

## 10. Luminous Details: On the Poetry of Ezra Pound

Both the shortest and the longest major poems in English of our century were composed by the same author. Ezra Pound wrote "In a Station of the Metro," which, including its title, runs to twenty-seven syllables, as well as *The Cantos*, which, though unfinished, has a total of about 23,000 lines.<sup>1</sup> These texts are the obvious examples to discuss the problem of a poem's length, which I raised in chapter 3. I am going to deal first with the short poem, and the views that made it possible, and shall then turn to the problems that arise if a long poem is attempted along similar lines.

The term "Imagisme" was coined by Ezra Pound, but he did not start the "movement" so named. T. E. Hulme, "the ringleader,"<sup>2</sup> first proposed its programme in "A Lecture on Modern Poetry." Among its points was the contention that "this new verse resembles sculpture rather than music; it appeals to the eye rather than to the ear."<sup>3</sup> He championed free verse, because, being less musical than traditional verse, it does not distract from the visual impression.

I quite admit that poetry intended to be recited must be written in regular metre, but I contend that this [new] method of recording impressions by visual images in distinct lines does not require the old system. (Hulme in Roberts 1938, p. 267).

Hulme denied that the basic material of verse is sound. It is

image and not sound. [The new poetry] builds up a plastic image which it hands over to the reader, whereas the old art endeavoured to influence him physically by the hypnotic effect of rhythm. (Hulme in Roberts 1938, p. 270).

This is a programme for poetry to be read on the page, not only because of its rejection of rhythm and sound, but also because the single line is intended to be read as a unit (see above, p. 46), and because it "hands over" - a curiously vague expression - "a plastic image." Since this programme has only negative things to say about the aural and sequential characteristics of language, it cannot, as a whole, be helpful to a practising poet, even though he may feel attracted by some of its implications, and above all by its concreteness and conciseness. He will, however, have to find solutions of his own to a variety of problems where Hulme does not offer any practicable guidance, especially problems of sound and rhythm.

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<sup>1</sup> Perkins 1976, p. 483. *Paradise Lost* has 10'465 lines, *The Waste Land* only 433.

<sup>2</sup> Flint 1915. Quoted by Stead 1964; 1975, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Hulme 1938. Quoted by Gross 1964; 1968, p. 101.

In the texts that Pound wrote as a propagandist for the Imagist Movement, in particular in "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," he echoes Hulme. He urges conciseness. The very definition of the Image, the heart of Pound's doctrine, seems to be based on brevity: "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" [my italics].<sup>4</sup> Pound emphasizes the immediacy of the "handing over" of the image, but he does not restrict the image to a visual impression. He rather relates it to the reactions, intellectual and emotional, of the author and of the reader to whom the image is presented. Pound also has much to say about the music of verse. He offers support for Flint's doctrine: "As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome."<sup>5</sup> He follows Hulme in rejecting regular "hypnotic" rhythm, but insists on the rhythmical organization of short passages, which will often coincide with the line-unit. In "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" Pound also stresses the importance for the poet of familiarizing himself with all the traditions and terminology of metrics.

Pound's remarks on rhythm and rhyme do not closely fit the notion of the image introduced earlier in his essay. They have the character of an appendix. He even grants that it is "not necessary that a poem should rely on its music" (Sullivan 1970, p. 43), which implies that sound and meaning may be independent of each other. Pound makes this explicit when he advises the poet to

fill his mind with the finest cadences he can discover, preferably in a foreign language so that the meaning of the words may be less likely to divert his attention from the movement. (Sullivan 1970, p. 43).<sup>6</sup>

This accords with his belief that there is "an absolute rhythm, ... that every emotion and every phase of emotion has some toneless phrase, some rhythm-phrase to express it."<sup>7</sup>

I shall return to this distinction between the meaning and the ph<sup>8</sup>ysical characteristics of verse in my discussion of *The Cantos*. In a short poem of the Imagist type, rhythm has little chance of establishing itself clearly.

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<sup>4</sup> "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," *Poetry* 1 (1913). Quoted in Sullivan 1970, p. 41. The following sentences make it clear that in an instant of time refers to the presentation, and not to complex.

<sup>5</sup> The third of the Imagist rules mentioned by F.S. Flint, "Imagisme," *Poetry* 1 (1913). Quoted in Sullivan 1970, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Cp. also p. 44: "That part of your poetry which strikes upon the imaginative eye of the reader will lose nothing by translation into a foreign tongue; that which appeals to the ear can reach only those who take it in the original."

<sup>7</sup> "Vorticism." Quoted by Sullivan 1970, p. 49. Pound adds that he first expressed this view in his edition of Cavalcanti's poems (1912). Cp. also "The Serious Artist," *New Freewoman* 1 (1913), in Sullivan 1970, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> "Vorticism," in Sullivan 1970, pp. 51-54. The following quotations are taken from p. 51 and 53.

In looking at "In a Station of the Metro" from the points of view of poet and recipient, we are lucky to have Pound's report on how he composed it, a report that confirms some of the observations made earlier. One day when getting out of a Métro train at the Place de la Concorde, he saw "suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman." Pound had difficulty in expressing "that sudden emotion" caused by what he saw. On the same day he found "an equation ... not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just that - a 'pattern', or hardly a pattern, if by 'pattern' you mean something with a 'repeat' in it." He did not try to deal directly with the visual impressions from the station, but to find an abstract equivalent for the emotion produced by them. This equivalent was a bunch of colour bits, which, as he stresses, did not involve any repetition, i. e. did not suggest sequence. Being a poet, he felt in an impasse. He tried to get out of it by writing a thirty-line poem, but destroyed it as lacking intensity. Six months later he wrote a poem half that length; and another year later he composed the two-line poem we have.

Because we have only the final result we can do no more than speculate on how Pound proceeded. It is striking that he returned to the original sequence of visual impressions from the station and telescoped them together in order to present the emotion, and that he did so by juxtaposing this visual impression to another. The brevity of the poem seems to reflect the suddenness of the emotion. But especially given the long process of composition, which must have been one of cutting as well as condensation, the brevity of the poem also suggests that its words were "charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (Pound 1934, p. 20) by the poet - in a way, however, which is difficult for the recipient to determine.

"In a Station of the Metro" was first published in *Poetry* in April 1914, as part of a batch of poems (Perkins 1976, p. 462). Pound's discussion of the poem shows that it was meant to be read as complete in itself, not as part of a sequence.

In a Station of the Metro<sup>9</sup>  
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet black bough.

The two lines of the poem are so simple, and the event of reading is therefore finished so quickly, that we are left bewildered for a moment. Our reaction is to turn back to the beginning and repeat the text, thus prolonging the event. The brevity of the text suggests that it must be more complex than it seemed on our first reading, that we have to sound its depths in order to experience it adequately.

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<sup>99</sup> in *Lustra* (London, 1916), p. 45.

Hugh Kenner's reading of the poem in *The Pound Era* may serve as an example of this approach. "'Apparition' reaches two ways, toward ghosts and toward visible revealings." (Kenner 1972, p. 187). That is, the core of the poem is a polysemous term which can only be grasped as such after repeated readings or in study (see above, pp. 47-48). "'Petals,' the pivotal word, relies for energy on the sharp cut of its syllables, a consonantal vigor recapitulated in the trisyllabic 'wet, black bough.'" (Kenner 1972, p. 187). That is, sounds are linked, not by alliteration or assonance, but by expressing the same notion, that of energy (see above, pp. 65-66). Kenner goes on: "The words so raised by prosody to attention assert themselves as words, and make a numinous claim on our attention, from which visual, tactile and mythic associations radiate." (Kenner 1972, p. 187). As we have seen, words tend to assume this radiant quality if they are freed from close syntactic relationships (see above, p. 87). Kenner takes this to be the case here, for the poem "is not formally a sentence; its structure is typographic and metric." (Kenner 1972, p. 186/187). He produces a bewildering range of associations:

We need the title so that we can savor that vegetal contrast with the world of machines: this is not any crowd, moreover, but a crowd seen underground, as Odysseus and Orpheus and Koré saw crowds in Hades. And carrying forward the suggestion of wraiths, the word "apparition" detaches these faces from all the crowded faces, and presides over the image that conveys the quality of their separation [i.e. the second line of the poem]. (Kenner 1972, p. 184).

Kenner is reminded of "flowers underground; flowers, out of the sun" (Kenner 1972, p. 185), and thus of Persephone, associated with such flowers in Canto 106. By way of conclusion Kenner draws together the associations he has made:

So this tiny poem, drawing on Gauguin and on Japan, on ghosts and on Persephone, on the Underworld and on the Underground, the Metro of Mallarmé's capital and a phrase that names a station of the Metro as it might a station of the Cross, concentrates far more than it need ever specify. (Kenner 1972, p. 185).

Kenner's interpretation is brilliant,<sup>10</sup> perhaps over-ingenious. His non-linear reading is certainly the kind invited by the brevity of the text, and by Pound's account of how it was composed. As I have indicated, Kenner minimizes the role of syntax in the poem, in a way that is not quite justified by the text. It does indeed not form a complete sentence, but we only have to supply "is" or "is like" at the beginning of the second

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<sup>10</sup> He almost certainly goes wrong when he takes "petals" to mean "flowers." I should rather think that the second line of the poem renders the effects of rain on a tree in full bloom. As the bark is black, and the poem is in haiku form, the tree is probably a cherry-tree.

line to get one. That this procedure is not beneath Pound's consideration is shown by the way he explains haiku verse in "Vorticism." He gives the example:

The footsteps of the cat upon the snow:  
(are like) plum-blossoms.

and he adds: "The words 'are like' would not occur in the original, but I add them for clarity." (Sullivan 1970, p. 53).

We should also remember that the semicolon at the end of the first line of "In a Station of the Metro" found in most editions is not the original punctuation. In the first printings there is a colon,<sup>11</sup> which indicates a logical relationship between the two lines (cp. p. 27). This relationship is similar to, if vaguer than, the one established by the copula and the relational word. The syntax, then, is fairly clear; it does not force us to slow down our reading or to piece together the words to form a sentence, and it does not allow, therefore, the individual words to radiate independently.

Pound seems to have been aware of the problem posed by the brevity of "In a Station of the Metro." He wanted Harriet Monroe to print his poem with spaces:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Kenner 1972, p. 197).<sup>12</sup>

Kenner interprets these spaces as indicating five phases of perception (Kenner 1972, p. 197) – each group corresponding to one of the Chinese characters in which Pound was soon to become interested (see below, p. 95). But for Pound one of the important points about Chinese writing (as he understood it) was that the characters are juxtaposed without syntax, whereas in this short poem we do not really have a sequence of juxtaposed sensations. The percepts are related to each other syntactically, for example by the prepositions of, in, on. It seems that Pound divided the *Poetry* form of the text into syntactic units in order to suggest slow reading. But this does not solve the problem that the poem creates in reading. The experience suggested by the syntax and the wording remains too brief to form an event of its own.

In his essay on "Vorticism" Pound concedes that the poem presupposes the existence of a definite mood: "I dare say it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought" (Sullivan 1970, p. 54)<sup>13</sup> (see above, p. 24). He continues with a sentence which is slightly apologetic:

In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms

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<sup>11</sup> Cp. "Vorticism" in Sullivan 1970, p. 54, and Kenner 1972, p. 197. The semicolon appears in *Lustra* (London, 1916), p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> In the *Poetry* printing, there is an additional space between black and bough (Kenner 1972, p. 573).

<sup>13</sup> It is after this sentence that Pound appends a note on the possibility of longer poems depending on a similar presentation of matter.

itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.  
(Sullivan 1970, p. 54).

This is similar to the definition of the image quoted earlier in this chapter, though two points have been modified. The image has become dynamic (the Image has become the Vortex); and<sup>14</sup> the goal is cautiously proposed to be recording a precise instant, rather than presenting a "complex" instantaneously.

It is intriguing that Pound should avoid reference to instantaneous presentation in discussing this particular poem, which, by its extreme brevity, comes close to achieving it. Nonetheless, the problems created by the sequentiality of experience (see pp. 48-49) even exist in the case of this brief poem. Although Pound considers his "one image poem" as "a form of superposition, that is to say ... one idea set on top of another" (Sullivan 1970, p. 53), the ideas follow each other in reading.

In reading, perception of a text is tied to syntactic units (see above, p. 46). We can distinguish three major units in this poem, if we include the title, each corresponding to one of the lines on the page. The title indicates a place, and the first line presents a phenomenon. The second line creates the Image by establishing a surprising link with a scene of nature. Only in reading this line can we have "that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits"<sup>15</sup> which, according to Pound, an image may give us.

Even this very short text, then, is not able to produce the instantaneous revelation that Pound postulates in his definition of the Image; at the same time, the text is too short and too simple to create an event of its own.

Shortly after Pound had written "In a Station of the Metro" he came to know Ernest Fenollosa's manuscripts about Chinese poetry. From these he edited *Cathay* in 1915, and the essay "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" in 1920. (In what follows I shall relate the ideas of Fenollosa and Pound without detailed qualifications; their views on the Chinese language and its writing system are not *correct*,<sup>16</sup> in any simple sense.)

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<sup>14</sup> The change from presentation to recording is somewhat puzzling, as the deictic in the phrase "these faces" indicates a situation experienced in the immediate present.

<sup>15</sup> Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." Quoted in Sullivan 1970, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> The major errors can be briefly hinted at. The Chinese writing system has no more simple or complex relation to texts in the Chinese language than any other writing system. The writing system uses logograms (signs for words); neither Chinese or any other writing system uses ideograms (signs for ideas). Not all logograms are comprehensible in their graphic density, and few need be comprehended as they are used. Neither Chinese verse nor any text in any language is without syntax; juxtaposition is no more than a useful metaphor in hinting at the effect of the reduced syntax of Chinese verse (note by Michael Patrick O'Connor).

In Fenollosa's essay Pound found a notion of the ideogram which was in many ways related to that of the image. The ideogram creates a strong visual impression; it is concrete (cp. Fenollosa [1936] 1964, pp. 8 and 9); it presents something instantaneously; and, like the image, it is "a form of superposition, that is to say ... one idea set on top of another." (Pound, "Vorticism," in Sullivan 1970, p. 53). In his *ABC of Reading* Pound gives the following example:

木	tree
日	sun
東	sun tangled in the tree's branches, as at sunrise, meaning now the East.

(Pound 1934, p. 21).

As Fenollosa emphasizes, the ideogram, unlike the phonetic representation of a word, exhibits the embryonic stages of its growth, i. e. its etymology, and thus bears "its metaphor on its face." (Fenollosa [1936] 1964, p. 25). Chinese characters are, therefore, particularly well suited for poetry. In a sentence that Pound echoes in his *ABC of Reading* (cp. Pound 1934, p. 20), Fenollosa writes:

Poetic thought works by suggestion, crowding maximum meaning into the single phrase pregnant, charged, and luminous from within. In Chinese character each word accumulated this sort of energy in itself. (Fenollosa [1936] 1964, p. 28).

This means that the ideogram expresses, in the terms introduced on p. 50, vertical, intensive relations.

The ideograms are linked to each other not by syntax as we know it in Western languages; rather they follow each other, representing the flexible sequence of thought (Fenollosa [1936] 1964, p. 7). This relation on the horizontal axis is implied in some definitions of Pound's ideogrammatic method. J. P. Sullivan, for example, explains the method as the "juxtaposition of poetically significant material without the mediation of grammatical (that is, essentially prosaic) connexion." (Sullivan 1970, p. 24). Pound, in his discussion of the ideogrammatic method in *ABC of Reading* (Pound 1934, pp. 21-23), is not dealing with horizontal relationships, but with complexities in the vertical dimension. This disparity suggests that the juxtaposition of particulars in the sequence of a poetic text - which Kenner sees at work in "In a Station of the Metro," and which we shall see in *The Cantos* - is an attempt to reproduce on the horizontal axis an effect conceived of on the vertical one and perhaps only possible there. The attempt is based on the problematic assumption that sequence can stand for simultaneity under the pressure of poetic usage.

The ideogram, unlike a word, always demands a visual experience. It does not, according to Fenollosa, refer to a

phonetic unit, but to a notion. Sound is unimportant - a fact that should have interested T. E. Hulme.

As I pointed out earlier (p. 45), a focus on visual reading leads the poet to work for complexity and intensity, and this in turn favours short texts, texts with minimal redundancy. A long poem like Pound's *Cantos*, which is, to a large extent, composed according to the ideogrammatic method, must therefore present formidable problems.

We have to ask ourselves, whether we can consider *The Cantos* a unity. From the point of view of this study this question is closely related to another: How should *The Cantos* be experienced? It is no coincidence that the two major tasks of critics writing on *The Cantos* seem to be explication (in particular, the hunting down of sources (cp. Sullivan 1970, p. 205-206)) and the establishment of the poem's over-all structure. In my discussion of the poem, I shall not offer much on either subject; instead, I shall try to show that the two fields of inquiry are related to each other, indeed, two aspects of the same problem.

There can be no doubt that *The Cantos* were planned as a single poem. The first separate collection of cantos appeared under the title *A Draft of XVI Cantos of Ezra Pound for the Beginning of a Poem of Some Length*<sup>17</sup>; and while the overall title *The Cantos* might refer to a number of separate poems of the same kind, the fact that Pound called Cantos LXXXV-XCV<sup>18</sup> a "Section" in 1955 shows that he still felt that he was working on the same poem.

In his own comments on the plan of *The Cantos*, Pound tended to refer to Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and to distinguish three main sections in his poem. In a letter to his father in 1927 he explained the structure of the poem as

rather like, or unlike subject and response and counter subject in fugue.

A.A. Live man goes down into world of Dead

C.B. The "repeat in history."

B.C. The "magic moment," or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru quotidien into "divine or permanent world." Gods, etc.<sup>19</sup>

By then he had published the first sixteen cantos, and he wrote to his father: "You have had a hell in Canti XIV, XV; purgatorio in XVI etc." (Paige 1950, p. 210). This suggests a poem rather shorter than the one we have.

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<sup>17</sup> published in Paris, 1925.

<sup>18</sup> Ezra Pound, *Section: Rock Drill, 85-95 de los Cantares* (Milan, 1955).

<sup>19</sup> In a letter to his father, 11 April 1927 (Paige 1950, p. 210). He gave a similar account of his plans to Yeats at about the same time. Cp. Yeats [1928] 1962, pp. 3-5.

In 1944, having published 71 cantos, Pound described his plan as "an epic poem which begins 'In the Dark Forest,' crosses the Purgatory of human error, and ends in the light."<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, Pound started his long poem in 1912 with an address to Browning that promises no orderly progression from beginning to end:

Hang it all, there can be but one "Sordello"!  
But say I want to, say I take your whole bag of tricks,  
Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the thing's an art-  
form,

Your Sordello, and that the modern world  
Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in;  
Say that I dump my catch, shiny and silvery  
As fresh sardines slapping and slipping on the marginal  
cobblestones?<sup>21</sup>

When he wrote a foreword to his own selection from *The Cantos* in 1966 he quoted these lines as the "best introduction to the Cantos." (Pound, *Selected Cantos*, 1967, p. 9). But what was an expression of youthful vigour, even insolence, the aged Pound seems to have quoted with bitterness. In an interview two years later he told Daniel Cory that the structure of *The Cantos* was "a botch."

After a long hesitation Ezra resorted to a rather striking illustration. He mentioned a shop-window full of various objects.

"I picked out this and that thing that interested me, and then jumbled them into a bag. But that's not the way to make" - and he paused for a moment - "a *work of art*."<sup>22</sup>

The critical dispute about the unity of *The Cantos* has never been settled. Basically two schools of critics can be distinguished, the integrators and the desintegrators.<sup>23</sup> It is fair to say that a majority of critics go along with what Pound said about the structure of *The Cantos* late in his life, without necessarily dismissing the poem as a result. Few critics, e.g., Daniel D. Pearlman, see a consistent thematic development throughout *The Cantos*,<sup>24</sup> and all recognize that there is no

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<sup>20</sup> in "An Introduction to the Economic Nature of the United States" (publ. 1944, in Italian). Sullivan 1970, p. 199.

<sup>21</sup> This passage from the Ur-Canto I was not made part of the final poem; the opening is condensed in Canto II. The text was printed in *Poetry* in June 1917. Pound quotes it in his Foreword to *Selected Cantos* (London, 1967), p. 9. - It is striking to see that Walter Baumann (1967, p. 15), seems to think the expression ragbag was first applied to *The Cantos* by hostile critics.

<sup>22</sup> Cory 1968, p. 38. Quoted in Sullivan 1970, p. 375.

<sup>23</sup> Cp. Pearlman 1969, pp. 7-12. Pearlman gives a useful survey of critical views on the unity of *The Cantos* in his Introduction.

<sup>24</sup> Pearlman 1969, p. 27, distinguishes three phases in *The Cantos*: "Time as Disorder" (No. 1-46), blending into "Time as Order" (No. 31-71), "Time as Love" (No. 74-84). He follows the English canon in omitting the Italian cantos, 72 and 73. Curiously enough, Pearlman does not deal with the post-

historical progression in them. Clark Emery (1958) has tried to show the thematic relationships between the different sections of the poem, and thus its coherence. Hugh Kenner denies the poem plot as well as thematic development, but sees its structure as based on "interlocking large-scale rhythms of recurrence."<sup>25</sup> (Kenner 1951, p. 260). These help the reader experience the poem adequately, for he "must remember all things and contemplate all things in a simultaneous present." (Kenner 1951, p. 277). Although the structural effectiveness of these rhythms has been questioned, the recurrence of themes and images has generally been accepted as an important element in *The Cantos*.

The notion of "large-scale rhythms of recurrence" makes the single canto relatively unimportant as a unit of experience. Features of the poem support this contention. Unlike the sections of other long poems (see above, p. 25), the individual cantos vary considerably in length,<sup>26</sup> between two and almost twenty-five pages. In many cases Pound makes sure that the beginnings and endings of a canto do not give it complete autonomy. The very first canto<sup>27</sup> begins with the line

And then went down to the ship,<sup>28</sup>

which implies, according to epic convention, that something has preceded. The canto ends with a reference to Aphrodite<sup>29</sup> followed by *So that:*, where the words as well as the colon suggest a direct consequence, but do not, in fact, lead on to it.

Earl Miner has observed<sup>30</sup> that Pound also uses the technique of superposition which he had developed in the Imagist haiku, to create striking endings, especially in the first thirty cantos and in the *Pisan Cantos*. An observation from nature is juxtaposed to the rest of the poem, for example, in Cantos III, XVII, XXI, LXXX. But this technique is used even more frequently within a canto "to express intensely in an image

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Pisan Cantos, because they do not offer any new elements to the structure (p. 30).

<sup>25</sup> George P. Elliott (1961, p. 161, repr. in Sullivan 1970, p. 265) has questioned the usefulness of these rhythms in establishing structure: "Kenner fails to make clear what structurally valuable end these recurrences serve."

<sup>26</sup> Cantos of about two pages: I, III, VI, XIII, XXX, XLV, XLIX, etc.; particularly long Cantos: LIII: 13 pages; LIV: 15; LXV: 17; LXXIV: 24,5; LXXX: 24; LXXXV: 17; etc. Canto LXXXV is also one of the most difficult. Cp. Davie 1964, pp. 205/206.

<sup>27</sup> Cp. also the beginnings of Cantos XI (*The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, London, 1975, p. 53); XXVI (p. 121); XXVIII (p. 133); and the endings of II (p. 10); VIII (p. 33); etc.

<sup>28</sup> Pound, *Cantos*, 1975, p. 3. See also Kenner 1972, p. 349.

<sup>29</sup> Pound, *Cantos*, 1975, p. 5. On its origin, see Kenner 1972, p. 361.

<sup>30</sup> Miner 1958. Quoted in Sullivan 1970, p. 237/38. Cp. also Stock 1967, p. 116.

what has gone before or what directly follows." (Miner 1958 in Sullivan 1970, p. 237). It does not, therefore, mark the ending of a canto as such. As a rule, the single cantos then cannot be understood as units of experience.

This leads us to the question of how *The Cantos* should be experienced. If the large-scale rhythms of recurrence are to be perceived at all, the poem has to be experienced at a brisk pace. The ideogrammatic method, on the other hand, suggests slow reading and may even demand study.

In the space at hand I cannot possibly do justice to *The Cantos*, nor can I deal with all the problems involved in experiencing the poem. I can only discuss two of the more general problems which appear throughout *The Cantos*: allusiveness and the recurrence of themes.

The first lines of Canto IV, as analyzed by Walter Baumann<sup>31</sup>, will serve as an example:

Palace in smoky light,  
Troy but a heap of smouldering boundary stones,  
ANAXIFORMINGES! Aurunculeia!

Hear me. Cadmus of Golden Prows! (Pound, *Cantos*, 1975, p. 13).

The first two lines present vivid and concrete images of an event in Greek mythology that is fairly familiar. This cannot be said of the following two lines. *ANAXIFORMINGES*, "lyre-leading," is the opening epithet of Pindar's second Olympian ode, *Aurunculeia* the family name of the bride praised in Catullus' Song 61. The following line refers to Ovid's account of the Cadmus myth. Athene summons Cadmus and orders him to sow in a ploughed furrow the teeth of the dragon he has killed. Thus Cadmus obtains the Spartoi, who help in building the acropolis of Thebes. "Golden Prows" indicates that Pound, like Ovid, considers Cadmus a sailor-hero.

So much we may find out with the help of works of reference. But we still cannot make sense of the lines. In order to understand *ANAXIFORMINGES! Aurunculeia!* we must be familiar with Pound's technique of alluding to whole domains of knowledge with a single word or phrase, with a "luminous detail."<sup>32</sup> We should further know what the texts alluded to so elliptically mean to Pound. We should know his distaste for Pindar's rhetoric (Baumann 1967, p. 21) in general and for the epithet quoted in particular, which "ought to be sent to the dust-bin ..." (*Egoist* (March/April, 1919), quoted by Baumann 1967, p. 21) (The capitalization of the word may be a comment on the hollow rotundity of Pindar's verse).

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<sup>31</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all my information about the poem is taken from Baumann 1967, pp. 21-23.

<sup>32</sup> Pound uses this term for facts or names capable of giving one "a sudden insight into circumjacent conditions in their causes, their effects, into sequence, and law." (*New Age* 7 (Dec. 1911), p. 131. Quoted by Kenner 1972, p. 152).

In order to understand *Aurunculeia!* we should be aware of the whole stanza of Pindar's ode epitomized by *ANAXIFORMINGES!*, which is hardly possible without consulting Pindar's text.<sup>33</sup> Pindar enumerates three possible subjects of his song, all male: gods, heroes, and men. *Aurunculeia!*, taken from a song of praise addressed to a woman, indicates a fourth possibility not mentioned by Pindar. Thus, the two alliterating words are meant to call up two contrasting domains of poetry.

Another theme is alluded to by the juxtaposition of burning Troy and the Cadmus myth: the destruction of one city is balanced by the building of another. Troy falls because divine principles are violated; the Cadmeia arises because the divine instructions are followed.

According to Baumann, the first four lines "contain in a nutshell all the major themes of the Canto." (Baumann 1967, p. 23). My summary of them has been incomplete, but, I hope, sufficient to indicate the kind of demands Pound's texts make, and the kind of experience they impose on the reader. For an understanding of these lines we need a good knowledge of Greek mythology as well as of Greek and Roman literature. This will not take us far, though, if we are not familiar with Pound's technique of allusion, and with his opinions about the figures and phenomena alluded to.

In noting this, we must remember that the allusions in these lines are by no means the most obscure<sup>34</sup> in Canto IV. Later on, there are also references to Provençal, Italian, and Chinese poetry (Vidal, Cavalcanti, So-Gyoku) and to Japanese religious beliefs (the pines at Takasago).

The first four lines of the canto can only be understood if the nutshell they form according to Baumann is cracked - by study. The sequence in which elements juxtaposed are mentioned does not contribute much to the total meaning, and they are not linked syntactically. Juxtaposition of the second and the fourth lines yields a common theme;<sup>35</sup> so does that of two types of literature in line 3.

On the other hand, the four lines from Canto IV also contain plainly sequential elements, which we associate with aural poetry. The address Hear me reminds us of the beginnings

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<sup>33</sup> George Dekker (1963), p. 133, thinks that Pound's allusions are meant to send us to their sources, the only place where they have full life and meaning. Davie (1964), p. 205, calls Canto LXXXV "unreadable in isolation."

<sup>34</sup> Examples of much obscurer allusions elsewhere in The Cantos are given by Stock (1967), p. 28. (Dolores in Cantos XXXVII, LXXX, LXXI), and p. 51 (a Max Beerbohm drawing in Cantos XXXV, XVII, IIC); cp. also p. 111 and 115.

<sup>35</sup> The same holds true of the juxtaposition of the story of Itys and Tereus to that of Cabestan, and that of Peire Vidal to the myth of Actaeon and Diana later in the canto. Cp. Blackmur 1957. Quoted in Sullivan 1970, p. 165.

of oral poems.<sup>36</sup> The first line, *Palace in smoky light* prepares for the next line on Troy, and for the lines following those quoted, which re-create the effects of light at dawn.

Lines 3 and 4 also contain at least two elements that are part of the "interlocking large-scale rhythms of recurrence," which allegedly help constitute the unity of *The Cantos*. One of these elements is the story of Troy; the great survivor, Ulysses, appears in Canto 1. The other, perhaps less obvious element is the figure of Cadmus, which is linked to the theme of accepting divine guidance,<sup>37</sup> and, especially, to the motif of city building. In Canto II Pentheus had been admonished to listen to the advice of his grandfather, Cadmus (Pound, *Cantos*, 1975, p. 9). In IV, the passage discussed, we get a piece of information on Cadmus's origins as a sailor-hero, which forms a "subject rhyme"<sup>38</sup> with Ulysses. In XXVII Cadmus ("of the gilded prows" (Pound, *Cantos*, 1975, p. 132)) will be mentioned again as sowing the teeth from which the *tovarisch*, 'companions' sprang; these probably stand for the masses rising in revolution. But the *tovarisch* return to the earth without being able to build the city. In Canto LXII, which deals with the American War of Independence, Cadmus will again be mentioned, this time in connection with the massacres associated with Boston's resistance to British taxation, probably to indicate that the city was not built then either.<sup>39</sup> Later on, the Cadmus myth will be alluded to (Baumann 1967, p. 23) in references to city building in Cantos LXXVII and LXXXIII.

Thus, the reference to Cadmus at the beginning of Canto IV is only one in a series of related passages which elucidate each other. Cadmus as a city founder, a notion that seems to be central in Canto IV, is only fully realized in later cantos. To some extent, therefore, full understanding of Canto IV presupposes the knowledge of later parts of the poem, i. e. simultaneous presence of large parts of the poem in the reader's mind. But because the Cadmus myth is only one element in an overwhelming wealth of material, it is hard to see how the mutual elucidation of these passages should work over such long distances. It is even doubtful whether all the elements of these large-scale rhythms could be noticed as such in reading the poem.

The four lines quoted from Canto IV demand two different kinds of experience: study in order to work out the

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<sup>36</sup> Cp. *Hwaet!* at the beginning of *Beowulf*. It is interesting that Baumann does not discuss *Hear me* in his otherwise detailed interpretation.

<sup>37</sup> Emery 1958, p. 91; Baumann 1967, p. 23. Again, I follow Baumann's discussion of the motif.

<sup>38</sup> Pound in a letter to his father (11-IV-1927). Quoted by Sullivan 1970, p. 93. Kenner (1972), p. 93, calls *The Cantos* "a thesaurus of subject rhymes." Cp. also Stock (1967) *passim*.

<sup>39</sup> Pound, *The Cantos*, 1975, p. 342. Pound speaks of five deaders (corpses). Their number corresponds to that of the Spartoi left after they had fought each other.

relationship between the allusions to Troy and to the Cadmus myth, and pacing in order to catch the large-scale rhythms of recurrence. This conflict cannot be solved, as R. P. Blackmur has observed:

The reader has the choice either of reading all the Cantos as if they were ... straightforward and self-explanatory, or of going behind the verses to the same material, or as much as he can discover of it, that Mr Pound himself used. The poem the reader seizes will be very different depending on the choice he makes. (Blackmur 1957, quoted from Sullivan 1970, p. 161).

If we proceed at a brisk pace we come across many fine and lucid passages. We will have the feeling that we have

traversed a great deal of material, without having at any time been quite certain what the material was about - and without, perhaps, distinguishing any need to find out ... Collected, the parts attract each other, and without the cohesive power of obvious design or continuing emotion, cling together, a quilt in the patch work, a string of rags from the inexhaustible bag. (Blackmur 1957, quoted from Sullivan 1970, p. 161).

On the other hand, the context and allusiveness of many passages demand that we study them. The effect of study will be that we proceed slowly, so slowly often that sequence is suspended altogether. The poem then disintegrates into a large number of small units, and becomes

a disjointed series of short poems, passages, lines and fragments, often of exceptional beauty or interest, but uninformed, poetically or otherwise, by larger purpose. (Stock 1967, p. 117).

These pieces may be related to each other thematically,<sup>40</sup> but the sequence in which they are experienced does not matter. The "rhythms of recurrence" are not experienced as rhythms, instead the passages sharing a particular theme will be selected and placed beside each other, with the purpose of mutual elucidation - the procedure common in critical studies.

This conflict between the two ways of experiencing the poem is reflected in the different critical strategies devised to confront it. T. S. Eliot, for example, emphasizes the horizontal drive of the poem, at the cost of neglecting its vertical one (see above, p. 50). He praises Pound's verse in his essay "Isolated Superiority," because it

does everything that he wants it to do; it has the uniform rhythm running through it, combined with unlimited variability of mood. As for the meaning of the Cantos, that never worries me, and I do not believe that I care. I know that Pound has a scheme and a kind of philosophy

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<sup>40</sup> An example of such a reading is Eugene Paul Nassar's *The Cantos of Ezra Pound: The Lyric Mode* (Baltimore and London, 1975).

behind it; it is quite enough for me that he thinks he knows what he is doing; I am glad that the philosophy is there, but I am not interested in it.<sup>41</sup>

Allen Tate, in his review of the first thirty Cantos, on the other hand, feels that "the thirty Cantos are enough to occupy a loving and ceaseless study - say a canto a year for thirty years, all thirty to be read every few weeks just for the tone."<sup>42</sup> This is also the approach of most academic critics. Baumann, for example, quotes Tate with approval, and goes on:

The hasty and uninitiated reader may be struck by certain passages of poetic intensity, but he cannot pierce the complex, if not complicated, surface and acquire a sufficiently disentangled vision of the core of this poem. Thorough penetration of a small but representative portion of the text can alone surmount this acute difficulty. (Baumann 1967, p. 15).

This attitude does not agree with Pound's view, expressed in 1935, that "the FIRST requirement" of a long poem "is that the reader be able to proceed."<sup>43</sup>

The relationship between the two kinds of experience suggested by *The Cantos* is discussed by Donald Davie, with the express purpose of avoiding the pitfalls of academic criticism. Having quoted excerpts from Cantos XLVII, LXXIV, LXXX, LXXXI, and CX he makes comments that must be quoted in full for their flavour to be caught.

Exegesis will be resisted; I could explicate each of these passages, but our present concern is with rhythm. And it's obvious that the catching up and echoing - over intervals of sometimes many hundred verse-lines, sometimes only a few score - of a motif like Jonson's 'Have you seen ... ?' or 'Have you marked ...?' [in "A Celebration of Charis"] constitutes one of the large-scale rhythms which ride through the Cantos in our experience of them when we read many at a time, and fast. And this is the sort of reading that we ought to give them, not just to begin with either. This indeed is what irritates so many readers, and fascinates an elect few - that the Cantos, erudite though they are, 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 3 until one is sure of line 2. They must be taken in big gulps or not at all. This means reading without comprehension? Yes, if by comprehension we mean a set

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<sup>41</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Isolated Superiority," *The Dial* (Jan., 1928). Quoted from Reeves 1969, p. 142/143. Cp. also George P. Elliott 1961.

<sup>42</sup> Written in 1936. Included in Russell 1950, p. 72. Quoted from Baumann 1967, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Apropos Laurence Binyon's translation of Dante. Quoted by Perkins 1976, p. 475.

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. Which is not to deny that some teasing out of quite short excerpts, even some hunting up of sources and allusions, is profitable at some stage. For the Cantos are a poem to be lived with, over years. Yet after many years each new reading - if it is a reading of many pages, as it should be - is a new bewilderment. So it should be, for so it was meant to be.<sup>44</sup>

The sanity and vigour of Davie's plea cannot hide a certain defensiveness. In his first sentence the rift between study and pacing is apparent. The advice that *The Cantos* should be taken in gulps has to be tempered by the suggestion that they should "at some stage" be studied; Davie does not say when - a point to which I shall return (p. 104). Each reading of the poem will offer new bewilderment - not, in itself, sufficient to justify, let alone encourage a return to the text. But perhaps the most defensive element in Davie's plea is the notion of the "elect few." This banishes all those who give up reading *The Cantos* - perhaps in desperation - from the circle of the initiated.

Pound's poem, unlike the poems of Homer, Dante or Milton, is addressed, according to R. P. Blackmur, "not to the general intelligence of its time, nor to an unusually cultivated class merely, but to a specially educated class alone" (Blackmur 1957, quoted in Sullivan 1970, p. 168), which is familiar with exactly the material used by Pound. The person belonging to this small group must further be able to follow the idiosyncratic workings of the poet's mind. If he wants to get beyond enjoying beautiful lyrical passages and the sound-music of strange words, he has to read rare and often odd pamphlets and books, in the perhaps vain hope that this will prove worthwhile. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Pound has only had disciples<sup>45</sup> and detractors. But for both followers and foes only prolonged study will unlock the secrets of *The Cantos*.

The study of a text presupposes its visual reading, and the conflict between the difficulty and the length of *The Cantos* is reflected in the visual elements of the text. The most obvious among these are the Chinese ideograms.<sup>46</sup> The first appears in Canto XXXIV (*Cantos* 1975, p. 171), and they recur throughout the rest of *The Cantos*. In the later cantos Pound often adds a

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<sup>44</sup> Davie 1975, p. 81/82. Cp. also Davie 1964, p. 229.

<sup>45</sup> See, for a moving example, Fraser 1960, p. 106/107.

<sup>46</sup> Beside the ideograms there are also other elements difficult to express in performance: the capitalization of words (cp. ANAXIFORMINGES! above, p. 99), excisions (e.g., in Cantos XIV and XV, *Cantos*, 1975, p. 61, 64-65), italics and spaced words (e.g., in XXXV, p. 173), underlinings (e.g., XLVI, p. 233), black bars replacing words (LII, p. 257), marginal notes (LII to LIX, pp. 265-325). The problem of Pound's typography is too complex to be reviewed here. Cp. his letter to Hubert Creekmore in February 1939 (Sullivan 1970, p. 192), and Pound's *Social Credit*, Money Pamphlet No. 5 (London, 1951), p. 17. On Pound's visual prosody, see Gross 1964; 1968, pp. 160-164.

transcription, but these notes do not help the text as a score. In Canto XCI he starts to introduce hieroglyphs<sup>47</sup>, and he uses other pictorial representations<sup>48</sup> as early as Canto XXII.

Pound was aware that these signs present problems to the kind of continuous experience he wanted for *The Cantos*. In a headnote to Cantos LII-LXXI he indicates that, as a rule,

foreign words and ideograms both in these two decads and in earlier cantos enforce the text but seldom if ever add anything not stated in the english, though not always in lines immediately contiguous to these underlinings [viz., signs of emphasis]. (*Cantos* 1975, p. 256).

This suggests that these visual elements only serve as a kind of comment on the aural text (see above, pp. 31-32). This view does not tally with Pound's statement (made at about the same time) that there is "condensation to maximum attainable"<sup>49</sup> in *The Cantos*. This would suggest that the ideograms and hieroglyphs are complementary to the aural text (see above, pp. 32-33).

The visual elements are not continually present in the text; they tend to appear between long passages that can be read sequentially or listened to. Thus the "visuals" form a parallel to passages that require study; they are preceded and followed by others which can be understood at first hearing or reading.

*The Cantos* thus not only demand two conflicting ways of proceeding. They also require switching from one to the other at certain points (see above, p. 100), without clearly indicating - except for the evidence of visual elements - where exactly this should happen. The recipient is in serious danger of simply getting confused, and of losing the pace necessary to bring out the "large-scale rhythms of recurrence," or, indeed, any over-all sense.

My purpose in dealing with two poems by Ezra Pound has been to discuss the problem of a poem's length. At the beginning of this study I postulated that the experience of a poem needs a certain duration in order to create an event (pp. 25-26), and claimed that this duration may be achieved either by length or difficulty, or a combination of the two. It is no coincidence that Kenner's discussion of both *The Cantos* and "In a Station of the Metro" implies the notion of speed. The need to find "rhythms of recurrence" suggests a quick pace, which shortens the experience of the long poem. The study of the one-image poem, on the other hand, prolongs the experience.

Both "In a Station of the Metro" and *The Cantos* are problematic. In both there is a conflict between the experience suggested by the length of the text and the experience required by its difficulty. Pound's one-image poem, whose brevity comes

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<sup>47</sup> See Canto XCIII, in Pound, *Cantos*, 1975, pp. 623-32.

<sup>48</sup> Canto XXII, in Pound, *Cantos*, 1975, p. 103; XXXIV (p. 171); XLII (p. 210); etc.

<sup>49</sup> Pound, letter to Hubert Creekmore. Sullivan 1970, p. 192.

close to presenting simultaneously all its elements, is relatively easy to understand. Experience of it may therefore be too short to create an event of its own. As Pound's report on the writing of the poem indicates, he was aware of this problem (see p. 94). If the poem is studied, as Kenner thinks it should be, the event of experiencing the lines will become long enough to be satisfying (p. 93). He takes the words of the poem to be allusive, and juxtaposed to each other in such a way as to create complex associations; as we have seen, neither careful reading nor early versions of the text necessarily justify this approach (p. 94).

The problem of experiencing *The Cantos*, on the other hand, is that the poem is long as well as difficult. In traditional long poems the development of an argument or a story-line facilitates the experience of the poem in sections. The single cantos do not form such units of experience. The rhythms of recurrence which, according to Kenner, constitute the unity of the poem demand that we proceed through the whole poem. At the same time, "luminous details," allusions to strange domains of knowledge, often related to each other in idiosyncratic ways, demand study. This conflict has been tackled in different ways. Meaning has been neglected for sequence, as by Eliot (see p. 102). Alternatively, sequence has been given up and length disregarded in order to study meaning, as in much academic criticism (see pp.99-100), with the result that the poem breaks up into small units. Compromises between the two approaches, like the one suggested by Davie (see pp.102-103), are unsatisfactory. The experience demanded by the poem is too long to form an event.