?

##### 5. *Tentative Conclusions*

Though there are no definitive interpretations and answers when it comes to Pound and his poetry, there are certainly many unanswered questions. Were cantos 72 and 73 written for ideological reasons, to prove Pound’s fascist faith and personal reliability to the regime? Or to express his *saeva indignatio* and to echo a Dantesque invective after the betrayal,

surrender and Armistice? If nothing else is certain about their genesis, it is safe to say that they are a form of emulation, a homage to his adoptive country and to its greatest poet. And like his mentor, Pound shows himself a master of the language and a great *artifex* of personae. Eliot's *miglior fabbro* is indeed, a "wordsmith" of the highest order – also in these cantos where "He Do the Italian in Different Voices."

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Berlin and New York: De Gruyter), the study explores the projection of a past Dantean SPS as key to individuals' perspectival alignment with the narrator, and concomitantly, with the author's fictionalized formulation of the realities of American working-class women in the 1950s. The linguistic anchoring of this Dantean SPS is also analysed and discussed. The Dante narrative is one of the key narratives of nineteenth-century Italy in the self-fashioning of Italian patriotism. At the times of Dante, the Italian city-states were split between those supporting the Pope (Guelphs) and those supporting the Emperor (Ghibellins): the split often existed inside each city with political factions claiming to support one or the other. The split had much more to do with business than ideals. He favoured the appointment of a new Black Guelph government and the subsequent ousting of the members of the rival party. Dante never returned to Florence and for twenty years he lived at the courts of Italian princes, mostly in Verona and Ravenna where he died in 1321. He expressed his political theories in a lengthy treatise (*De Monarchia*) and in a more effective way in describing the two sons of Rome (the Pope and the Emperor) each enlightening a specific aspect of life.