THE MACKSEY JOURNAL
A PUBLICATION OF JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Volume 5 Article 44

2024

# “pure Light, we beseech thee: The Incantatory Quality in Ezra Pound’s Poetic Corpus”

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# *pure Light, we beseech thee*: The Incantatory Quality in Ezra Pound's Poetic Corpus[1]

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**Abstract**

Ezra Pound's poetry—and especially his later poetry—by a certain allusiveness of style, by a brevity of expression, and by a dogged self-referentiality that effects the appearance of hermetic impenetrability, has all but become a by-word for deliberate obscurantism and extravagant modernist experimental excess. In exploring the incantatory quality of Pound's poetry, from his earliest lyrics to the final "Drafts and Fragments" of *The Cantos*, I shall not only examine Pound's construction of a novel English-language poetics but will moreover demonstrate the fundamental parallels between the otherwise private and exclusive-seeming later work of his corpus, and the accessible lyrics of his early modernist and *Imagiste* periods.

**Keywords*:*** Ezra Pound, Incantation, Modernism, Poetry, *The Cantos*

[1] This article is based on arguments I make in my thesis on paradise in Pound's *œuvres complètes*, and especially on the fourth chapter "Incanting Paradise." This research was funded in part by an Undergraduate Research Travel Award from the Office for Undergraduate Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Born in Hailey, Idaho in 1885 and dying 1972 in Venice, Italy at age 87, Ezra Pound is perhaps the seminal figure of literary modernism. Championing the careers of such modernist luminaries as T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, and H. D., and an influential figure in the early history of *Poetry* magazine who played a major role in the publication of W. B. Yeats and Rabindranath Tagore, Pound is today most often remembered for Eliot's grateful dedication of "The Waste Land" (a poem that would be unrecognizable absent Pound's editorial hand): "For Ezra Pound / *il miglior fabbro*"—"the better craftsman," a tag from the *Divine Comedy* with which Dante expresses his approbation for Arnaut Daniels, the influential vernacular poet. The dedication remains an indication of the trail-blazing role Pound took up both in his generation and for those that followed. To students of literature, Pound's reputation rests largely on *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, a medium-length poem of social and aesthetic criticism, and on *The Cantos*, a daunting 800-page Modernist epic in free verse, a work which, though it has perhaps more than any other set the tone of and course for all subsequent American poetry, remains a by-word for hermeticism, poetic obscurity, and the extravagant experimental excesses of poetic modernism.

Approaching *The Cantos*, however, by way of the paradigm of poetic incantation, I argue that it shares more than a passing resemblance to Pound's earlier, more accessible lyric work, and illustrate a facet of Pound's metaphysics and poetics constant across his entire corpus largely unacknowledged by scholars of either Pound studies or literary modernism. Moreover, I seek to demonstrate in Pound's incantatory poetics theoretical structures of continued relevance to poetry today.

Magical theories of poetry—a notion familiar to Pound and the modernists themselves—and specifically those centering on incantation or invocation, have seen something of a renaissance over the past three decades.[2] Thomas M. Greene presents a sophisticated framework of lyric as invocation wherein the magical spells and propitiatory rituals of primitive societies, in the face of changing social and material conditions, develop historically into lyric poetry. The poem is then a more sophisticated, though attenuated, means of reconciling to the poet's social context and the surrounding natural world the same desires that the magical action of a prior age sought to satisfy by direct intervention.[3] Unlike purely magical invocation, which elaborates the epithets and characteristics of the ontologically consistent, preexisting (extratextual) being invoked, Greene argues, the secular lyric invocation functions by calling into existence a *new* being. Green terms this being an "ad hoc oppositional presence,"[4] through the specific epithets and characteristics described over the course of the text:

> Thus the apparently dual structure of this lyric seems to mingle "name" and summons inextricably. What looks like an address in the vocative followed by a

[2] See Matthew Mutter's "Criticism of Magical Poetics" for an overview of the scholarly debate and recent revival of magical theories of poetry, as well as an insightful critique of their modern incarnation through the lens of W. H. Auden's criticism of "magical thinking" in literary modernism. Matthew Mutter, "'The Power to Enchant that Comes from Disillusion': W. H. Auden's Criticism of Magical Poetics," *Journal of Modern Literature* 34, no. 1 (2010): 58-85, https://doi.org/10.2979/jml.2010.34.1.58.

[3] Thomas M. Greene, "Poetry as Invocation," *New Literary History*, no. 3 (1993): 495–517, https://doi.org/10.2307/469420.

[4] Greene, "Poetry as Invocation," 504.

> series of injunctions in the imperative is more usefully considered as a single elaborately periphrastic and metaphoric act of denomination denoting an entity previously unnamed and unknown. The denomination brings the entity into being, so that the wish for reception, the wish for the presence of a specific emanation, is a unique wish actualized by the unique text.[5]

In contrast to incantation as a magic tool, which seeks to effect material change by the supplication of a specific entity to perform specific actions, incantation as an aesthetic structure functions by constructing a unique, novel entity. The poem, then, in delineating and describing this entity, satisfies the desire for its existence as an ideal, or imaginary, concept.

This sort of invocation is aptly illustrated by one of Pound's early lyrics, the 1908 "Night Litany":

O Dieu, purifiez nos coeurs![6]
purifiez nos coeurs!

Yea the lines hast thou laid unto me
in pleasant places,
And the beauty of this thy Venice
hast thou shewn unto me
Until is its loveliness become unto me
a thing of tears.

O God, what great kindness
have we done in times past
and forgotten it,
That thou givest this wonder unto us,
O God of waters?

O God of the night
What great sorrow
Cometh unto us,
That thou thus repayest us
Before the time of its coming?

O God of silence,
Purifiez nos coeurs
Purifiez nos coeurs
For we have seen
The glory of the shadow of the
likeness of thine handmaid,
Yea, the glory of the shadow

[5] Greene, "Poetry as Invocation, 504–505.
[6] "O God, purify our hearts!"

of thy Beauty hath walked
Upon the shadow of the waters
In this thy Venice.
And before the holiness
Of the shadow of thy handmaid
Have I hidden mine eyes,
O God of waters.

O God of silence,
Purifiez nos coeurs,
Purifiez nos coeurs,
O God of waters,
make clean our hearts within us
And our lips to show forth thy praise,
For I have seen the
shadow of this thy Venice
floating upon the waters,
And thy stars
have seen this thing out of their far courses
have they seen this thing,
O God of waters.
Even as are thy stars
Silent unto us in their far-coursing,
Even so is mine heart
become silent within me.

*(Fainter)*
Purifiez nos coeurs
O God of the silence,
Purifiez nos coeurs
O God of waters.[7]

Pound adapts the call-and-response form of the litany, along with its concomitant archaic ritual language, including fixed, foreign-language formulæ, direct address of deity, and prominent repetition, to bestow upon his subject, the city of Venice at night, the elevated gravity typically reserved for objects of religious veneration. But these are more than the mere accoutrements of litany—alone, such a poem could be read as pastiche or parody. "Night Litany," rather, succeeds in constructing in the extremely ontologically flexible space occupied by the term, "God," an ad hoc oppositional presence unique to this poem and its themes. The epithets, "God of waters," "God of the night," and "God of [the] silence" are not traditionally Christian, and in selecting them, Pound not only foregrounds the mise-en-scène of Venice at night, but further constructs a novel complex, that of the transcendent aesthetic purification that both inspires

[7] Ezra Pound, "Night Litany," *A Quinzaine for this Yule*, in *Poems and Translations*, ed. Richard Sieburth (New York: The Library of America, 2003), 69.

art and redeems the perceiver. Pound's "God" has shown him, through the sight of Venice at night, a beauty so extreme that it has "become unto [him] / a thing of tears," and, like the stars at night, "[s]ilent unto us in their far-coursing," his "heart / [has] become silent within [him]." Pound's translation of the refrain "Purifiez nos coeurs" as "make clean our hearts within us" recalls the Aristotelian notion of *katharsis*, but this aesthetic purification is not merely the heightened, passive experience of the beautiful aesthetic object—it proceeds to prompt his "lips to show forth thy praise," that is, to express his experience of this beauty in the form of language—lyric poetry. Nor is this aesthetic purification that inspires artistic creation the conscious, rational decision of the autonomous poetic subject; it is presented as a religious or mystic experience directly homologous to personal redemption, even salvation, through beauty. When the speaker asks "what great kindness / have we done in times past / and forgotten it / That thou givest this wonder unto us" or "What great sorrow / Cometh unto us, / That thou repayest us / Before the time of its coming," the perception of extreme beauty ("this wonder") is made explicitly to compensate for either a good deed done or a great sorrow to be suffered by the perceiver, and the perception of beauty comes to stand in for the traditional guerdon of eternal paradise with which God rewards the righteous and comforts the sorrowful.

Greene draws a similar conclusion concerning the same process in Milton's "L'Allegro," which we might quote *mutatis mutandis*: "The short name [God] [...] is brilliantly filled out by a set of images which is not predetermined by its umbrella; no one could have *predicted*, that is, the specific wealth of development the word [God] is accorded as well as its delicate shadings of tone and its answerable rhythms."[8] The aesthetic complex that Pound evokes—indeed, invokes—while necessarily unique in its specific manifestation in this poem, is not, however, without its compliment across his corpus. Aesthetic beauty as a consolation for grief is the metaphysical heart of Pound's short lyric "Prayer for a Dead Brother," which Pound wrote to console his friend, the painter Sheri Martinelli, on the occasion of her brother's death in 1954:

May his soul walk under the larches of Paradise
    May his soul walk in the wood there
and Adah Lee come to look after him.

Queen of Heaven receive him.
Mother of the Seven Griefs receive him
Mother of the seven wounds receive him
    May he have peace in heart.

By a stream like Castalia, limpid,
    that runs level with the green edge of its banks,
Mother of Heaven receive him,
Queen of Heaven receive him,
    Mother of the Seven Griefs give him Peace.

Out of the turmoil, Mother of Griefs receive him,
Queen of Heaven receive him.

[8] Greene, "Poetry as Invocation," 506.

May the sound of the leaves give him peace,
May the hush of the forest receive him.[9]

Formally, this lyric closely parallels the former; direct petition of supernatural forces, formulaic ritual language, and mantric repetition lend the piece a remarkably similar, elevated tone. Whereas, however, the previous poem is a praiseful psalm for a boon already granted, in this poem, Pound, suppliant and intercessor for the "Dead Brother," implores the various supernatural entities invoked to receive him "[o]ut of the turmoil" into paradise and comfort him ("give him Peace"). That this comfort is to be rendered "under the larches," "in the wood," "[b]y a stream like Castalia, limpid, / that runs level with the green edge of its banks," and by means of "the sound of the leaves" and the "hush of the forest" is more than the mere recurrence of the natural imagery that spans the entirety of Pound's poetic output. Pound, in characterizing this "Peace," defines it, namely as homologous to the experience of the sublime beauty of the natural world. Significantly, "Castalia" is the spring on Mt. Parnassus sacred to Apollo and the Muses, and a symbol of poetic inspiration in Greco-Roman literature[10]: Pound literally petitions poetry itself, the linguistic manifestation and expression of beauty.

The poem operates on two levels: on the first, basic level, Pound consoles the intended recipient in the face of the loss of her brother by an obsecration for his eternal quiescence. On the second, abstract level, in the act of making his invocation and pronouncing his petition, he actively constructs the specific ad hoc oppositional presence supposed to fulfil it. And if the means by which it is to be fulfilled is the aesthetic experience of beauty (represented symbolically by natural beauty and effected by poetry), then the many supernatural entities he invokes to do so come to stand in for a novel complex perhaps best summarized as the redemptive potency and solace of the transcendent aesthetic sublime.

It is worth note that not all of these entities preexist the text. "Adah Lee" is not a synonym for Mary, the "Queen of Heaven" and "Mother of the Seven Griefs," and it is not clear whether she merely plays a role parallel to the blessed mother, the ultimate Dantescan intercessor, or if she is a novel aspect of the Queen of Heaven with whom she is to be syncretized by the poem's very construction of the recipient of its invocation. Across his corpus, Pound typically invokes the Greco-Roman gods Dionysus, Diana, Persephone, and Aphrodite, and the Buddhist bodhisattva Guanyin, though he just as often invokes more obscure gods, including those of his own invention, and he even addresses abstract natural forces such as light and water. His invocations, moreover, are universally syncretic, in effect expanding the complex associated with the invoked deities in the very act of invocation. This, in and of itself, comports with Greene's paradigm of the lyrical invocation, but it is noteworthy that in the examples he presents, Greene focuses solely on the invocation of a single entity. Granted, it would not be baseless to read that aggregate of entities which Pound invokes in this prayer as in effect a single ad hoc oppositional presence, standing in for an abstract complex encompassing aesthetic beauty, transcendence, and poetry.

For a fuller and more precise understanding of the phenomenon, however, we must now turn to another of Pound's early lyrics (this one from 1912), "The Alchemist: A Chant for the Transmutation of Metals":

[9] Pound, "Prayer for a Dead Brother," in *Poems and Translations*, 1202.
[10] Liddell, Scott, Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. Καστᾰλία; Oxford Latin Dictionary, s.v. "Castalia."

Sail of Claustra, Aelis, Azalais,
As you move among the bright trees;
As your voices, under the larches of Paradise
Make a clear sound,
Sail of Claustra, Aelis, Azalais,
Raimona, Tibors, Berangèrë,
'Neath the dark gleam of the sky;
Under night, the peacock-throated,
Bring the saffron-coloured shell,
Bring the red gold of the maple,
Bring the light of the birch tree in autumn
Mirals, Cembelins, Audiards,
Remember this fire.
Elain, Tireis, Alcmena
'Mid the silver rustling of wheat,
Agradiva, Anhes, Ardenca,
From the plum-coloured lake, in stillness,
From the molten dyes of the water
Bring the burnished nature of fire;
Briseis, Lianor, Loica,
From the wide earth and the olive,
From the poplars weeping their amber,
By the bright flame of the fishing torch
Remember this fire.

Already by the close of the second refrain, the reader has been overwhelmed by a deluge of women's names, seemingly selected at random from amongst the luminous historical personages of medieval Provence and the Greco-Roman Mediterranean. Closer inspection reveals that the requests put to them by the incantation ("Chant") ostensibly meant to effect the "Transmutation of Metals," are inextricably bound to natural beauty—the entities invoked are to take the various beautiful golden hues found in nature and store them up, to "[r]emember this fire." The chant continues:

Midonz, with the gold of the sun, the leaf of the poplar, by the light of the amber,
Midonz, daughter of the sun, shaft of the tree, silver of the leaf, light of the yellow of the amber,
Midonz, gift of the God, gift of the light, gift of the amber of the sun,
Give light to the metal.

Pound asks of one of the women, amidst a flood of epithets linking her to natural beauty and light, that she "[g]ive light to the metal," the light of the brilliant natural hues enumerated above. The spell proceeds to its next step:

Anhes of Rocacoart, Ardenca, Aemelis,
From the power of grass,
From the white, alive in the seed,
From the heat of the bud,

From the copper of the leaf in autumn,
From the bronze of the maple, from the sap in the bough;
Lianor, Ionna, Loica,
By the stir of the fin,
By the trout asleep in the gray-green of water;[11]
Vanna, Mandetta, Viera, Alodetta, Picarda, Manuela
From the red gleam of copper,
By the mirror of burnished copper,
O Queen of Cypress,
Out of Erebus, the flat-lying breadth,
Breath that is stretched out beneath the world:
Out of Erebus, out of the flat waste of air, lying beneath the world;
Out of the brown leaf-brown colourless
Bring the imperceptible cool.

This petition, it would seem, is subtler: the desired operation is to "[b]ring the imperceptible cool" to the metal, but the sources of this cool are somewhat surprising. Alongside the usual "heat" and golden hues (here in seeming contradiction to the stated goal), the ladies are to take the vital force of flora (the "power of grass," the "white, alive in the seed," the "sap in the bough") and the "stir of the fin" and the "trout asleep in the gray-green of water," that is, a gentle, sinuous vital force in dormancy. To these vital energies, however, are conjoined the "brown leaf-brown colourless," the absence or trace of a now-vanished vital force as represented by a dead leaf in Autumn, and, perhaps most surprising of all, the "flat waste of air, lying beneath the world" to be taken "[o]ut of Erebus," that is, Hell. The process of "cooling" the metal here is clearly also a process of animation, of melting, thawing, and finally resolving into a new solid state. The vitality of the metal, thus far subjected to fire and light and then cooled, is clearly still present within, and the chant proceeds to demand that it be quieted:

Elain, Tireis, Alcmena,
Quiet this metal!
Let the manes put off their terror, let them put off their aqueous bodies
with fire.
Let them assume the milk-white bodies of agate.
Let them draw together the bones of the metal.

The mystical vocabulary of this section is not without its ambiguity, but a process of purification is clearly depicted. In Roman religion, the *manes* are the spirits of the dead now resident in the underworld and become minor deities, or sometimes, as in Vergil, merely ghosts[12]: that they

[11] Cf. Pound, "Fish and the Shadow" (1916), *Lustra*, in *Poems and Translations*, 315:

The salmon-trout drifts in the stream,
The soul of the salmon-trout floats over the stream
Like a little wafer of light.
[…]
Light as the shadow of the fish
That falls through the pale green water.

[12] Oxford Latin Dictionary, s.v. "manes."

are to "put off their terror [...] with fire" and "assume the milk-white bodies of agate" suggests that they are, like the "[b]reath that is stretched out beneath the world," to come "[o]ut of Erebus" and to aid the metal in condensing into a higher, purer form (to "draw together the bones of the metal"). Finally, the incantation reaches its climax:

> Selvaggia, Guiscarda, Mandetta,
> Rain flakes of gold on the water,
> Azure and flaking silver of water,
> Alcyon, Phætona, Alcmena,
> Pallor of silver, pale lustre of Latona,
> By these, from the malevolence of the dew
> Guard this alembic.
> Elain, Tireis, Allodetta
> Quiet this metal.[13]

The "pale lustre of Latona" is perhaps the moonshine of Diana/Artemis, the daughter of Latona/Leto. Precious metals and brilliant pure colours are invoked, and the chant ends with an exhortation that the ladies both "[g]uard th[e] alembic" in which the alchemical process is unfolding and "[q]uiet th[e] metal" into its ultimate transmuted form.

While it would be far beyond the scope of this paper to explicate the precise implications and internal subtleties of the alchemical symbolism in the piece, its most salient feature has by now already made itself evident: namely, that it dramatizes a process of gradual metaphysical transformation in the form of an incantation. That the entities invoked to this effect are a host of historical and literary ladies is clarified on the surface by an assertion Pound makes in *The Spirit of Romance* that "feminine names were used as charms or equations in alchemy."[14] The term "equations" is telling here, recalling a formulation of Pound's poetics earlier in the same text:

> Poetry is a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, and the like, but equations for the human emotions. If one have a mind which inclines to magic rather than science, one will prefer to speak of these equations as spells or incantations[15]

Following the analogy between poems and spells or incantations[16] to its logical conclusion reveals that the process of alchemical transmutation dramatized in "The Alchemist" is none other than the process of internal, psychological transformation effected by the perception of aesthetic beauty—the same process invoked under the name of "God" in "Nighty Litany" and behind the different aspects of the entities besought in "Prayer for a Dead Brother." The invocation of "Adah Lee" in "Prayer for a Dead Brother" is thus likewise clarified: "Adah Lee" is simultaneously an arbitrary "feminine nam[e]" employed in a "char[m] or equatio[n]" and an equipollent aspect of the syncretic ad hoc oppositional presence comprising the divine intercession of art on behalf of the soul of the poet. So too, as the *manes* are here made to "put

[13] Pound, "The Alchemist," *Umbra*, in *Poems and Translations*, 566.
[14] Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions Publishing, [1910] 1952), 106.
[15] Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, 14.
[16] For the sake of precision, it is necessary to note that the specific contours of this analogy differ from the paradigm of lyric Greene delineates in "Poetry as Invocation."

off their terror," the ghost of the "Dead Brother" is made to relinquish the fear and sorrow of life and given a final "Peace" "under the larches of Paradise," a phrase which is employed verbatim in both poems.

And, just as "Prayer for a Dead Brother," "The Alchemist" operates on two levels: on its face it is a piece of Neo-Victorian mediævalia typical of its period, like Rossetti's paintings or Tennyson's poetry, and the mantric texture of the poem, exhibiting striking formal similarities to all those already analyzed, evokes the renaissance alchemist in his laboratory reciting obscure incantations over bubbling alembics. On a more abstract level, however, it dramatizes the aesthetic transformation of the soul as it ascends "[o]ut of Erebus" and is purified by its encounter with aesthetic beauty, namely, that of language, but especially poetry in particular, a central theme across Pound's entire corpus. On this level, the mantric quality of the text is a superficial manifestation of its essential substance as a serious instance of the "spell," a literary text constructed to exert real-world emotional or psychic effects through the charging of language.

The magical quality ascribed to language in this model of poetry and exemplified by Pound's poetics of the name extends, however, beyond just names. The invocation of Bacchus in the 1918 "Cantus Planus" (literally "plainchant") illustrates the direct parallel between Pound's use of names and his use of "magic words" as incantatory formulæ:

> The black panther lies under his rose tree
> And the fawns come to sniff at his sides:
>
> Evoe, Evoe, Evoe Baccho, O
> ZAGREUS, *Zagreus*, Zagreus,
>
> The black panther lies under his rose tree.
>
> ||Hesper adest. Hesper || adest.
> Hesper || adest.||[17]

"Evoe" is an alternate form of the Latin *euhoe*, itself from the Greek *εὐοῖ*, the ecstatic cry of the bacchants in frenzy. Like the ॐ of the Karmic religions, the word transcends literal denotation; it is a verbal crystallization of thousands of years of preliterate human tradition, transmitted through the written word to posterity. Pound employs similar exclamations liberally in incantatory passages across his corpus, the majority borrowed from various ancient ritual contexts, but he shows an especial preference for "Io!" and "AOI."[18] "Hesper adest" means "the evenstar is at hand," though "Hesper" is not classical Latin, but an English derivative of the Latin adjective *hesperus* (itself from the Greek *ἕσπερος*, meaning "eventide," or, literally, "western"). This usage recalls the treatment of Hebrew nouns in the Vulgate, or foreign names in medieval Latin; the connection with the liturgical will be evident. While this composite treatment of language is a hallmark of Pound's style that only grew more marked as he shifted

[17] Pound, "Cantus Planus," *Umbra*, in *Poems and Translations*, 568.

[18] The latter, not properly ritual, Carroll F. Terrell sources in the manuscript tradition of *La Chanson de Roland* as meaning "hail!" or "io!" (Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, 427). Marked examples of this tendency may be found in Cantos XVII, LXXIX, LXXXIII, the Addendum for C, and the lyric poem "Phanopoeia" (*Umbra*, in *Poems and Translations*, 565).

his attention from lyric to epic, in this context it is evidently the language of the spell—and many examples of spells in the Western tradition, from both Greco-Roman antiquity and the Christian middle ages and Renaissance, employ such exotic terms as tokens of magical power, "signs which carry their energy within them."[19]

To these ecstatic magic words, Pound conjoins an elaborate apostrophic passage, invoking Bacchus and employing, in the Greco-Roman fashion, a range of names and epithets for the same god. Pound addresses Bacchus in this lyric by his ritual synonym, Zagreus, which refers to the god specifically in his aspect as patron deity of orgiastic ritual intoxication. Carroll F. Terrell writes in his *Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* that Zagreus is "[a]nother name for Dionysus, in late tradition the god of wine, but in Pound the god of 'Orgia' (religious ecstasy) and fertility associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries, arcanum, and the rites of spring."[20] The panther, Bacchus' traditional beast, both symbolizes the god's domain and signals the lyric's exit from mundane reality—fawns and panthers do not typically live together in harmony. The imagery (alongside that of nymphs, flames, flowers, water, light, and dawn or eventide) is typically Poundian, and occurs both in other lyrics and across *The Cantos*.

Superficially, the apostrophic invocation of the deity must be read on one level as a component of the incantation distinct in function from the magic words. On a higher level of abstraction, however, following Greene's paradigm, it is the total composite of the poem comprising the vocative apostrophe, the magical formulæ, and the paradisiacal imagery, that contributes to the construction of a novel ad hoc oppositional presence whereof Zagreus and Bacchus are merely two discrete aspects. On this level, the plainchant notation, an example of a "visual" textuality that recalls the italicized stage direction "(*Fainter*)" in "Night Litany", while alien to the essentially vocal and aural nature of incantation, in suggesting additional logical content (that is, that the tag "Hesper adest" is to be incanted musically, as if a plainchant) functions akin to the name of a lyric poem that does not occur in the text, further delineating and tonally shading the poem's total signified—and thereby serves to further enrich and construct the specific substance of the ad hoc oppositional presence invoked. And it is this ad hoc oppositional presence which reoccurs as the acme of the incantatory in *The Pisan Cantos*, and perhaps *The Cantos* writ large: canto LXXIX.

## Paradise and *The Cantos*

Having established the essential nature of Pound's incantatory poetics with examples from his lyric corpus, we may now turn to what is arguably his magnum opus, *The Cantos*. While an incantatory poetics suffuses the entire work from beginning to end, it finds its chief expression in his celebrated *Pisan Cantos*. The *Cantos* was written in 1945 after Pound was arrested by partisans for collaboration with the Italian fascist regime during the second world war, while confined to a steel cage in the American Disciplinary Training Center in Pisa (DTC),

[19] Greene, "Poetry as Invocation," 497.
[20] Terrell, *Companion*, 73.

exposed to the elements, and deprived of all his personal effects save the Bible, a collection of Confucius,[21] a Chinese dictionary, and his memory.

Propelled by a collapse of his political convictions[22] and artistic project, and deeply affected by the harsh circumstances of its composition, Pound poignantly articulates his vision in the *Pisan Cantos* of a psychic paradise available not only to those few mystics who lead weird and ascetic lives of the mind, but accessible to anyone with the humility and perception to observe the natural world in its awful beauty. I have argued elsewhere at length that paradise as a mystic psychic state, and particularly the eternally asymptotic ascent or approach theretoward is a dominant theme of the entire Poundian corpus.[23] While the specific "physics" and metaphysics of Pound's paradise are beyond the scope of this paper, it is relevant to note that Pound conceives of paradise as a *fragmentary* psychic state, an appropriation and reconception of the Neoplatonic mystic tradition that extends from late antiquity through the middle ages and into the Renaissance to the material exigencies of modernity in the early 20th century. Pound succinctly characterizes this notion of paradise in the first of the *Pisan Cantos*:

Le Paradis n'est pas artificiel
but spezzato apparently
it exists only in fragments unexpected excellent sausage,
the smell of mint, for example,
Ladro the night cat[24]

An allusive (and ludic) repudiation of Baudelaire's opium-and-hashish-induced paradise of *Les paradis artificiels*, a tradition with roots extending back to Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater* and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "vision in a dream," is immediately followed by the twin assertion of the psychic immediacy of paradise and of its fragmentary nature, as contrasted with the psychic totality of both the earlier ascetic mystics and the narcotic reveries of Baudelaire. Paradise, as incarnated in the surprise of an unexpectedly delicious morsel, the smell of the wild herbs, and the beatific apparition of a humorously named—*Ladro* is "thief" in Italian—wild cat in the internment camp where Pound was held, is a phenomenon both psychically immanent and fragmented ("spezzato") across distinct moments of perceptual experience. It is this paradise that Pound evokes by a chant, by a litany.

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[21] James Legge's *The Four Books: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, and The Works of Mencius* (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, Ltd., 1922), containing original texts, a translation into English, and textual commentary (Terrell, *Companion*, 361).

[22] Though Pound remained a life-long fascist (and his late-in-life repudiation of anti-Semitism has been met with a degree of scholarly skepticism), his faith in the practical potential of the fascist model of government to bring about utopian material conditions and a renaissance in the arts was shattered by the war and subsequent collapse of the Italian state. After a span of involuntary confinement in a psychiatric institution in the United States from 1945 to 1958, Pound, freed by the intervention of prominent artistic allies and devotees, returned to Italy, where he spent the rest of his life. See Victor C. Ferkiss, "Ezra Pound and American Fascism," *The Journal of Politics* 17, no. 2 (1955): 173–97, https://doi.org/10.2307/2126463; Charlotte Hemenway Taylor, "Poetry, Accountability and Forgiveness: Ezra Pound and the *Pisan Cantos*," *South Central Review* 27, no. 3 (2010): 104–32, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40985576.

[23] Bradley Sadowsky, "'The Swirling Sphere Has Opened': Pound in Paradise" (Honors Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2024). https://doi.org/10.17615/yz8t-ac85. See especially chs. 1 "The Physics of Paradise" and 2 "The Metaphysics of Paradise," 9–71.

[24] LXXIV/458. Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1995).

The archetypal example of this invocation of paradise through incantation occurs in canto LXXIX, which, after a three-page description of Pound's surroundings in the DTC, interspersed with episodes from Pound's memory, suddenly bursts into ecstatic chant:

O Lynx, my love, my lovely lynx,
Keep watch over my wine pot,
Guard close my mountain still
Till the god come into this whiskey.
Manitou, god of lynxes, remember our corn.

The lynx, like the panther of "Cantus Planus," is sacred to Bacchus, the god of drink and orgiastic intoxication. Pound's invocation is on its surface syncretic, synthesizing the antique image of the "wine pot," the lynx, and Bacchus with the contemporary production of grain whiskey by mountain-dwelling moonshiners with Manitou, "[t]he Algonquin Indian name for the natural power that permeates all things."[25] The "god" that is to "come into this whiskey" is not so much the literal alcohol that the still concentrates as it is the intoxicated, bacchic euphoria of the Maenads and devotees of the Eleusinian rites that it is capable of conjuring, recalling the supernatural significance of the physical alembic in "The Alchemist." Pound's recollection of Manitou as "god of lynxes" refracts to another god, who does not follow logically in the series, and then slips into a sequence of tangentially related memories, a ludic interruption perhaps akin to the mental operation of the intoxicated reveler:

Khardas, god of camels
what the deuce are you doing here?
I beg your pardon…
"Prepare to go on a journey."
"I…"

"Prepare to go on a journey."
or to count sheep in Phoenician,
How is it far if you think of it?
So they said to Lidya: no, your body-guard is not the
town executioner
the executioner is not here for the moment
the fellow who rides beside your coachman
is just a cossak who executes…
Which being the case, her holding dear H. J.
(Mr. James, Henry) literally by the button-hole…
in those so consecrated surroundings
(a garden in the Temple, no less)
and saying, for once, the right thing
namely: "Cher maître"
to his checqued waistcoat, the Princess Bariatinsky,

[25] Terrell, *Companion*, 426.

as the fish-tails said to Odysseus, ἐνὶ Τροίῃ,[26]

"How is it far if you think of it?" is not only a comment of Confucius on one of the Odes, but also a frequent tag and central motif of the *Pisan Cantos*, typical of Pound's philosophy of memory and parallel to his conception of paradise: the notion that, if something is conjurable by the memory, no matter how distantly it be separated by space or time from the rememberer, it is immediately present. The recollections of various anecdotes, literary figures (Henry James), and literary moments (Odysseus and Homer's *Odyssey*) then follow naturally from this dictum. Though Pound's body might be involuntarily confined in the camp, his mind can yet bring him his friends and the literary tradition. This abstract reflection on the self then transforms into a presentation of Pound as author (*ego scriptor cantilenae*)[27] in his immediate surroundings:

The moon has a swollen cheek
and when the morning sun lit up the shelves and battalions
of the West, cloud over cloud
Old Ez folded his blankets
Neither Eos nor Hesperus has suffered wrong at my hands

The enchanted imagery of the moon, eventide (Hesperus—the "Hesper" of "Cantus Planus") and dawn (Eos), that is, the psychic deification of material phenomena, is contrasted with the crude reality of Pound, sleeping in his cage with no roof but a blanket. Eos and Hesperus, though not invoked in the vocative, are nonetheless ad hoc oppositional presences, to whom Pound moreover asserts an amiable relationship. The material conditions of his torment are made into allies in his psychic struggle for survival. This process continues as Pound, looking around the DTC, views his fellow inmates, captors, and the surrounding nature through the lens of ancient mystic-religious traditions and history:

O Lynx, wake Silenus and Casey
shake the castagnettes of the bassarids
the mountain forest is full of light
the tree-comb red-gilded
Who sleeps in the field of lynxes
in the orchard of Maelids?
(with great blue marble eyes
"because he likes to," the cossak)
Salazar, Scott, Dawley on sick call
Polk, Tyler, half the presidents and Calhoun
"Retaliate on the capitalists" sd/ Calhoun "of the North"

[26] "In Troy," "From the song of the Sirens to Odysseus (*Hom. Od*. XII, 189–190)" (Terrell, *Companion*, 427). Also cited memorably by Pound in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (*Poems and Translations*, 549):

*ἴδμεν γάρ τοι πάνθ'ὅς'ἐνὶ Τροίῃ*
Caught in the unstopped ear;
Giving the rocks small lee-way
The chopped seas held him, therefore, that year.

[27] LXII/350, LXXVI/478.

ah yes, when the ideas were clearer
debts to people in N.Y. city

Silenus, an older companion and tutor to Dionysus/Bacchus associated with the forest, and Casey, a corporal at the DTC, are called upon in the same breath that Pound invokes the ecstatic bacchants ("bassarids"). While Pound's relationship to the black soldiers of the DTC was always marked by a distinct, unconscious paternalism, their mutual friendliness provides the basis for Pound to springboard from their "presidential" last names to an approbative recollection of the anti-Capitalist tradition in U.S. history. The incantatory elements of the passage build pressure in the background until the canto explodes into an even more intense syncretism:

and on the hill of the Maelids
in the close garden of Venus
asleep amid serried lynxes
set wreathes on Priapus Ἴακχος, Io! Κύθηρα, Io![15]
having root in the equities
Io!
and you can make 5000 dollars a year
all you have to do is to make one trip up country
then come back to Shanghai
and send in an annual report
as to the number of converts

The Bacchic/Eleusinian ad hoc oppositional presence constructed thus far (enriched by the Maelids, fruit-tree nymphs, the blissfully dormant lynxes—recalling an earlier image of paradise in *The Cantos* with much the same imagery[28]—and Ἴακχος, the specifically Eleusinian epithet for Bacchus/Dionysus) is syncretized with the sexual energy of Venus/Aphrodite/Κύθηρα and Priapus, the ithyphallic god of sex and fertility. Pound then asserts that this composite complex has its "root in the equities," a Confucian metaphysical and ethical notion, which then refracts into a recollection of Christian missionaries in China. The passage is interrupted by the exclamatory magic word "Io!", which then combines with a sequence of imagery from Chinese folk-religious ceremonies and the "Kyrie eleison" of the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, here employed as a magic word:

Sweetland on sick call
ἐλέησον Kyrie eleison[17]
each under his fig tree
or with the smell of fig leaves burning
so shd/ be fire in winter
with fig wood, with cedar, and pine burrs

O Lynx keep watch on my fire.

The "fire" in this case is simultaneously the earlier fire of Eleusinian alcoholic intoxication and the fire of the religious ceremonies. The complexity of the syncretization here effected follows

[28] XVII/76.

directly from the refractive, almost free-associative poetics of *The Cantos*, and the ad hoc oppositional presence here invoked continues to be enriched by elements from "the tradition":

So Astafieva had conserved the tradition
From Byzance and before then
Manitou remember this fire
O lynx, keep the phylloxera from my grape vines
Ἴακχε, Ἴακχε, Χαῖρε, AOI

More and greater magic words heighten the incantatory quality of the epic voice, and, commensurate with this elevation, the agricultural/viticultural complex inherent in the Bacchic presence and the Chinese agricultural rituals is synthesized, extended, and referred to Κόρη, the virgin Persephone, daughter of Demeter:

"Eat of it not in the under world"
See that the sun or the moon bless thy eating
Κόρη, Κόρη, for the six seeds of an error
or that the stars bless thy eating

O Lynx, guard this orchard,
Keep from Demeter's furrow

This fruit has a fire within it,
Pomona, Pomona
No glass is clearer than are the globes of this flame
what sea is clearer than the pomegranate body
holding the flame?
Pomona, Pomona,

Lynx, keep watch on this orchard
That is named Melagrana
or the Pomegranate field
The sea is not clearer in azure
Nor the Heliads bringing light

The "fire" of the vine is now the "fire" in all fruit, even the pomegranate seeds that trapped Persephone in the underworld as consort of Hades, and thus Orphic springtime-rebirth rituals (a theme stretching back to the very first canto in the guise of Odysseus' *nekyia*) are syncretically fused with the Eleusinian intoxication rituals and fertility rites already present. The distinct traces of the various complexes here elucidated begin to melt inextricably into one another, and the rich imagery continues to pile up:

Here are lynxes Here are lynxes,
Is there a sound in the forest
of pard or of bassarid
or crotale or of leaves moving?

Cythera, here are lynxes
Will the scrub-oak burst into flower?

There is a rose vine in this underbrush
Red? white? No, but a colour between them
When the pomegranate is open and the light falls
half thru it

Lynx, beware of these vine-thorns
O Lynx, γλαυκῶπις coming up from the olive yards,
Kuthera, here are Lynxes and the clicking of crotales
There is a stir of dust from old leaves
Will you trade roses for acorns
Will lynxes eat thorn leaves?
What have you in that wine jar?
ἰχώρ, for lynxes?

Maelid and bassarid among lynxes;
how many? There are more under the oak trees,
We are here waiting the sun-rise
and the next sunrise
for three nights amid lynxes. For three nights
of the oak-wood
and the vines are thick in their branches
no vine lacking flower,
no lynx lacking a flower rope
no Maelid minus a wine jar
this forest is named Melagrana

O lynx, keep the edge on my cider
Keep it clear without cloud

We have lain here amid kalicanthus and sword-flower
The heliads are caught in wild rose vine
The smell of pine mingles with rose leaves
O lynx, be many
of spotted fur and sharp ears.
O lynx, have your eyes gone yellow,
with spotted fur and sharp ears?

The natural imagery of the incantation transcends just the agricultural and viticultural; a flood of flowers and plants comprise the enchanted bowers wherein nymphs, spirits, gods, and goddesses gambol in glittering sunshine amidst overflowing draughts of wine. Pound syncretically identifies this wine, or more broadly the wine/whiskey/alcohol complex already developed, with ἰχώρ, the blood of the gods. This is paradise, and it directly mirrors Pound's earliest depiction of paradise in canto XVII. Its mystic force is insuppressible as the incantation climaxes:

Therein is the dance of the bassarids

Therein are centaurs
And now Priapus with Faunus
The Graces have brought Ἀφροδίτην
Her cell is drawn by ten leopards
O lynx, guard my vineyard
As the grape swells under vine leaf
Ἥλιος is come to our mountain
there is a red glow in the carpet of pine spikes

O lynx, guard my vineyard
As the grape swells under vine leaf

This Goddess was born of sea-foam
She is lighter than air under Hesperus
δεινὰ εἶ, Κύθηρα[29]
terrible in resistance
Κόρη καὶ Δήλια καὶ Μαῖα
trine as praeludio
Κύπρις Ἀφρόδιτη
a petal lighter than sea-foam
Κύθηρα
aram
nemus
vult

O puma, sacred to Hermes, Cimbica servant of Helios.[30]

The dance of the raving Maenads ("bassarids") is joined by centaurs, Priapus is joined by and to Faunus, the old Roman satyr-god of the woods—and, implicitly, to Silenus—Aphrodite is attracted to the Graces, the "red glow" of the sunrise becomes a beneficent visit of the sun god Helios, and the entire chant ends in two powerful visionary images. First, Aphrodite's virgin birth out of the sea-foam mutates into an explicitly syncretic trinity-complex ("trine as praeludio") of the virgin Persephone in her spring-rebirth aspect (Κόρη), Diana/Artemis (Δήλια), the maiden goddess of the hunt, and Maia (Μαῖα), mother of Hermes, the messenger-god. Second, there is the lynx/pard/puma/panther/cimbica as sacred companion of Hermes and servant of the sun god. The cimbica, according to Pound, is "friend of man, the most loyal of wildcats" in South American indigenous religion.[31] "aram / nemus / vult," its rhythm and relative import emphasized by the poem's orthography, means "the glade desireth an altar," and is an elevated expression of the mystic and religious significance of the glade that provides the setting for this vision of paradise.

[29] "Fearful art thou, Aphrodite."
[30] LXXIX/507.
[31] "Writing about the work of W. H. Hudson, Pound said: 'He would lead us to South America… for the sake of meeting a puma, Chimbica, friend of man, the most loyal of wildcats' (SP, 431). A rhyme with other animals of the cat family who have significance as manifestations of the divine presence in nature" (Terrell, *Companion*, 428).

The extreme sophistication of the incantation in this canto, and the commensurate complexity of the ad hoc oppositional presence it constructs is not merely an unavoidable consequence of the vast textual and notional accretion of the preceding 500 pages of the poem; it is the paradigm of Pound's mode of incantation in its pure form. As Pound addresses a profusion of gods, flowers morph into nymphs, Bacchus' lynx into the sacred cimbica cat, fruits into wine, and wine into moonshine into fire into Manitou. Pound's American English blends into the local Italian spoken around the DTC, and Latin and Greek proper nouns blend together with exclamatory magic words into the precatory « κύριε, ἐλέησον » and the sacral "aram vult nemus." A fragmentary, psychic paradise accessible to the mind through the memory must be syncretic as all of its elements are conjoined by and through its medium (the faculty of memory), and the ad hoc oppositional presence this canto suggests is not any one or even the composite sum of all the supernatural entities Pound invokes—rather it is this very transcendent psychic state itself. This incantation is undeniably more obscure than the incantatory lyrics cited above, but they are in fact merely two faces of the same coin: the one dramatizes poetry, the aesthetic sublime through language, as the means of ascent to a paradisiacal psychic state, while the other, written from the confines of the internment camp, dramatizes this psychic state in and of itself.

In both the lyrics and the incantation of *The Cantos*, the use of ecstatic, ritual magic words, the wide-ranging invocation of divinities by their many names and epithets, even the mantric repetition of the passages, characterize mortal man's encounter with the divine, the magical, and the extramundane. In drawing theoretical links between magical-alchemical processes and the emotional and aesthetic valence of poetry, Pound appropriates the language of hermeticism to represent the metaphysical significance he accords to poetry itself. And in both, Pound incants paradise into being by the precation of the abstract collective consciousness, the *nous*, through the intermediary godheads who reside therein. Moreover, as the alchemist, by invoking a litany of divinities, mythohistorical figures, and saints, magically elevates and ennobles the base elements to which he has ready access, Pound the poet literally transmutes by the same means the mundane surroundings of his captivity, the grass and the rain and the insects, his regret and his sorrow, into paradise:

Χαῖρη! Ω Διώνη, Χαῖρη
pure Light, we beseech thee
Crystal, we beseech thee
Clarity, we beseech thee
from the labyrinth[32]

[32] "Addendum for C"/819.

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