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“A poem containing history”: Pound as a Poet of Deep Time

Newell Scott Porter

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“A poem containing history”: Pound as a Poet of Deep Time

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There has been an emergent trend in literary studies that challenges the tendency to categorize our approach to literature. This new investment in the idea of “world literature,” while exciting, is also both theoretically and pragmatically problematic. While theorists can usually articulate a defense of a wider approach to literature, they struggle to develop a tangible approach to such an ideal. By examining Ezra Pound’s critical approach to poetry, especially in *The Cantos*, an applicable visualization of a global approach to literature becomes more transparent.

Keywords: Ezra Pound, deep time, world literature, *The Cantos*, poetry, Wai Chee Dimock

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“A poem containing history”

and I through this, and into the earth,
 patet terra,
 entered the quiet air
 the new sky,
 the light as after a sun-set,
 and by their fountains, the heroes,
 Sigismundo, and Malatesta Novella,
 and founders, gazing at the mounts of their cities. (Canto XVI)

A couple of summers ago I started an internship in Salt Lake City. I was living in Provo at the time, and luckily the UTA had just completed the FrontRunner train that made for an easy commute. While I was excited for the job and grateful for the newly constructed transportation, I was also wary of the company I'd likely have to endure on that train—I'd had bad public transit experiences in the past and didn't look forward to repeating any of them. So I brought a book along—my copy of Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*. I figured if there was any book that declared to the world, “I'm busy. Don't talk to me” it was Pound's 800-page epic.

As most plans do, it backfired. As I was working my way through the poems, I came across something I knew was coming but was not at all prepared for— Chinese ideograms. Simultaneously impressed and frustrated by the scope of Pound's influences, I looked up from my book and noticed that I was sitting beside a Chinese man. Figuring it was worth a shot, I leaned over to him and asked if he was familiar with written Chinese. He looked at my book and enthusiastically began to explain to me that the Chinese characters I was looking at were old— at least old enough to make him unsure of the accuracy of his translation, though he gave it his best attempt.

It seemed my wall of isolation had betrayed me. Before long, my fellow traveler introduced himself as Yunan and began showing me pictures of his kids, telling me about his wife, his new job, and his experiences thus far in Utah. He was describing the differences

between old and new Chinese, between Western and Eastern philosophy and religion, and any other subject he could get to before we arrived at his stop.

Yes, the book had failed to do what I wanted it to do. But really, it had done something that Pound would have appreciated. Had he been on the train with us, he would have likely celebrated our encounter; a young, introverted scholar/poet interacting with an enthusiastic immigrant (at a station of the metro, no less) and experiencing the unique interaction that those types of encounters might foster. In fact, it was a good representation of what happens between cultures in *The Cantos*—segments of humanity that are separated either by time, language, or geography combine in an epic attempt to get a wide-lens view of the scope of human experience.

Unfortunately, much contemporary scholarship approaches *The Cantos* in the same way I first approached my train ride. A recent survey of the MLA online bibliography shows that people are both studying the poems less frequently but also more specifically. For example, the search produces recent titles like “‘That Roman’ in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* 78,” or “‘High Civilization’: The Role of Noh Drama in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*.” It seems that G. S. Fraser’s observation about *The Cantos* proves prophetic: “there will always remain details to provide employment for young men doing Ph.D. theses” (72). Most articles and books, in addressing these details, tackle a very small aspect of the *Cantos*—they comment on Ezra Pound and his experiences with Chinese, his readings of Dante, or the influence of Vorticism in certain poems. These are all important aspects that contribute to the massive whole of the work, but when we study each of them in isolation, then we have ignored the project of the poems on the whole and condemned their separate parts to different cars of the train—no conversation, no photos, no interaction, no growth.

This isn't a surprising development—much in our current scholarly approach to literature is built around the value of concentration—the narrower, the better. We're accustomed to the idea that we can't *possibly* know or appreciate multiple genres, periods, or authors in their entirety and so we pick a small section of the literary world upon which we feel capable of making a lasting scholarly impact. Unfortunately, there is a downside to this approach, and it seems that most struggle to view literary history (or, by extension, human history) as a generalizable, cohesive whole and thus don't quite know how to handle a magisterial work like *The Cantos* that actually tries to do so.

Recently, however, an emergent trend in scholarship has challenged this tendency to categorize and segregate the study of literature. Scholars have become more deeply invested in the idea of “world literature,” which David Damrosch (editor of *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* and author of *What is World Literature?*) defines as “literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (9). This definition is a rough one, and several scholars point out that it and its theoretical and pedagogical implications are underdeveloped. Some, such as James Hodapp and Emily Apter, identify the weakness and hypocrisy of a program that is necessarily dependent on translation. Hodapp echoes Apter, arguing that “polyglots produce more nuanced and culturally specific readings than readers of texts in English translation” (73). In a similar vein, Dorothy Figueira warns against an “easy” approach to world literature, arguing that “In such pedagogies, each text preserves its own heritage as long as it speaks English. Such pedagogies also feed American isolationism...[and] consist of nothing more than snippets from endless recycled ‘representative’ authors writing or translated into the English language.” The biggest problem may simply be, as Figueira points out, that “The world, whether it be the first or the third, defies packaging” (30).

The resurgence of genre studies and global accounts of a “deep” literary-historical inheritance may have their deficiencies and seem underdeveloped, especially under the weight of questions of translation, identity, nationalism, literary canons, recognition, and representation. These issues not only present theoretical difficulties, but certainly pragmatic and pedagogical difficulties. That being said, these issues are not without solution. My purpose is to show that a successful conceptualization of “world literature” becomes more lucid when we use an adapted definition of “deep time” provided by Wai Chee Dimock to examine Ezra Pound’s critical approach to poetry. His theories ought to be used as the high water mark for scholars of world literature, which I will demonstrate not by conducting a close-reading of *The Cantos*, but by considering their project as an evidence of the tangibility of world literature from Pound’s perspective, which has risen in value with the shift in the literary landscape.

Dimock and Deep Time

Men’s manners cannot be one
 (same, identical)
 Kung said: are classic of heaven,
 They bind thru the earth
 and flow
 With recurrence (Canto XCIX)

One of the more developed touchstones of this new scholarly movement is Wai Chee Dimock’s influential study, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (2006). Dimock explicitly challenges the way the literary scholars classify the writings they are studying. It is a mistake, she argues, to label our literature as “American,” because when we do, we “limit ourselves... to an analytic domain foreclosed by definition, a kind of scholarly unilateralism” (3). She proposes instead that we view literary canons from the perspective of what she terms “deep time,” arguing that “American literature emerges with a much longer view than one might think” (4). It is obvious that many of the defining characteristics of “American”

literature predate the founding of America itself. The language, political ideals, genres, even the governing mythos of American literature can be traced back to antecedent civilizations and aesthetics. While “America” is a unique composite of prior influences, and maybe that blend is uniquely “American,” ignorance of the origin and reach of predecessor influences is not only myopic, Dimock contends, but also a poor way of accounting for the global circulation of influences across time and space.

If we approach literary development through a lens of deep time, Dimock argues, we are provided with a new, more accurate perspective: “What [deep time] highlights is a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric” (3). In other words, literature (and the study of it) ought to act like my encounter on the train, *ad infinitum*. On the surface level of that experience there is the obvious dimension of multicultural interaction that every individual encounters, either through one’s own travel, research on the internet, or a documentary television series. The “binding of continents” that Dimock refers to seems to grow more accessible daily through the developments of technology and their globalizing effect, and doesn’t seem to meet much opposition outside of xenophobic tendencies that sometimes mark cultural and political relationships.

Dimock’s “binding of millennia,” on the other hand, seems almost limited by the same expansion. This technology that enables globalization can also act as a cultural overlord, demanding constant participation in the innovative trends that obsessively need to take last year’s model and “make it new” (to borrow Pound’s phrase). The problem is that we become so driven to “make it new” that we forget the value or function of what we are leaving behind. Pound’s prescriptive statement, while certainly supportive of innovation, was equally concerned

with the “it” that is being made new, that is being made relevant to a new age. The “it” doesn’t come from newness itself, but comes from something much older, waiting to be reborn, reincarnated by newness.

This sentiment was shared by fellow poet-critic T. S. Eliot, who declares at the end of his famous “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that the poet “is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living” (Eliot). Eliot celebrated Pound’s ability to do just that in his review of Pound’s *Quia Pauper Amavi*:

Most poets grasp their own time, the life of the world as it stirs before their eyes, at one convulsion or not at all. But they have no method for closing in upon it. Mr. Pound’s method is indirect and one extremely difficult to pursue. As the present is no more than the present existence, the present significance, of the entire past, Mr. Pound proceeds by acquiring the entire past; and when the entire past is acquired, the constituents fall into place and the present is revealed. Such a method involves immense capacities of learning and of dominating one’s learning, and the peculiarity of expressing oneself through historical masks. Mr. Pound has a unique gift for expression through some phase of past life. This is not archaeology or pedantry, but one method, and a very high method of poetry. (1065)

The determination of both poets to express themselves “through some phase of past life” is an example of what Dimock calls the “binding of millennia.” This type of binding was also present on the train; beneath the surface of our conversation, there was a deeper interchange taking place. Both Yunan and I were experiencing the set of “recessional frames”—Yunan was in one moment looking into the history of his own language and the philosophy of his ancestors— and

also “projective frames”— Yunan, in the next moment, was showing me photos of his children, projecting a future of “China” which is also “American.” Naturally these frames will have differing (and likely more complicated) implications in the literary world, but it was deeply poetic for me to watch him translate the Chinese ideograms for “old” and “new,” and then subsequently act as a living force of what he had been elucidating for me.

These are the kinds of interactions that “deep time” seeks to embed in our study of literature. They are facilitated by the idea that “Literature is the home of nonstandard space and time” (4), that it is capable of bridging gaps that limit human conversation. Since this is one of literature’s great gifts, as both Dimock and I argue, then surely our study of it ought to revel in that defining characteristic instead of evading it.

Misrepresentations of Pound

To study with the white wings of time passing
 is not that our delight
 to have friends come from far countries
 is not that pleasure
 nor to care that we are untrumpeted? (Canto LXXIV)

With this argument in mind, Dimock’s inclusion of a chapter about poet Ezra Pound seems completely appropriate. By the time she reaches that section, we have already read several chapters explaining America’s deep literary past and its international roots, so a poet with so diverse and fluid an aesthetic as Pound would seem an obvious inclusion. A famously omnivorous reader, Pound drew readily on outside traditions to perfect his craft, particularly the Provencal and Confucian traditions. To label him simply as an “American poet” would discredit his range, unless the word isn’t mean to only give him a geographical category but to acknowledge that Pound, like America, has far-reaching influences.

Yet, Dimock's treatment of Pound oddly seems to come up short and her opinion of his ostensibly deep-time poetics is difficult to evaluate, as she focuses mainly upon his struggles as an expatriate and his difficult relationship with his home country. Directing her attention away from Pound's poetry, Dimock mainly gets distracted by (and appears to side with) the ad hominem treatment of his harshest critics— she recounts with disbelief the fact that Pound's own journals on the day of Pearl Harbor completely ignore the tragic incident and are instead focused on Japanese classical plays (121-22). She writes, "Then as now, Pound's will always be a minority voice, laughable in its naive and stubborn attachment, blind to the patriotic fury of a wounded nation," using Pound as an example of how the aesthetic "is not intellectual..., not savvy, not expedient," and ultimately, uses his anti-American statements as an example of "why the word 'aesthetic' can so easily be made into a synonym for the word 'un-American'" (122).

As an American, it may be difficult to distance oneself from the overwhelmingly negative connotation of the phrase "un-American," but just on the next page Dimock explains that "Deep time is 'un-American' in conforming neither to a national chronology nor to a national map" (123). It's tough to consolidate, then, what Dimock's message on Pound really is. She perhaps rightly considers his politics "laughable" and "naïve." Yet following her own logic, shouldn't a poet who is blind to "patriotic fury" (or any type of aggressive patriotism, for that matter) be exemplary? Isn't Pound's blindness in fact closer to being a defining characteristic of a disciple of deep time, rather than a reproach? Is Pound's distance from nationalism—his retreat into the alternative time and space of literature—evidence of Pound's committed absorption to a deep time perspective Dimock remains unprepared to embrace, given his problematic political life?

Dimock's dismissive approach to Pound is compounded by the scant attention given his actual poetry. She mentions *The Cantos* as Pound's grand epic, and the fact that his work on the

Pisan Cantos won him the Bollingen Prize in 1948, but only brings that up to introduce readers to the political controversies that surrounded the award. Considering the poems' driving motivation is precisely a synthetic elucidation of the transnational flows and latent correspondences of human poetic experience, it seems as though Pound deserves more attention, if not respect. Scholarship that is driven by a deep-time perspective should especially be wary of situational politics and instead concern itself with the grander concepts that emerge when literature breaches the typical bounds of space and time, as Pound sought to do.

Unfortunately, Dimock isn't the only recent scholar to treat Pound so dismissively. In *On Literary Worlds* (a book with a similar project to Dimock's *Deep Time*), Eric Hayot condenses *The Cantos* into one parenthetical phrase- "Many of the writers we now call 'modernist'—the Europeans and U.S. expats of the 1900-1940 period—largely combined Modernism and Romance, building new worlds from an apprehension of the diversity of world-experiences (think of *The Cantos*)." On the same page, though, he suggests "that the study of literary history would be quite different if we were to regroup and recategorize the authors we have under a different explanatory logic" (132). Ironically, if there is any piece that resists being glancingly "thought of," it's *The Cantos*. This misstep is amplified by the stated goals at the end of Hayot's paragraph— why are we simply thinking of *The Cantos* when their project (and the project of most of Pound's poetry) actively resists such categorization?

The new scholars of deep time and literary worlds are foregrounding the problems of narrow academic specialization. Yet in an effort to illustrate the new potential for a "different explanatory logic," they are left without a consistent system of critique, with a thin method whose result appears a scattershot approach that overlooks crucial parts of literary history and the sympathetic projects of their predecessors.

My purpose isn't to dismiss the laudable aim of Dimock's or Hayot's criticism, but to acknowledge difficulties that come with the territory. Given the aims of *Across Other Continents* and *Literary Worlds*, a seemingly sympathetic critical voice like Pound's requires special attention, something more substantial than a passing glance or a quick summative phrase. Critical preoccupations in the new scholarship, notably the recursive flow of literary influence throughout time, are essential to Pound's poetics and criticism. The work of criticism is itself recursive, and to reduce Pound to a mere case-in-point is to overlook the critical ground he'd already broken regarding deep time and world literature. A closer review of his criticism and poetics is thus required if we are to better chart the deeper flows of critical influence along with those of literature.

Pound as Young Poet

who seized the extremities and the opposites
 holding true course between them
 shielding men from their errors
 cleaving to the good they had found (Canto LXXIV)

Pound has always felt that best way to immerse himself into the world of poetry was to cast a wide net. In his 1913 essay "How I Began," he writes:

I resolved that at thirty I would know more about poetry than any man living ... that I would know what was accounted poetry everywhere, what part of poetry was 'indestructible', what part could *not be lost* by translation and – scarcely less important – what effects were obtainable in *one* language only and were utterly incapable of being translated. In this search I learned more or less of nine foreign languages, I read Oriental stuff in translations, I fought every University regulation and every professor who tried to make me learn anything except this, or who bothered me with 'requirements for degrees.'

(707)

Notable here is the claim that the search for the “indestructible” part of poetry is dependent on finding global examples of poetry. In order to discover the enduring elements of the art form, Pound had to search across time and space for everything that “constitutes poetry.” This is a quest driven by several questions. How far can we go with genre? At what point does something stop being a poem and start to be something else? What are the universal standards of poetry? How do other cultures measure its worth? What is a given culture’s unique offering to poetry? By testing the global scope of his definitions, Pound reasoned, he could more effectively define these bounds of poetry and thus operate most effectively within them.

In order to create a visual representation of this endeavor, one can imagine a huge Venn diagram—for every different incarnation of poetry that we come across, we create a separate circle. Now if we were to overlay each of these circles in the areas in which they share aesthetic features, we would be left with a small area in the center of all of them, one that outlines the universal characteristics of poetry. If we were to look at these pairs individually, we could simply compare English and French poetry, for example, and our list of shared characteristics might be quite long and include everything from decasyllabic lines to similar rhyme schemes. Introduce an influence like Japanese, however, and that list of shared characteristics becomes considerably smaller. The more expansive our study becomes, the more our central circle shrinks until soon we have isolated a few universal characteristics of poetry—the very DNA of the art.

Of course, one could arguably become the expert on “American” poetry by simply studying American poets. But instead of investing time solely in Whitman, Dickinson, Poe, or whatever other local author he felt worth his time, Pound was on the trail of poetry itself (with no special regard for whether or not it was “American”) and went digging for deeper cuts across continents and millennia. As he explains it: “When it comes to the question of poetry, a great

many people don't even want to know that their own country does not occupy ALL the available surface of the planet. The idea seems in some way to insult them" (ABC, 42).

The results of Pound's broad approach are some of the most important poems in his career and the most influential of the entire modernist period. His Anglo-Saxon translation "Seafarer," his "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" and the other Asian translations that appear in his collection *Cathay*, his "Sestina Altaforte," and a slew of other poems borrow directly from forms and aesthetics that are often as old as they are foreign. And these are just examples of times that Pound borrows explicitly—the effect that all of these sources have on the rest of his work (and the work of the multitude of artists who were influenced in turn) is immeasurable. Because of Pound's tendency to, as Eliot put it, express himself "through historical masks," he is often culturally unclassifiable, whether he blatantly intends it or not.

This pattern would intensify in *The Cantos*. While English may be the linguistic foundation for many of the poems (except some, like "LXXII," which is written mainly in Italian), one cannot read far before experiencing, as I had, the need for a translator or encyclopedia. This is especially the case in the *Pisan Cantos*, with Pound creating a fugue-like form of circulating and variant ideas weaving in and out of each other. Languages, too, appear and disappear from line to line, and every appearance of a new line of influence seems intended to reinforce Pound's dictum that "all things that are are lights" (449). The recurring use of the word "periplum," likewise suggests a journey of thorough mental exploration that would be required to obtain and internalize this kind of synthesis.

Pound expounds on this idea throughout his *ABC of Reading*. First, he writes: "It doesn't, in our contemporary world, so much matter where you begin the examination of a subject, so long as you keep on until you get round again to your starting-point. As it were, you start on a

sphere, or a cube; you must keep on until you have seen it from all sides” (29). And later, that advice is converted into a more practical application for those who are learning: “Let the student hunt for a dozen poems that are different... that introduce some new component, or enlarge his conception of poetry, by bringing in some kind of matter or mode of expression not yet touched on” (144).

For Pound as instructor, then, helping one develop a depth of understanding comes from increasing the breadth of their vision. These aren't small pedagogical steps, either—if a young poet is struggling to find a voice and seems to be writing similar to Ginsberg, then we can't simply recommend Kerouac or any of the other Beats in order to help him more fully orient himself. That is a kind of aesthetic fine-tuning that still prevents one from seeing the other 99 percent of the poetic “sphere” and must be delayed until a more thorough survey of the landscape has been conducted.

That isn't to say, though, that an open-minded determination to gain that survey of the literary landscape should prevent one from making critical judgments. But these must emerge from a process of defamiliarization rather than identification. To admire and recover writers from diverse backgrounds—evidenced by the identity politics that undergird much in post-colonialism, feminist criticism, gender studies and queer theory—on the basis of finding representative voices instead of uncovering technical merits or formative effects on the genre would be a secondary concern for Pound. Without attention to form and transformational influence criticism is reduced to something akin to those patrons of the Phoenix Zoo who purchase paintings by Ruby the elephant; the unexpected source of the paintings alone gives them value. Preoccupation with the source alone is one of Pound's primary cautions, for one

“can learn more about poetry by really knowing and examining a few of the best poems than by meandering about among a great many” (ABC, 43).

The Cantos

And the vinestocks lie untended, new leaves come to the shoots,
 North wind nips on the bough, and seas in heart
 Toss up chill crests,
 And the vine stocks lie untended
 And many things are set abroad and brought to mind (Canto V)

It should seem evident why the “deep time” scholars’ scant attention to Pound is unfortunate. But at the same time, it also doesn’t seem as evident that the early Pound contributed much more to the implications of deep-time reading than is currently being contributed by contemporary scholarship. This will change as Pound gets into his massive *Cantos*, because this is the point where theory and practice fuse in both a technical and practical sense. There has been considerable debate about the artistic merit of the *Cantos*, often centered on the question of whether it is cohesive or irredeemably fragmentary. Pound himself acknowledged in the middle of working on assembling the poems into a functioning whole that he was struggling. But the project didn’t need to be successful in order to shape the further development of the ideals in question, and the focus here is less on the value of the result than the value of the goal.

The Cantos isn’t simply concerned with the principles of great poetry (though that is true for Pound himself) but more the questions of an essential humanity. We shift focus from discovering the “pure elements” of poetry as Pound called them and start digging for the divine ingredients of humankind. The pursuit of these two separate things are still operating under very similar processes, and it often appears in Pound’s prose that he considers both the elements of

poetry and humanity to be synonymous. In letters to his father, Pound describes his overall plan for the poems:

Have I ever given you outline of main scheme;;; or whatever it is?

1. Rather like, or unlike subject and response and counter subject in fugue.
 - A. Live man goes down into world of Dead
 - B. The “repeat in history.”
 - C. The “magic moment” or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidien into “divine or permanent world.” Gods, etc. (210)

This “repeat in history” is built on a similar foundation as almost all of Pound’s other critical works, whether it be *Guide to Kulchur* or *ABC of Reading*. As part of his infamous radio broadcasts, he demands “If you don’t know ANY history whatever, how can you understand HOW things happen? You don’t expect a bloke who has never SEEN a game of football to rush in and play a star game” (#49). This sounds like the exasperated lament of a high-school history teacher, the well-worn cliché of being doomed to repeat history if it is ignored, but Pound’s intention is more searching. The “HOW” in history is the same as his search for the “HOW” of poetry, but now he has used the concept of history to expand that approach from aesthetic problems to the problems of the human race.

For Pound, the literary world has a unique ability and responsibility towards history and its interpretation for the populace. To return to Dimock, “Literature is the home of nonstandard space and time” (4), meaning it can extend itself outwards and occupy different dimensions of a shared humanity (and history) from which we are otherwise separated. Pound defined literature in a similar way. His assertion that “literature is news that STAYS news” (ABC, 29), means it

ought to, in its process of expanding and enriching a reader's perspective, make clear enduring questions of human existence. Thus, something that is capable of "staying news," is also capable of, as Dimock described it, "binding millennia." Something that is always news is always urgent, always demanding of attention. If this is the case, then it has universal application: it is important to every people and every time. By Pound's own definition, the very goal of literature (and of *The Cantos* specifically) is the same as the goal of "deep time"—it is a historical poem, but it seeks out the parts of history that maintain their urgency. Therefore, by labelling something "American literature," we prevent it from being literature at all, or at least rob it of its most potent literary qualities by focusing on the details of its immediate, originary context.

In order for history to be meaningful in Pound's sense for the term, in order for a poem to bind not only millennia but also continents, requires that Pound cover nearly the entire sphere of human history, just as he demanded that young students who wanted to get a clear understanding of poetry had to work their way around the entire subject and get a comprehensive view of it. This pursuit, however, might seem to require a gargantuan amount of material.

In addressing this problem, Pound explained in an interview with the *Paris Review* that he "had various schemes, starting in 1904 or 1905. The problem was to get a form—something elastic enough to take the necessary material. It had to be a form that wouldn't exclude something merely because it didn't fit."

This problem of form is a key indicator that Pound's project is more deeply invested in the concern of deep time than a simple gloss would indicate. Hayot and Dimock seek merely to catalog and categorize the history of literature in a more accurate way by accounting for the dynamics of influence—but this only requires a topical interaction with the text. Pound's goal requires something more synthetic. He wants to use the world's history, mythology, and poetry

as a kind of index, or shorthand, to fashion a form that evokes the depth of human experience in time and space without necessarily following a chronological or causal historical thread.

Pound spent over fifty years trying to achieve such a form. Many scholars have criticized his translations for their literal inaccuracy, particularly William Gardner Hale, who declared in his criticism of “Homage to Sextus Propertius” that “Mr. Pound is incredibly ignorant of Latin” (52). Others have acknowledged that Pound had done a better job of getting to the essence of the thing than most technical translations accomplish. In the introduction to Pound’s *Translations*, Hugh Kenner asserts that:

A translation, by extension, is a rendering of a modus of thought or feeling in its context after it has already been crystallized... the English poet must absorb the ambience of the text into his blood before he can render it with authority; and when he has done that, what he writes is a poem of his own following the contours of the poem before him. He does not translate words. The words have led him into the thing he expresses: desolate seafaring, or the cult of the plum-blossoms, or the structure of sensibility that attended the Tuscan anatomy of love. (11)

The *Cantos* is concerned with this same problem of “absorbing ambience” and being led into things by the words of others, though on a mass scale that left Pound searching for the proper form to do so.

The formal answer to that question, it seems, was the epic poem. Pound described in the same interview with the *Paris Review* that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the epic poem, as Pound explains, is that “an epic is a poem containing history.” He was particularly concerned about “six centuries that hadn’t been packaged. It was a question of dealing with material that wasn’t in the *Divina Commedia*” (PR). Pound’s study of Dante showed him that a

work similar to the one that he was undertaking had already been done in the past and that the form was ready to be picked up and experimented with.

Other scholars have argued for the similarities between Pound and Dante and their significance in our reading of the poem and understanding of its project:

The Cantos is about Pound's efforts to master Western history. While his definition of an epic as a "poem including history" or "poem containing history" is deliberately reductive, it nonetheless testifies to a fundamental conviction, that the epic poet works to fashion a poetic form that can contain what we normally think of as the concerns of history. In fact, as my study demonstrates, the chief problem of the epic in the modern world is the problem of form: how can poetry confront, include, provide meaning to, and thus master the violent and complex world of history? (Sicari, ix)

Pound's awareness of Dante and acknowledgment that he was building on a similar framework is itself an example of how an informed author can benefit from and build upon a tradition. Of course, as Sicari argues, Pound has developed a new variation of the wandering hero, a likeness of Dante's, but still unique to the modern question. Instead of Dante's wandering hero that rises from the depths of hell to the circular heavens, "The wanderer is now voyaging through a sea of historical texts that he himself has accumulated; if he can arrange and organize these texts into a perfect pattern of ideal justice, he will transcend the limitations of history and achieve a consciousness of ideal justice" (xii).

This observation of *The Cantos* is crucial to showing the gravity of Pound's project. This isn't simply another manifestation of his determination to be a great poet or to have his name immortalized next to a significant masterpiece—the principles of deep time, for Pound, are the principles of salvation. When you consider the mindset of Europe in the midst of two World

Wars, you can imagine why Pound would be desperate to act, as he claimed artists should, as the “antennae of the race,” capable of sensing danger and guiding civilization to safer terrain. You can also imagine why he felt that discovering, via history, the “HOW” of civilization was more crucial than ever as civilization itself felt like it was crumbling. He explained:

I am writing to resist the view that Europe and civilization are going to Hell. If I am being “crucified for an idea”—that is, the coherent idea around which my muddles accumulated—it is probably the idea that European culture ought to survive, that the best qualities of it ought to survive along with whatever other cultures, in whatever universality. Against the propaganda of terror and the propaganda of luxury, have you a nice simple answer? One has worked on certain materials trying to establish bases and axes of reference. In writing so as to be understood, there is always the problem of rectification without giving up what is correct. There is the struggle not to sign on the dotted line for the opposition. (Paris Review)

Pound’s struggle, the need to establish “bases and axes of reference,” is equally the challenge of literary scholarship, whether it be in theory or pedagogy or writing creatively. We struggle to gain a kind of universality, to expand our audience, to be more fully understood. Our need for the kind of universal human understanding that Pound sought extends beyond scholarship. The absence or diminishment of historical understanding lies at the root of countless human problems; is its presence at the root of their solution? Pound’s faith in the wandering hero’s search across time and space for a universal understanding is a faith that such a search might culminate in a resonant harmony.

To accomplish this, Pound's hero acts as a shadow of Pound as poet—he searches through everything in order to find out of it the best parts. As Pound explains, “It is difficult to write a paradiso when all the superficial indications are that you ought to write an apocalypse. It is obviously much easier to find inhabitants for an inferno or even a purgatorio. I am trying to collect the record of the top flights of the mind.” (Paris Review) One of Pound's many challenges to students in *ABC of Reading* is to “decide whether there are 100 good poems in whatever general anthology he possesses; or fifty, or thirty” (143). Once again, finding both “the top flights of the mind” and a “good poem” out of many are examples of pursuing the concentrated universality of the subject matter.

The great difficulty that arises after that selective, filtering part of the process is the need to bind them altogether in a cohesive whole. The common criticism of *The Cantos* is that the many parts are fragmentary and incoherent. This need to make everything fit is what most frustrated Pound. “Obviously you haven't got a nice little road map such as the Middle Ages possessed of Heaven. Only a musical form would take the material, and the Confucian universe as I see it is a universe of interacting strains and tensions” (Paris Review).

Not only would music provide the overall form of the poem, but also provide a way that a multitude of cultures can have a synonymous presence in the poem. This happens as early as the first *Canto*, with Odysseus' trip to the underworld being translated from Andreas Divus' translation of the *Odyssey* into an Anglo-Saxon form, as typified in the rhythm of strong-stressed syllables and dominating alliteration. Right from the start of the poem readers are forced to calculate a location somewhere between both of these cultures, a harmony between these “strains and tensions” that are created through these types of poetic layering. And, as mentioned before, what Pound hopes to find in the middle of this Venn diagram are the divine ingredients of

humanity, with poetry acting as the vehicle for that discovery as cultures are overlaid via different methods of meaning.

There are times, however, when all of this cultural juxtaposition, reorientation, and “repeating history,” can often feel cyclical to the point of redundancy. As frustrating as this is, it is also part of the project. Pound explains that “The problem was to build up a circle of reference—taking the modern mind to be the medieval mind with wash after wash of classical culture poured over it since the Renaissance. That was the psyche, if you like. One had to deal with one’s own subject” (Paris Review). These altering minds and “washes” of culture, while overwhelming for readers, are intended to reach toward some lasting resolution, and this resolution lies in the treatment of the “epic subjects.” Pound insisted that “There *are* epic subjects. The struggle for individual rights is an epic subject, consecutive from jury trial in Athens to Anselm versus William Rufus, to the murder of Becket and to Coke and through John Adams” (Paris Review). In this explanation, Pound’s term “epic subject” is synonymous with a subject that “stays news,” a subject that has universal appeal.

In the midst of all of these strains, tensions, interactions, cultures, languages, images, names, and noises, a reader can feel burdened down and possibly further from enlightenment than in any other point in their life. The last point of Pound’s formula, the claim the poem ends on “The “magic moment” or “moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidien into ‘divine or permanent world’” may seem laughable. However, when we consider the processes of deep time we can understand why Pound felt the path to metamorphosis would lead through a sprawling compilation of the world’s history.

Both deep time and *The Cantos* are driven by the axiom that “The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is CAPABLE of expressing all

forms and degrees of human comprehension” (ABC, p 34). As we look at the history of literature, and genuinely ask how the thing works and how it can be made to work better, where it is headed and how we can help it move there, we must realize that its ingredients are dispersed among the entirety of the human race.

While there are many opinions on the man Ezra Pound and questions regarding his lasting contribution to literature, these newer ideas of viewing art and humanity through a more inclusive lens are allowing us to more highly value both his poetry and criticism. Pound writes that “one has to divide the readers who want to be experts from those who do not, and divide, as it were, those who want to see the world from those who merely want to know WHAT PART OF IT THEY LIVE IN” (ABC, p 42).

Of course, there is a reason that the majority of readers aren’t trying to be experts to the extent that Pound would desire of them—it’s a difficult process. It’s not only difficult for the average reader, but even for the master poet. When asked in the interview with the *Paris Review* about his progress on *The Cantos*, Pound replied, “Okay, I am stuck.”

In an attempt to best represent Pound’s ideas and take him at his word, I’ve quoted rather heavily from primary source material. In reality, however, Pound didn’t come to a resoundingly conclusive solution to his problem. But before we rush to criticisms of the poems’ shortcomings, as several critics have done, there is still a necessary lesson to be learned from the project and its failure. Pound identifies several complicating aspects of the project throughout the interview, mainly the struggles between: “the principle of order versus the split atom;” “the heteroclitic contents of contemporary consciousness;” and “the fight for light versus subconscious.”

Most importantly, he declares, “A lot of contemporary writing avoids inconvenient areas of the subject.”

Unfortunately, contemporary scholarship like Dimock's *Through Other Continents* and Hayot's *Literary Worlds* fall under this umbrella—they are working towards a valuable end, but seem to work towards that end too *easily*, almost like a student who finishes their assignment so quickly that you are confident it hasn't been done correctly. Dimock does genuinely interesting work in tracing some of literature's less obvious genealogy, but sketches a family tree whose branches are too perfect, too seamless. Her chapter on Pound, though maybe not intentionally, seems dependent on a view of him that is two-dimensional. Likewise, Hayot's work is admirable in its scope, but steps so far back that it tries to reduce the irreducible.

Any true work in the vein of “deep time” or “literary worlds” needs to find a way to navigate through the problems that Pound struggled with, not around them. There are, as he described, things that simply “won't fit,” at least not easily. And if Ezra Pound, one of the greatest literary minds of the 20th Century, struggled for a lifetime to try and make a cohesive, operating incarnation of “deep time,” then surely contemporary scholarship ought to respect the difficulty of the project and also be deeply suspicious of what can appear to be an easy solution from an untested viewpoint.

Most of all, contemporary scholarship needs to be aware of the work Pound has done in this vein. Scholars don't need to wholeheartedly admire him. They don't need to unreservedly emulate him. But they do need to respect the ground that he has gained in his lifelong pursuit of a more comprehensive literature. In short, they owe Pound the same respect he offers Walt Whitman at the end of his poem “A Pact:”

It was you that broke the new wood,

Now is a time for carving.

We have one sap and one root—

Let there be commerce between us.

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