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"OUT OF ALL THIS BEAUTY SOMETHING MUST COME": CHAUCER'S PLACE IN EZRA POUND'S "PISAN CANTOS"

by

Andrew Wallace

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Graduate Department of English
University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

"Out of all this beauty something must come": 
Chaucer's Place in Ezra Pound's "Pisan Cantos"

Master of Arts, 1998
Andrew Wallace
Graduate Department of English, University of Toronto

The thesis argues that an awareness of Chaucer's presence in the "Pisan Cantos" helps counter the notion that the sequence is purely personal in organisation. Chapter One argues that Pound's praise for Chaucer in the ABC of Reading suggests that Pound esteemed Chaucer as a precedent for his own urgent exploration and recombination of the various poetic traditions of the past. Chapter Two suggests that Pound consistently strives to avoid the merely personal in the "Pisan Cantos" by experimenting with various personae and voices. It argues that criticism of Pound's techniques might benefit from an approach similar to the one developed in David Lawton's 1985 Chaucer's Narrators. Chapter Three uses Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde as a point of departure for an exploration of the nature of Pound's poetic consolation at Pisa.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations ............................................................................................................... v

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... vi

Chapter One ........................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter Two .......................................................................................................................... 44

Chapter Three ....................................................................................................................... 71

Works Cited .......................................................................................................................... 94
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following standard abbreviations are used throughout for works by Pound:

*ABC* . . . . *ABC of Reading*

*CEP* . . . . *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*

*GB* . . . . *Gaudier Brzeska: A Memoir*

*GK* . . . . *Guide to Kulchur*

*L* . . . . *The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1914*


*SP* . . . . *Selected Prose, 1905-1965*, Ed. W. Cookson

*SR* . . . . *The Spirit of Romance*

*WTSF* . . . *A Walking Tour of Southern France*

*C to C* . . . *Confucius to Cummings*. Eds. Ezra Pound & Marcella Spann

References to the *Cantos* are taken from the latest New Directions edition, and follow the standard (canto number: page number) format: (74:462).
Altogether he composed eleven new cantos--one hundred and twenty pages.... They are confused and often fragmentary; and they bear no relation structurally to the seventy earlier cantos; but shot through by a rare sad light they tell of things gone which somehow seem to live on, and are probably his best poetry. In those few desperate months he was forced to return to that point within himself where the human person meets the outside world of real things, and to speak of what he found there. (Noel Stock *The Life of Ezra Pound* 411)

It is with some irony that I turn to biography to open this discussion, for while Noel Stock's *Life of Ezra Pound* creates an engaging portrait of the poet, this thesis discusses matters that contradict Stock's description of the "Pisan Cantos" in significant ways. Most importantly, it argues that the "Pisan Cantos" represent a sophisticated refinement of the structure of the seventy earlier cantos--a refinement that is absolutely in keeping with Pound's earliest conceptions of what was to become his "poem of some length." Pound described his plan in 1927 in a letter to his father:

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. 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 from
INTRODUCTION

quodidian into “divine or permanent world.” Gods, etc. (SL 285)

The “repeat in history” and the “magic moment” play a significant role in the “Pisan Cantos,” and these two phrases provide the impetus for my decision to consider Pound’s achievement alongside that of Chaucer. My reason for doing so recalls another phrase of Stock, who observed that the “Pisan Cantos” grant us a glimpse of the poet “stript of all but himself and his one mastery, control of speech”(413). Stripped of the books which Pound used to attain what he called, in a letter to the camp censor of the DTC, the “extreme condensation” of quotations in, for example, the “Adams” and “Chinese” sequences, Pound was compelled to rely on memory to create the “Pisan Cantos.” And memory yields, among many other things, the poetry of Chaucer, which is quoted and paraphrased in Canto 81.

Though many critics have commented on Pound’s praise for Chaucer in the ABC of Reading and elsewhere, none has undertaken a comprehensive discussion of the nature of Chaucer’s influence on Pound’s mature poetry. Self-conscious archaisms abound in Pound’s early volumes, but I will suggest that Chaucer set an enduring example for Pound even after he managed to rid himself of the highly mannered language of his early poetry. As a product of Pound’s poetic maturity, the “Pisan Cantos” suggest that Pound was engaging an aspect of Chaucer’s achievement that goes far beyond the question of merely stylistic borrowings. In so doing, the “Pisan Cantos” argue for a significant identification with Chaucer on Pound’s part.

One of the keys to this identification is the centrality of memory in the “Pisan Cantos.” In Chaucer’s’ “Anelida and Arcite,” Anelida begins her complaint upon “fals Arcite” with the words “So thirleth with the poyn of remembrance/ The swerd of
sorowe" (Benson 379), and the combination of memory and sorrow bears a significant relation to Pound’s plight at the DTC at Pisa. The “one mastery” of which Stock speaks—Pound’s control of speech—is complemented by the richness of the way in which memory manifests itself in the “Pisan Cantos.” In “The Legend of Good Women” Chaucer describes memory in terms of books and inherited learning (“yf that olde bokes were aweye, / Yloren were of memory the keye” (Benson 589)), and although neither the “Anelida and Arcite” nor “The Legend of Good Women” is referred to in the Cantos, these lines provide a useful context for the study of Pound’s interest in memory and matters of artistic continuity. Pound muses on his personal past, works of art he has seen, and places he has visited. The range of his meditations on the themes of continuity and loss, fragmentation, and rehabilitation, poignantly describes the way in which “the poynt of remembraunce” and “the swerd of sorowe” combine:

we will see those old roads again, question, possibly
but nothing appears much less likely (74:448)

Memories of travel, myth, reading, art, and history are balanced between alternating moods of faith and despair, and in Canto 81 they are assembled as a meditation on the endurance of craft and the sin of vanity.

It is into this discourse that Pound inserts a quotation from Chaucer’s “Merciles Beaute,” and a paraphrase of lines from his “Balade de Bon Conseyl.” These quotations from Chaucer figure prominently in Canto 81, and Chapter One deals with the relationship between these quotations and Pound’s praise for Chaucer in the ABC of Reading. I argue that Pound’s account of Chaucer’s poetic achievement identifies the specific nature of his influence on Pound. I further suggest that Chaucer’s art is
particularlly relevant to artists at the beginning of the twentieth century, when a renewed interest in Chaucer revealed itself in both scholarly and artistic projects—including Pound’s “Three Cantos” of 1917.

Chapter Two is concerned with Pound’s variations on the device of employing personae in his poetry, and I discuss the relevance of Chaucer criticism to the study of Pound. I use Chaucer criticism (especially as it applies to the shorter poems and complaints) in order to argue that here one can find a more sophisticated understanding of personae than in much criticism of Pound on the subject. The core argument of Chapter Two rests in the notion that Pound’s apparent un-maskings—the many interjections of the “I” of the “Pisan Cantos”—give way to other masks, and that even when such interjections begin as autobiography they end as something altogether more complex.

Chaucer’s translations—notably the Boece—as well as the Troilus and Criseyde, the dream-vision poems, and the shorter complaints, all bear a significant relation to Pound’s undertaking in the “Pisan Cantos,” and this is the subject of the Third Chapter, in which I discuss the transmission of learning and the necessity of action. Noel Stock’s sense that Pound is speaking from the point “where the human person meets the outside world of real things” is limited in that it fails to acknowledge that Pound’s layering of voices and personae means that such an encounter between the speaking voice and the outside world occurs at more than just a single point. The speaking voices of the Pisan sequence are shifting and unstable, and it is this very instability which makes the “Pisan Cantos” a kind of microcosm of the structure of Cantos.
In 1938 Ford Madox Ford--friend and correspondent of Ezra Pound, the man whom Pound eulogises in the “Pisan Cantos” as “Fordie that wrote of giants” (84:452) -- published *The March of Literature: From Confucius to Modern Times*, in which he proposed that “the ideal career for a writer was that of Chaucer” (638). Ford describes Chaucer’s participation in the 1359 campaign against the French, and his ensuing imprisonment, in order to underscore the degree to which Chaucer’s extraordinarily active and engaged life enriched an even more extraordinary literary life. Ford’s assessment juxtaposes Chaucer’s military and business careers with his poetic activities, and the harmony of this union is further emphasised by Ford’s belief that, while imprisoned, Chaucer occupied himself with a translation of the *Roman de la rose*. Ford praises Chaucer as a man of action and as a man of affairs who wrote “out of his real human contacts, things to please,” and it is clear that Ford is fascinated by the figure of Chaucer as soldier, poet, vintner, lobbyist, customs agent and translator. It was probably an act of homage that led Ford to include among his pseudonyms the name “Dan Chaucer” -- a name as notable for its recombination of the new and the old as Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus.¹

The image of the imprisoned poet-translator provides an emblem of the survival-- or rather the flourishing-- of poetic discipline and inspiration under trying circumstances. Ford’s words on the subject of François Villon, another prisoner-poet cherished by
Pound, sound chauvinist now, but they preserve the tenor of his conviction that “it is from male suffering supported with dignity that the great poets draw the greatest of their notes— that sort of note of the iron voice of the tocsin calling to arms in the night that forms, as it were, the overtone of their charged words” (405). The tradition of the imprisoned artist encompasses authors such as John Bunyan, Thomas More, Villon, Chaucer and the Roman consul, philosopher and scholar Anicius Boethius, whose influential de Consolatione Philosophiae became Chaucer’s Boece. The tradition would be repeated and renewed in 1945 at the American military Detention Training Centre north of Pisa, where Ezra Pound—poet, journalist, art and music critic, amateur economist and broadcaster—filled the pages of several army-issue notebooks with translations of Confucius and the eleven “Pisan Cantos.”

* * *

Pound’s earliest conceptions of the form of his “poem of some length” reveal a fascination with the notion of “the repeat in history.” His criticism, too, is full of statements arguing the notion that the past and present are inseparable:

It is dawn at Jerusalem while midnight hovers about the Pillars of Hercules. All ages are contemporaneous. It is BC, let us say, in Morocco. The Middle Ages are in Russia. The future stirs already in the minds of the few. This is especially true of literature, where the real time is independent of the apparent, and where many dead men are our grandchildren’s contemporaries, while many of our contemporaries have been already gathered into Abraham’s bosom, or some more fitting receptacle. (Spirit of Romance, Preface)

Pound, in both the letter to his father previously cited and in the 1910 Prefatio Ad
Lectorem written for The Spirit of Romance, could never have foreseen his own incarceration at the Detention Training Center north of Pisa. What he did foresee, however, was the form his consolation would take in the “Pisan Cantos,” where the achievements of the past assert their enduring relevance in the present.

For a man as deeply versed in the history of literature as Pound, the sense of identification with such figures and models as the past could provide, and with Chaucer in particular, must have been acute. As early as 1931 Pound had praised Chaucer in How to Read as “an enrichment, one might say a more creamy version of the ‘matter of France’” (32). Pound’s praise for Chaucer is less ambiguous in the revised and expanded version of that book, the ABC of Reading, where Chaucer is described as “the father of ‘litterae humaniores’ for Europe” (102). “Chaucer’s culture was greater than Dante’s,” writes Pound, and his “knowledge of life” was “greater than Shakespeare’s” (99). Most significantly, Pound praises Chaucer for shaping the English poetic tradition in ways that characterised England’s participation in a European tradition. Pound repeats Eustache Deschamps’ famous epithet for Chaucer (“Le Grand Translateur”), and his most elaborate praise for the English poet is full of the names that populate the verse of his own Cantos:

He participated in the same culture with Froissart and Boccaccio, the great humane culture that went into Rimini, that spoke Franco-Veneto, that is in the roundels of Froissart and in the doggerel of the Malatesta . . . Chaucer uses French art, the art of Provençe, the verse art come from the troubadours. In his world there had lived both Guillaume de Poictiers and Scotus Erigena. But
Chaucer was not a foreigner. It was HIS civilization. (101)

Great stretches of the Cantos reassemble these names, and Pound's undertaking represents his own attempt to renew and lay claim to this same civilisation.

Pound's fascination with the Middle Ages has been well documented, and, as a remark of Eliot's in After Strange Gods makes clear, this fascination is specialised: “[Pound] is attracted to the Middle Ages, apparently, by everything except that which gives them their significance”(41). The remark--which sounds like a complaint--says as much, perhaps, about Eliot as it does about Pound, but what it does say about Pound is interesting because of the way in which it draws on words G.K. Chesterton used to describe John Ruskin, who, as Chesterton put it, “loved everything about Gothic cathedrals but the altar.” For it is not the Christian theological presence which interests Pound, but the great tradition of translatio studii.

Pound speaks of the culture that “went into Rimini,” and the words underscore his preoccupation with the transmission and continuity of learning. Significantly, Pound invests the phenomenon with a quantifiable and even geographical quality. Early in the Cantos we encounter the verses “And Poictiers, you know, Guillaume Poictiers, I had brought the song up out of Spain”(8:32), and the words tell us a great deal about Pound's understanding of advances in the arts. These advances are brought about by that special group of artists whom Pound classified as Inventors in the ABC of Reading, where they are described as “Men who found a new process, or whose extant work gives us the first known example of a process”(39). In this instance it is Guillaume who carries new forms into new countries, and the achievements of these artists are often
reckoned in even more overtly physical terms:

Out of Phlegethon!
out of Phlegethon,
Gerhart
art thou come forth out of Phlegethon?
with Buxtehude and Klages in your satchel, with the
Ständebuch of Sachs in yr / luggage (75:470)

The physicality of Gerhart’s effort to transport letters and musical scores links Pound’s conception of the transmission of learning to the journey of Æneas. Three cantos after the lines about Gerhart, Pound paraphrases first Horace and then Vergil’s Æneid in Gavin Douglas’ translation:

Roma profugens Sabinorum in terras
and belt the citye quahr of nobil fame
the lateyn peopil taken has their name
bringing his gods into Latium
saving the bricabrac
“Ere he his goddis brocht in Latio”
“each one in the name” (78:498-499)

It is the story of Æneas’ struggle, but, in the movement from Horace—whose lines describe the return from the land of the Sabine women—to Douglas’ Virgil, Pound’s verse enacts not only the story, but the history of the survival of that story: “Virgil came to life again in 1514 partly or possibly because Gavin Douglas knew the sea better than Virgil had” (ABC 45). Pound re-tells and renews the story of Æneas in a way that emphasizes his own participation in the transmission of ancient learning, and it is a participation that links Pound with what he esteems in Chaucer. The shift from Horace’s Latin to the Middle English of Douglas, and the interjection of Pound’s own commentary, hint at the way in which medieval England’s faith in the enduring relevance of myth and of Virgil’s poetry could allow them to conceive of themselves as
the heirs of Troy. (Even older than Caxton's *Chaucer* is Caxton's *Receuyell of the Histories of Troy.*) Pound's verse describes the way in which England laid claim to the past through the translation of the classics, and Pound lays claim to that same past in the lines that follow the quotations from Douglas:

\[\text{in whom are the voices, keeping hand on the reins} \]
\[\text{Gaudier's word not blacked out} \]
\[\text{nor old Hulme's, nor Wyndham's} \]
\[\text{*Mana aboda*.} \] (78:499)

Interestingly, the phrase “keeping hand on the reins” recalls the last lines of Pound's poem “The Return”: “Slow on the leash, / pallid the leash-men!” (*P 70*). Yeats observed that the poem announced “some change of style” (*A Vision* 29), and the verses written at Pisa more than thirty years after the publication of “The Return” reunite Gaudier, Hulme and Wyndham Lewis—the proponents of the change of style to which Yeats alludes. “Mana Aboda” appears in *The Complete Poetical Works of T.E. Hulme*, first published in 1912 at the end of *Ripostes*, the volume in which “The Return” was first published. Pound’s conflation of Horace, Virgil, Douglas, Gaudier, Hulme and Wyndham Lewis announces, if not a change of style, certainly the significance and the inevitability of change. It is a conception of inheritance and contemporaneity that is more complex than its early manifestation in “The Return,” which Pound recalls in these lines. For Pound, harnessing the past was always the way to move forward, to become modern: “Pound’s borrowings from a French / English translator-poet, Chaucer, and a neo-Nietzschean anthropologist-art historian, Frobenius, suggest the lengths to which he was willing to go in order to ‘make it new’” (*Lindberg* 64).

This preoccupation with issues of inheritance and contemporaneity is not
Pound's alone. The conceit of thinking of London as Troynovant lasted until well into the eighteenth century, when Alexander Pope structured his mock-epic *The Dunciad* so that the progress of Dulness would parody the progress of learning westward from the classical world to England. This tradition of inheritance is embodied by the quotation from Douglas’ translation of the *Æneid*, which is all the more significant for the fact that it occurs in one of the most peripatetic of the *Cantos*. The quotation concludes Pound's account of his flight North from Rome as he made his way first to Gais and then toward Mussolini's fledgling Republic of Salo. Pound, who had been indicted for treason by the United States for his broadcasts on Rome Radio during the War, fled Rome on September 10, 1943—the day the German and Allied forces were expected to converge on the city. Pound covered the 450 miles separating Rome and Gais on foot and by train (Carpenter 623-629). Pound’s account blends elements of myth with the words of peasants encountered en route, and the journey underscores Pound’s own place in “the repeat in history.” More importantly, it is an example of what Stock refers to as Pound’s encounter with “the outside world of real things”:

San Sepolchro

the four bishops in metal
lapped by the flame, amid ruin, la fede--
reliquaries seen on the altar.
“Someone to take the blame if we slip up on it”
Goedel’s sleek head in the midst of it,
the man out of Naxos past Fara Sabina
“if you will stay for the night”
“it is true there is only one room for the lot of us”
“money is nothing”
“no, there is nothing to pay for that bread”
“nor for the minestra”
“Nothing left here but women”
“Have lugged it this far, will keep it” (il zaino)
No, they will do nothing to you.
“Who says he is an American”
a still form on the branda, Bologna
“Gruss Gott,” “Der Herr!” “Tatile ist gekommen!” (78:498)

The scattered phrases culled from conversations occurring during the course of the journey are structured as if in Poundian shorthand for travel northward. San Sepolchro and Bologna receive only cursory mention, but this mention, along with the sudden interjection of one of the Germanic dialects of northern Italy and the nature of the phrases themselves, help underscore the arduous nature of Pound’s journey. Interestingly, the most significant of these scraps of dialogue, and the one which asserts the most vigorous relevance of Pound’s undertaking in the Cantos, is also the least politically charged: “‘Have lugged it this far, will keep it” (il zaino).” The words “il zaino” (Italian for “the backpack”) link Pound’s journey with those of Guillaume, Gerhart, and, after the introduction of the quotation from Virgil (to which this passage serves as an introduction), Æneas. Furthermore, as Terrell has noted, the reference to Naxos links Pound’s homeward journey to other mythical figures: “Naxos was the island Dionysus stopped at on his way home. Before that, Theseus had stopped there on his return home from slaying the Minotaur in Crete. Pound thus sees himself, as did both Dionysus and Theseus, on his way home” (Terrell 416).

The words “la fede” (the faith) iterate an important Italian Fascist slogan (Terrell 416), but they represent something else as well. In spite of Pound’s sense that the world was ending, as he says, “with a bang, not with a whimper” (74:445), and in spite of the destruction wrought upon the Italian countryside by Allied bombing attacks, the words hint at the survival of Pound’s faith during his journey northward. Works of art are particularly vulnerable to the brutalities of war, and Pound attempts to gauge the
significance of the inevitable losses:

But to set here the roads of France,
of Cahors, of Chalus,
the inn low by the river's edge,
the poplars; to set here the roads of France
Aubeterre, the quarried stone beyond Poitiers--
--as seen against Sergeant Beaucher's elegant profile--
and the tower on an almost triangular base
as seen from Santa Marta's in Tarascon

"in heaven have I to make?"

but all the vair and fair women
and there is also the more northern (not nordic)
tradition from Memling to Elskamp, extending
to the ship models in Danzig . . .
if they have not destroyed them
with Galla's rest, and . . .

is measured by the to whom it happens
and to what, and if to a work of art
then to all who have seen and who will not (76:475)

Amid so much uncertainty ("in heaven have I to make?") , Pound sets about preserving
and restoring that which he believes to be lost. This urge for renewal, much more of an
act of faith than the Vorticist urge to "make it new," could also extend far beyond poetry:
having arrived safely, if exhausted, at Gais, Pound spent his time repairing steps and
chicken coops at the farmhouse of his daughter Mary's guardians (Stock 401-402).

Like Aeneas, who brought his gods out of Troy and into Latium to found a new
nation, Pound writes and works to repair a sense of disrupted continuity as he asks,
"will the world take up its course again?"(76:473). In an appendix to the anthology
Confucius to Cummings (Edited by Pound and Marcella Spann), Vincent Miller instructs
readers to "remember that Chaucer was a man active in an England that was a
responsible part of western civilization and was seriously concerned with the concept of
equity upon which all civilization rests” (C to C 335), and the observation provides a context in which to understand Pound’s own concern with the foundations of civilisation:

nothing matters but the quality
of the affection--
in the end--that has carved the trace in the mind
dove sta memoria (76:477)

The phrase “dove sta memoria” (which translates as “where memory lives” (Terrell 396)) describes what is perhaps the single most important determinant in shaping Pound’s method of allusion in the “Pisan Cantos.” Bereft of books, Pound quotes from memory scattered lines which have “carved the trace in the mind.”6 Memories of places visited (Chalus, Cahors, the mausoleum of Galla Placidia) mingle with the voices of peasants (“no, there is nothing to pay for that bread”), the achievements of heroes like Æneas and the words of Chaucer and Gavin Douglas. Pound’s account of his actual journey from Rome to Gais resonates with the constant journey through his memory that takes place in the “Pisan Cantos.” Significantly, by using the lines from the Douglas translation of Æneas’ journey into Latium, Pound subtly reinterprets the more pessimistic version of his own journey where it appears near the opening lines of the same canto:

Cassandra, your eyes are like tigers,
with no word written in them
You also have I carried to nowhere
to an ill house and there is
no end to the journey. (78:497)

The journey from Rapallo to the D.T.C. has been a journey “to nowhere.” More specifically, it is a journey to a place where Pound, like Odysseus in the cave of the Cyclops, is “no man” (“ΟΥΣ ΤΕΣ” (74:445)), to where he is primarily the sum of his
memories. As Pound moves northward to reunite with his daughter at Gais (one of his original motives for the journey had been to reach to Salo Republic in order to advise Mussolini—he stopped at Salo on his return from Gais to Rapallo), he collects classical parallels and further complicates the texture of the verse by using classical stories to inform contemporary events. He describes Mussolini stopping at “Salo, Gardone/ To dream the Republic”(78:498)—a dream Republic which had fallen by the time Pound wrote the lines—and this complex layering of past and present emphasizes the perpetual “repeat in history.” There is, as Pound says, “no end to the journey.” What redeems this notion from mere pessimism is the fact that Pound is buttressed by his faith in continuity and in inheritance. Where this faith takes the form of seeking out repetitions of mytho-historical events it serves as a validation of the structure of the Cantos in general, and of the “Pisan Cantos” in particular.

Pound’s poetry and prose constantly emphasize his conviction that myth and history are sustained and renewed by asserting their relevance in the present. As James Longenbach has observed in Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism, “‘Three Cantos’ are based upon Pound’s sense of himself as inheritor of ‘the old way’”(243). More specifically, Longenbach, citing Yeats’ journals, states that Pound served as the model for the poet in Per Amica Silentia Lunae who turns from the present age “to try to feel Chaucer nearer than the daily paper”(Per Amica 341). Pound’s exercise in emphasising Chaucer’s relevance to the present is an undertaking that had its equivalents in the Middle Ages. As Pound writes in The Spirit of Romance:

Whatever we can learn from the medieval redaction of the events of Greek and
Roman antiquity can be more easily learned from the illuminations of an early Fifteenth Century book, which has recently been displayed in the National Gallery. It represents Caesar crossing the Rubicon, he and his hosts being arrayed in the smartest fashions of the late Middle Ages. (78)

Pound, like those fifteenth-century illuminators, emphasizes the enduring relevance of those figures who, as the phrase goes, make history. It is this urgent assertion of the past's relevance to the present, rather than theology, which attracts Pound to the Middle Ages, and it is pleasing to reflect on the fact that Pound seems to have sensed that a particular kind of continuity was being asserted as he was being escorted out of Rapallo under armed guard, carrying only a copy of Confucius, a Chinese dictionary, and the eucalyptus pip that he would hide from prowling cats at the DTC.

* * *

Critical work on Pound's use of medieval sources and conventions has tended to emphasize the influence of Italian, Provencal, French and Spanish sources. Subtitles are helpful in this instance, and Pound's *The Spirit of Romance*—subtitled *An Attempt to Define Somewhat the Charm of the Pre-Renaissance Literature of Latin Europe*—is at least partially responsible for the critical bias which has led scholars to enquire into Pound's continental Medieval influences at the expense of his debts to the English tradition in general and to Chaucer in particular. Ernst Robert Curtius' *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages* supplies a more general justification for the continental bias of much criticism of Pound. Curtius' influential work precedes the earliest studies of Pound's Medievalism, and Curtius' analysis of what he refers to as
"the relation of England to Romania"(35)--that is, to the Romance languages and the European tradition--dwell almost exclusively on the continuity of rhetorical devices. One of the achievements of Curtius' work is to encourage an understanding of rhetorical continuity as something that goes beyond the mere question of authors borrowing from other authors. When Curtius discusses, for instance, Chaucer's handling of the humility topos as a narrative device, he does so not in terms of Chaucer's borrowings directly from Dante and Petrarch, but in terms of his active participation in a rhetorical tradition which included those authors (407-413).

It is an approach that both aids and inhibits an inquiry into the question of Pound's use of Chaucer. On the one hand, it affirms Pound's interest in questions of inheritance and continuity, as well as his sense of Chaucer's importance as a link between the English and the European traditions, but it also serves as a reminder that those traditions were necessarily linked by virtue of the survival of Latin in England. Curtius illustrates this point with a quotation of Eliot's from The Criterion, and Eliot's words provide one of the motives behind his own efforts to re-embrace the Latin tradition:

If everything derived from Rome were withdrawn--everything we have from Norman-French society, from the Church, from Humanism, from every channel direct and indirect, what would be left? A few Teutonic roots and husks. England is a "Latin" country, and we ought not to have to go to France for our Latinity. (Criterion Oct. 1923)

Chaucer, of course, did go to France (and this is at least a part of Pound's point), but he did so as a participant in the culture described in Pound's ABC of Reading. Later
authors who look to Chaucer as “the first representative English poet” (Curtius 35) can gain access and exposure to that culture through what Chaucer has taken from it, but this exercise makes Chaucer an intermediary. Pound transcends that exercise in a way that demonstrates a particular respect for the magnitude of Chaucer’s achievement. In fact, he does so by replicating Chaucer’s achievement--by assembling for a second time the most vital components of the European Romance tradition--and this replication of Chaucer’s achievement confirms the artistic kinship between the American Pound and his English predecessor. It is a kinship that goes far beyond questions of mere borrowings.

For Pound, the English poetic tradition is the product of innovations inherited and imported from other traditions, and attempts to figure him as merely a precocious polyglot represent a failure to recognise the urgency of his undertaking in the Cantos. Likewise, criticism which confines itself only to the influence of continental sources on Pound’s poetry, without analysing the particular combinations which interest, fails to touch on the motives which provide a context and precedent for that endeavour.

It is Pound himself who creates the link with Chaucer when, in the midst of a meditation on the endurance of craftsmanship, he quotes the first couplet from “Merciles Beaute”—a triple roundel attributed to Chaucer—and follows it with an enigmatic observation:

Your eyen two wol sleye me sodenly
I may the beauté of hem nat susteyne

And for 180 years almost nothing. (81:540)

Anthony Woodward’s suggestion that the lines represent a “moody comment on the
lack of any good poetry set for music after the death of John Jenkins (1678) [and until] the birth of Arnold Dolmetesch (1858)"(90), draws from the lines which introduce the couplet:

**libretto**

Yet
Ere the season died a-cold
Borne upon a zephyr's shoulder
I rose through the aureate sky

*Lawes and Jenkyns guard thy rest*
*Dolmetesch ever be thy guest,*

Has he tempered the viol's wood
To enforce both the grave and the acute?
Has he curved us the bowl of the lute?

*Lawes and Jenkyns guard thy rest*
*Dolmetesch ever be thy guest*

Hast 'ou fashioned so airy a mood
To draw up leaf from the root?
Hast 'ou found a cloud so light
As seemed neither mist nor shade?

Then resolve me, tell me aright
If Waller sang or Dowland played. (81:539-40)

Woodward seems mistaken in his attribution of the lines to the accomplishments of Jenkins and Dolmetesch, and Georg Gugelberger suggests as much in his book *Ezra Pound's Medievalism* where he observes that the lines are “about Chaucer”:

It is Chaucer who “curved us the bowl of the lute.” The citation of Chaucer's couplet does not only repeat the theme of inviolable beauty that opens the musical drama of the whole passage, but it gives the reader a subtle indication of the source of the lyric technique in these stanzas and refrains. (133)

Woodward's conviction that the lines lament “the lack of any good poetry set for music” misses Pound's point entirely, for Pound is not speaking of poetry set for music, but of
poetry which *is* music. It is the distinction between poetry written for music, and poetry which is inherently musical, and the distinction recalls the one made by Chaucer’s admirer and contemporary Eustache Deschamps. Laila Gross, citing Deschamps’ poetic treatise *L’art de dictier et de fere chançons, balades, virelais et rondeaux*, distinguishes between “the ‘artificial’ music produced by the singing voice or musical instruments and the more difficult and sophisticated ‘natural’ music, which consists in skilful versification in the fixed forms and which is recited rather than sung.” Gross goes on to observe that “apparently almost all of Chaucer’s surviving lyrics belong to the category of ‘natural’ music”(Benson 631), and Pound’s praise for the musicality of Chaucer’s verse is based on his appreciation of this “natural” music.

In the *ABC of Reading* Pound observes that this aspect of Chaucer’s achievement remains unsurpassed: “Idiom has changed, but no greater *fitness to be sung* has been attained. Not even by Shakespeare with the aid of later Italian songbooks” (*ABC* 106). In spite of Woodward’s theory about the line “And for 180 years almost nothing,” simple addition from the accepted year of Chaucer’s death (1400) places us in 1580, when—as the “Sequence of authors through whom the metamorphosis of English verse writing may be traced” which Pound includes in the *ABC* informs us (173)—Arthur Golding, in Pound’s eyes Ovid’s best translator, was forty-four, and Marlowe and Shakespeare were sixteen.® Slight as it may seem as a part of Chaucer’s canon—and the question of its legitimacy is a matter of some scholarly dispute—the complete text of the roundel proves Pound correct in his esteem for its musical qualities:
I    Captivity

Your yēn two wol slee me sodenly;
I may the beautē of hem not sustene,
So woundeth hit through-out my herte kene.

And but your word wol helen hastily
My hertes wounede, whyl that hit is grene,
   Your yēn two wol slee me sodenly
   I may the beautē of hem not sustene.

Upon my trouthe I sey you feithfully,
That ye ben of my lyf and deeth the quene;
For with my deeth the trouthe shal be sene.
   Your yēn . . .

II    Rejection

So hath your beautē fro your herte chaced
Pitee, that me ne availeth not to pleyne;
For Daunger halt your mercy in his cheyne.

Giltles my deeth thus han ye me purchaced;
I sey yow sooth, me nedeth not to feyne;
   So hath your beautē fro your herte chaced
   Pitee, that me ne availeth not to pleyne.

Allas! that nature hath in yow compassed
So greet beautē, that no man may atteyne
To mercy though he sterve for the peyne.
   So hath your beautee . . .

III   Escape

Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
I never thenk to ben in his prison lene;
Sin I am free, I counte him not a bene.

He may answere and seye this and that;
I do no fors, I speke right as I mene.
   Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
   I never thenk to ben in his prison lene.

Love hath my name y-strike out of his sclat,
And he is strike out of my bokes clene
For evermo; ther is non other mene.

Sin I fro Love . . . (C to C 105-106)

This version of the poem is taken from Confucius to Cummings: An Anthology of Poetry, which Pound edited with Marcella Spann, and it is interesting to consider the implications of the italicised section headings (editorial additions) in light of Pound’s inclusion of the opening lines of the poem in Canto 81. The rhythm established by the headings “Captivity . . . Rejection . . . Escape” signals an immediate relevance to Pound’s plight at Pisa, and the fact that Pound conceived of the stanzas in these terms makes his decision to quote from the roundel at Pisa all the more significant. More likely, however, the headings in Confucius to Cummings (the anthology was published in 1964, after Pound’s release from St. Elizabeth’s and after his return to Europe) represent Pound’s later attitude towards a poem whose opening lines came back to him at Pisa.

* * *

When, in the midst of the meditation on vanity that follows the quotation from the “Merciles Beaute,” Pound reintroduces Chaucer’s poetry, he does so in a fashion which further blurs the distinction between himself and the English poet. The line “Master thyself, then others shall thee beare” is a free paraphrase of a line from Chaucer’s “Balade de Bon Conseyl” (also known as “Truth”), a work much beloved by Chaucer’s earliest readers. Kenner provides a genealogy for Pound’s rendering of the line:

“Reule wel thyself, that other folk canst rede”—“Balade de Bon Conseyl.” The Pocket Book of Verse offers Henry Van Dyke’s modernisation, “Work well thyself
to counsel others clear,” and could Ezra Pound have resisted improving Van Dyke? (The Pound Era 492).  

Kenner’s observation hints at Pound’s ability to invoke authors even as he asserts his own presence, and this particular case parallels the opening of the Cantos, where Homer’s Odyssey is translated into English by way of Divus’ Latin translation.

The relationship between Pound’s use of Chaucer’s “Merciles Beaute” and his quoting from the “Balade de Bon Conseyl” helps illuminate the matter of Chaucer’s importance in Canto 81, and it is fitting that the second reference should be drawn from a poem which R.K. Root called one of Chaucer’s “most noble utterances” (30). It is fitting because Root’s valuing of the poem says a great deal about the preoccupations of Chaucer criticism in the first part of this century (when Chaucer’s poetry was being mined for evidence of the “high seriousness” which Matthew Arnold was so sure it lacked), and also because Root’s praise for the poem helps locate the significance of Pound’s quotation:

To the man of truly humble spirit his own importance in the universe seems but small, his own exertions of slight avail. He will live his own life in the world as well as he can. Sedulously removing the beams from his own eyes, he will give to the world whatever of good he can, and see to it that his own small influence be an influence towards righteousness; for the rest, he will leave the salvation of the world in the competent hands of the God who has created it. (30)

Pound, of course, would speak of Gods rather than God, but Root’s point stands, and Pound, in his cage at Pisa, is acutely conscious of his own insignificance: “As a lone ant from a broken ant-hill/ from the wreckage of Europe, ego scriitor” (76:478). The lines
are a far cry from the “Ezra Pound speaking” voice of the infamous Rome broadcasts.

Chaucer’s “Balade de Bon Conseyl” is remarkable for the way in which it sustains a mood in which resignation and fortitude are joined:

Fle fro the pres, and dwelle with sothfastnesse;
Sufficeth thee thy good, though hit be smal;
For hord hath hate, and clymbynge tikelnesse,
Pres hath envye, and wele blent over al.
Savour no more then thee behoveth shal;
Do wel thy-self that other folk canst rede,
And trouthe thee shal delyver, hit ys no drede.

Peyneth thee not ech croked to redresse
In trust of hir that turneth as a bal,
Gret resteth stant in lytil besynesse;
Bewar also to spurne ayein a nal,
Stryve not as doth a crokke with a wal;
Daunte thy-self that dauntest otheres dede,
And trouthe thee shal delyver, hit is no drede.

That thee is sent receythe in buxomnesse,
The wraseling of this world asketh a fal;
Heer is no hoom, heer is but wyldemesse.
Forth pilgrime, forth! forth best, out of thy stal!
Loke up on hye, and thonketh God of al;
Weyve thy lust, and let thy gost thee lede,
And trouthe shal thee delyver, hit is no drede.

L’Envoye

Thefor, thou vache, leve thy old wrecchednesse;
Unto the worldë leve now to be thral;
Crye him mercy, that of his heigh goodnesse
Made thee of naught; and, in especial,
Draw unto him, and pray in general
For thee, and eek for other, hevenly mede;
And trouthe schal thee delivere, it is no drede. (80-81)

Pound’s copy of The Pocketbook of Verse contained Van Dyke’s modernisation of the poem, but the version quoted here is from an 1897 anthology entitled The English Poets, edited by J.H. Ward and with an Introduction by Matthew Arnold. Pound may
have known this edition during his student days, and certain details in both Arnold’s
Introduction and in the editorial matter dealing with Chaucer contain striking similarities
with Pound’s praise for Chaucer in the *ABC of Reading*. In particular, the prefatory
matter that Ward devotes to Chaucer anticipates Pound’s esteem for the achievement
of Chaucer. Ward writes: “Chaucer, like Dante, had the rare fortune of coming in upon
an unformed language, and, so far as one could, of forming it” (13). The words
anticipate Pound’s observation in the *ABC of Reading*: “[Chaucer] had found a new
language, he had it largely to himself, with the grand opportunity. Nothing spoiled,
nothing worn out” (101). Like Dante’s being credited with establishing a standard for
written Italian, Chaucer’s achievement is rooted in language, the bedrock of poetry.

Interestingly, the complete text of the “Balade de Bon Conseyl” calls attention to
the potential resonance of lines not quoted by Pound. They are lines which Pound, with
the complete poem before him in *The Pocketbook of Verse*, would have read even as
he chose to omit them from the material quoted in Canto 81. There is characteristic
self-effacement in Pound’s decision not to quote the lines which seem so appropriate to
his circumstances: “Forth pilgrime, forth! forth best, out of thy stall!” The self-
effacement, however, is not ironic, and it matches the modesty advocated by the very
line Pound paraphrases: “Master thyself, then others shall thee beare.” The omitted line
also emphasizes a link between the “Balade de Bon Conseyl” and the section headings
Pound added to the “Merciles Beaute” as it appears in *Confucius to Cummings*.

The humility advocated by Chaucer’s “Bon Conseyl” provides, simultaneously, an
explanation for Pound’s self-effacement in the *Cantos*, and a means of qualifying what
has too often been reduced by critics to the status of a merely confessional voice in the "Pisan Cantos." Carpenter describes some of the ways in which the "Pisan Cantos" have been regarded:

Given their position in his life story, and their distinct and pervading tone of regret, it is not surprising that since their first publication the "Pisan Cantos" have been widely regarded as an act of contrition, renunciation and expiation, a confession of failure and error--particularly, of course, the errors of Fascism and anti-Semitism. James Laughlin seemed to be hinting at this in his dust-jacket blurb to the New Directions edition, when he wrote of them as a "revelation of the poet's personal tragedy." (671)

Remarks such as those made by Laughlin were, of course, written with the dual purpose of marketing the sequence and putting the best possible spin on the media attention focused on Pound, and Carpenter is right to dispute such claims. Carpenter does so by attempting to prove that the "Pisan Cantos" are free of contrition. He centres his claims on the observation that Pound's goals in the sequence are personal, and that Pound's chief intention in the "Pisan Cantos" is to probe his memories:

In the face of adversity, Ezra is withdrawing his ideals into his private mental world. This is the principal message of Canto 74, and really of the entire "Pisan Cantos," which exemplify it by exploring the crannies of Ezra's own mind and memory, in search of the perfect city he believes to lie there. (673)

Carpenter is correct up to a point, but he is as mistaken in his impression that "the only certainty is the D.T.C., with Ezra as the central figure in the landscape"(676), as he is in his sense that Pound is "withdrawing his ideals into his private mental world." If
Carpenter avoids the error of too-readily accepting the notion of Pound’s contrition, he falls into the trap of believing that the “Pisan Cantos” are, to quote Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, “just personal.” Pound is still the creator assembling and drawing together fragments, but these fragments are not mere reminiscences even if they often begin as such.

* * * *

In addition to the quotation and paraphrase in Canto 81, Chaucer’s influence is pervasive in Pound’s writing. The “libretto” passage that introduces the quoted couplet opens with a pastiche of Chaucer (“Yet / Ere the season died a-cold/ Borne upon a zephyr’s shoulder . . . “), and that pastiche recalls an early poem of Pound’s. Pound excluded the poem, entitled “Piazza San Marco,” from the Personae volume, and the third part of the poem is entitled “XCVII [After Shakespeare's Sonnet]:

When proud-pied April leadeth in his train
And yellow crocus quickneth to the breath
Of Zephyr fleeting from the sun-shot tain,
Then seek I her whom my heart honoureth.
She is a woodland sprite and suzerain
Of every power that flouteth wintry death.

When proud-pied April leadeth in his train
And freeth all the earth from cold’s mort-main,
Then with her fairness mine heart journeyeth
Through bourgeon wood-ways wherein tourneyeth
Earth’s might of laughter ‘gainst all laughter slain
Ere proud-pied April led in feat his train. (A Lume Spento 121)

Gibson, who noted that the poem is “larded” with borrowings from Chaucer, is correct in her estimation that the poem “cannot escape the effect of too many too present forebears at once. The very process of imitation seemed for Pound at first to embody the sublime, and thus the purpose of his earliest imitations was imitation itself” (64). The
complete text of the poem suggests that Pound is conscious of the heavy-handedness of his borrowings, and that he is willing, in a sense, to “sacrifice” the poem in order to demonstrate Shakespeare’s own dependence on Chaucer. As he writes in the second stanza of “Piazza San Marco”: “Some comfort ‘tis to catch Will Shaxpeer stealing”(A Lume Spento 120). The poem “XCVII” suggests that Chaucer is behind Shakespeare’s poem.

Another pastiche of Chaucer opens Canto 30:

Compleynt, compleynt I hearde upon a day,  
Artemis singing, Artemis, Artemis  
Agaynst Pity lifted her wail;  
Pity causeth the forests to fail,  
Pity slayeth my nymphs,  
Pity spareth so many an evil thing.  
Pity befouleth April,  
Pity is the root and the spring.  
Now if no fayre creature followeth me  
It is on account of Pity,  
It is on account that Pity forbideth them slaye.  
All things are made foul in this season,  
This is the reason, none may seek purity  
Having for foulnesse pity  
And things growne awry;  
No more do my shaftes fly  
To slay. Nothing is now clean slayne  
But rotteth away. (30:147)\textsuperscript{12}

Pound’s use of Chaucerian language and cadences in this passages suggests a link with Chaucer’s “Complaint Unto Pity.” Pity is dead in Chaucer’s poem, and Pity is revived, here in Canto 30, as a negative force.

It is interesting to note the fact that Pound’s quotations, pastiches, and paraphrases of Chaucer’s poetry are almost exclusively based on Chaucer’s shorter poems. In particular, Pound’s praise for the musicality of Chaucer’s verse is directed at
these short poems, and it is likely that this musicality offered one of the main reasons for Pound's choices. The roundels and the lyric complaints proved a fertile ground for Pound, as Gugelberger notes in a chapter entitled "Pound's 'Chaucerian Busy-ness':"

The excerpts from various Chaucerian sources and their extremely elliptical incorporation into the Cantos function as "maps," pointing toward Pound's own poetics in terms of the compendium, polyglot composition, the complaint, the citation of sources, the Dantesque background, the principle of dramatisation, the impressive combination of the three "poeias" [phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia], and, last but not least, the "curiosity concerning minute variants in human personality." In this sense Pound's reading of Chaucer functioned as Pound's own "gradus ad Parnassum." (138)

These, the final sentences of Gugelberger's chapter, reveal that the title "Pound's 'Chaucerian Busy-ness'" is drawn from Pound's own comments on the differences between himself and Yeats, whom he describes as not having "my Chaucerian busy-ness and curiosity concerning minute variants in human personality" (Selected Letters 96).

The inclusion of the lines from the "Merciles Beaute" in Canto 81 is striking primarily in terms of their presence in a meditation on the endurance of craftsmanship. Woodward makes an enigmatic observation about the relationship between the couplet and the statement which follows it when he observes that the line "And for 180 years almost nothing" serves as "a device for distancing the lyric as well as the Chaucer quotation from his own self and from the reader"(90). His sense of the distance that is
achieved seems to overstate the matter. Pound does, in a sense, use the line to deny any claim to the authorship of the quoted couplet, but the fact that this denial points directly to Chaucer suggests that the line also functions in the tradition of medieval *auctoritas*, or what Gugelberger terms Pound's "quotism"(25-29). Although Pound does not directly name Chaucer, the line "And for 180 years almost nothing" nevertheless signals that the couplet is a quotation, and thereby serves to bring both Pound and the reader closer to Chaucer.

This dynamic of retrieving and appropriating voices from the past is one of the principles upon which Pound bases the structure of the *Cantos*, but the process attains a new degree of complexity in the "Pisan Cantos," where personal remembrance subtly and constantly mingles with allusion. It is a fact which Woodward's comment fails to recognise: the lines from Chaucer absorb previous patterns of imagery even as they themselves are absorbed into the more general structure of the *Cantos*. They unify themes instead of separating them. Peter Makin maintains that "these are the eyes of the *Kuthera Deina* . . . (Dread Cythera, Venus) who rules this book"(247), but it might be more properly said that Pound is suggesting that Chaucer absorbed the Venus/Cythera figure into the English tradition.

* * * *

Wendy Stollard Flory has written that "the personal is clearly the main organising principle of the [Pisan] sequence"(182), but Flory's certainty is merely symptomatic of an urge to oversimplify the *Cantos* as a reaction to their overwhelming difficulty. The difficult and fragmentary qualities of the verse, combined with Pound's own self-
effacement in the earlier sequences, make the “Pisan Cantos” somewhat of a relief to readers. Even if the verse is no less difficult, Pound’s sudden appearance in the poem lends a sense of focus to the seeming chaos of the fragments assembled in the verse. Often, the effect produces the kind of humour so often lacking in the “Adams” or the “Chinese” Cantos:

“Ah certainly dew lak dawgs, ah goin tuh wash you”  
(no, not to the author, to the canine unwilling in question) (79:505)

At other times, however, the effect aims at and achieves something else:

The moon has a swollen cheek  
and when the morning sun lit up the shelves and battalions of the West, cloud over cloud  
Old Ez folded his blankets  
Neither Eos nor Hesperus has suffered wrong at my hands  
O Lynx, wake Silenus and Casey  
shake the castagnettes of the bassarids,  
the mountain forest is full of light  
the tree-comb red-gilded  
Who sleeps in the field of lynxes  
in the orchard of Maelids?  
(with great blue marble eyes  
"because he likes to", the cossak)  
Salazar, Scott, Dawley on sick call  
Polk, Tyler, half the presidents and Calhoun  

(79:509)

“Old Ez” is described in the third person, and he is grouped with gods, satyrs, tree nymphs, and D.T.C. trainees sharing the names of Presidents of the United States. Sometimes, Pound’s voice is so personal that the lines seem insignificant—as is the case in the line “methenamine eases the urine”(74:454). At other times, when numbering himself among mythical and historical figures, Pound uses techniques such as third-person description to make something that is more than merely personal out of the lines. Such is the case in the lines about “Old Ez.” Later in Canto 74, Pound writes
that "'ghosts move about me' patched with histories," and the line is a quotation from the first of the "Three Cantos" of 1917, but the fact that they are set apart from the text (and set apart from one another) between inverted commas suggests that Pound wants the quotation to be recognised as a quotation. The lines "ghosts move about me / Patched with histories" (P 229), provide a kind of gloss for Pound's method in the "Three Cantos," but here, at Pisa, Pound self-consciously quotes his earlier lines and projects himself into the phantastikon of ghosts. "Old Ez" is as much a figure in that landscape as the maelids, Dawley, Calhoun, and the presidents for whom they are named. That is, he is not merely the imaginative mind encircled by ghosts; he is one of the ghosts as well. Instead of representing merely a return to the monologue, Canto 74 suggests that Pound is attempting to revisit and reconsider the thirty-two year old monologue of the "Three Cantos."

If, as Hugh Kenner maintains in The Pound Era, "Pound's structural strategy in Cantos was based on the conviction that 'the poem would not work as a monologue'" (367)--and the nature of the revisions to which Pound submitted the "Three Cantos" during the summer of 1923 would suggest that Kenner is correct--then that confessional voice in the "Pisan Cantos" should be carefully analysed. Pound is the "ego scriptor" in the "Pisan Cantos," but the term represents a complex kind of unmasking, and this particular unmasking has its parallels elsewhere in the Cantos. The Cantos open with the translation of Homer's Greek into a distinctly old-English flavoured verse by way of a Renaissance Latin translation by Divus, and the dynamic by which Homer's presence is asserted is subtly modulated by the fact that readers are at
multiple removes from his original Greek. A similar effect is achieved when Pound paraphrases Van Dyke's modernisation of Chaucer: Chaucer is present, but it is the language of Pound that asserts his presence. The self-disclosure effected by Pound's own “ego scriptor” is likewise modulated by the fact that the words are written in an ancient language—the very language which peppers so many of Pound's and Eliot's poems, and which critics of modernism have attacked as being inaccessible to most readers. The dynamic allows Pound both to assert his presence and maintain his distance by identifying himself not as “I, Pound,” but as “ego scriptor.”

The phrase “ego scriptor” represents a vacillation between assertions of presence and absence (between questions of monologue and questions of compilation) at least in part because it so closely resembles the kind of humility formulas which medieval scribes appended to works they were copying (Curtius 407-13). Humphrey Carpenter observes that the lines “might be taken to imply defeat”:

But though the ant-hill is broken, the ant is not, and he can announce himself with the confidence not merely of a survivor but of one set apart from the tribe:

“ego scriptor,” “I the writer.” (675)

Carpenter’s suggestion that the lines strike a note of triumph is unconvincing. The lines suggest not confidence, but loss, and if Pound does give the impression of being “set apart from the tribe,” it is not, as Carpenter seems to suggest, because of his privileged position as author. What seems more immediate is the dual sense of fragmentation and exile, and the drive to escape despair leads to an urge to see things rebuilt: the sentence fragment “parts reassembled”(76:479) occur just lines after the “ego scriptor.” Chaucer paraphrased hints at Pound’s identification with the English poet, but the “ego
scriptor" represents no more than a partial unmasking of the narrator. The language of Pound's paraphrase--which could be interpreted as narratorial intrusion--is more significant when considered as proof of identification with Chaucer.

It is appropriate that Canto 81 should end with a meditation on the enduring merit of activity as a principle that opposes the paralysis of vanity:

But to have done instead of not doing
this is not vanity
To have, with decency, knocked
That a Blunt should open
            To have gathered from the air a live tradition
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
            This is not vanity.
Here error is all in the not done,
all in the diffidence that faltered . . . (81:542)

The phrase "a fine old eye" could refer to the poet W.S. Blunt, but it also recalls the lines from the "Merciles Beaute" in a way which suggests that Pound is drawing deliberately on the achievement of Chaucer. For Pound, Chaucer represents an active nurturing and enlargement of the English poetic tradition, and the "Merciles Beaute" is quoted in Confucius to Cummings and also in the ABC of Reading (112). The fact that the quotation in the ABC is set amidst highly concentrated praise for Chaucer underscores his relevance to the closing lines of the Canto. Pound contemplates the endeavour to "gather from the air a live tradition," and it is an urge for which he has repeatedly praised Chaucer. Significantly, the lines from Chaucer--who describes himself as "nat but a lewd compilator" in the Prologue to A Treatise on the Astrolabe (Benson 662)—occupy a prominent position among the fragments of memory compiled by Pound. It is a further mark of the kinship between the two artists that the compilation of fragments gathered, as it were, "from the air," should be such an obvious component
of both their achievements.

* * * *

And Chaucer was in the air in the late nineteenth-century and the first decades of the twentieth, not least of all in the work of Eliot, whose poem "The Waste Land" begins where Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* begin; that is, in April. R.K. Root observed in a 1906 Preface to *The Poetry of Chaucer*: "During the last twenty years, the poetry of Chaucer has been attaining an ever increasing popularity"(v). Root's assertion hints at the critical revaluation of Chaucer's poetry which took place during this time. Pound, for one, was still attacking the traditional approaches to Chaucer's poetry when he lamented the fact that scholars in America were content to catalogue the sources of his fabliaux (*How To Read* 32). Pound's praise for Chaucer fits into and even anticipates some of what have become trends in twentieth-century critical approaches to Chaucer, including his praise for Chaucer as more than a mere compiler of the stories of others. But while Pound's comments on Chaucer seem prescient, his use of Chaucer follows other surprising uses of his poetry. It is, however, impossible to agree with Kenner's statement that "Pound is the first English poet since Pope who has been able to learn from Chaucer"(*The Poetry of EP* 238 n.1). Yeats and Ford are just two writers in Pound's immediate circle who were able to draw inspiration from Chaucer.15

One of the most interesting aspects of Root's book is his cataloguing of significant modern editions of Chaucer's poetry. The catalogue bespeaks a flurry of scholarly activity. The appearance of Skeat's six volume *Oxford Chaucer* (1894), along with his one volume *Student's Chaucer* (1900), Pollard, Heath and Liddell's Globe
edition (1903), Robinson’s *Chaucer* (1921), and J.L. Hulbert’s *Chaucer’s Official Life* (1912), offers a convincing testament to the poet’s influence, appeal, and relevance to critics and readers at the beginning of the century.\(^{16}\)

Over the last ten years, articles have appeared arguing for the presence of Chaucer in works by novelists as different in temperament as Dickens and Fitzgerald, and evidence of Chaucer’s influence has been noted in the novels of Ford Madox Ford, who, as we have seen, borrowed Chaucer’s name as a *nom-de-plume*.\(^{17}\) More importantly, in terms of this discussion, Chaucer was in Pound’s early poetry and in the 1917 version of “Three Cantos”:

> What’s left for me to do?  
> Whom shall I conjure up; who’s my Sordello,  
> My pre-Daun Chaucer, pre-Boccaccio,  
> As you have done pre-Dante? (*Personae* 231)

The lines are from Pound’s extended address to Browning in the first of the “Three Cantos,” and the passage is of interest because Pound seems determined to embrace Browning’s endeavour while reaching back before the time of Chaucer (much as Pound’s lines argue that Browning sought to do the same with the achievement of Dante). Interestingly, Pound wrote that “No one will ever gage or measure English poetry until they know how much of it . . . is already there on the page of Chaucer” (*ABC* 102), and the remark seems to suggest that Chaucer is more an end than a beginning. The rigorous demands of a search for a pre-Daun Chaucer supports this notion, and it requires a great deal more of Pound than the playful homage of Ford’s pseudonym Dan Chaucer. The search for something behind Chaucer (the search for signs of a vital literary culture that pre-exists Chaucer) asserts its presence throughout Pound’s poetry,
as in his translation of “The Seafarer.” If Pound is banishing a ghost in his revision of the “Three Cantos”--as Browning does Shelley’s ghost at the beginning of Sordello--the ghost seems to be Chaucer’s. Leonard Burrows has observed that Chaucer established the iambic couplet as “the orthodox verse-form for the talking voice” (Burrows 80),¹⁸ and it is interesting to note that Browning (whose example Pound is following) broke with the tradition which had extended from Chaucer through Jonson, Pope, and others.

If Chaucer is only an apparent beginning to Pound, he is the beginning as far as critics at the turn-of-the-century were concerned. As J.H. Ward observes in The English Poets, which was published in 1890:

It is natural that a book which aims at including the best that has been done in English verse should begin with Chaucer, to whom no one has ever seriously denied the name which Dryden gave him, of the Father of English poetry. The poems of an earlier date, the Brut and the Ormulum, the Romances and the Homilies, have indeed an interest of their own; but it is purely antiquarian interest, and even under that aspect it does not exist for the reader of Chaucer, who cannot in any sense be said to have been inspired by them. English poetry, distinguished on the one hand from the “rym doggerel” of the romancers, which is not poetry, and on the other from Beowulf, which is poetry but not, in the ordinary sense, English, begins in the reign of Edward III, with Chaucer and his lesser companions. (1)

Nor, however, is Pound writing “English poetry” in any sense which would have pleased
Ward, and his undertaking in the *Cantos* seems to be rooted in reaching behind Chaucer to establish all the Classical and Continental influences which Ward ignores and from which Chaucer drew. Properly, Pound's pre-Chaucer is the world described in *The Spirit of Romance*, and in the catalogues of authors that make up so much of the *ABC of Reading*, and practically all of his correspondence.

Pound's search for his pre-Chaucer continues in "Three Cantos":

Whom shall I hang my shimmering garment on?
Who wear my feathery mantle, hagoromo;
Whom set to dazzle the serious future ages?
Not Arnaut, not De Born, not Uc St. Circ who has writ out the stories.
Or shall I do your trick, the showman's booth, Bob Browning,
Turned at my will into the Agora,
Or into the old theatre at Arles,
And set the lot, my visions, to confounding
The wits that have survived your damn'd *Sordello*? (Personae 232)

Pound rejects three heroes in succession--three who figure prominently in the finished *Cantos*--in favour of the whole "lot," and the decision to do so stands as a replication of Chaucer's ability to absorb a wide range of influences. Pound cherishes what he calls Chaucer's "participation" in the European literary traditions, and his sensitivity to the presence of these influences accounts for his endeavour to anatomise the components that are combined in Chaucer's poetry.

Pound's appreciation for Chaucer is far from ambivalent in the "Three Cantos," where he appears as one of the ancient ghosts in Pound's *phantastikon*:

Take the old way, say I met John Haydon,
Sought out the place,
Lay on the bank, was "plungèd deep in swevyn;"
And saw the company--Layamon, Chaucer--
Pass each in his appropriate robes;
Conversed with each, observed the varying fashion. (241)
The phantastikon of these “Three Cantos” (often referred to as the Ur-Cantos) is Pound’s first version of the ghostly processions seen from the steps of the Dogana, and if this “Ur-Canto urge to be present and talking” (Kenner 360) is refined and altered in the Cantos, it is important to recognise the significance of Chaucer’s position in the poem’s original shape. He is present as more than inspiration. In fact, the example of the dream-vision poems helps occasion the Ur-Cantos. The “old way” provides access to the phantastikon through the device which characterises medieval dream-vision poetry as the narrator is “plungèd deep in swevyn,” and it is fitting that Pound, the modern poet, should use this medieval device to conjure Chaucer’s ghost.

Pound’s habit of collapsing time in order to allow these ghosts to coexist makes it fitting that he should say that “Landor’s dialogues of Chaucer, Petrarch and Boccaccio, are the best real criticism of Chaucer we have” (ABC 58). The remark may seem puzzling until one recognises that what Pound esteems in Landor’s Imaginary Conversations is the way in which Landor allows these three authors to interact on the page. When, in the dialogue in question, Chaucer’s Sir Magnus de Lucy marvels that sermons identifying Babel, Sion and Israel with England are literal, he is accomplishing something on the order of Pound’s shorthand in the “Pisan Cantos,” where the poet describes “Mt. Taishan @ Pisa/ as Fujiyama at Gardone” (84:447). Landor’s Conversations represent “the best real criticism of Chaucer we have” because it makes a traveller of Chaucer, thereby allowing him to absorb attitudes and expressions as well as the inspiration for his stories and fabliaux. Landor’s Conversations among Boccaccio, Petrarch and Chaucer touch on such varied topics as Chaucer’s
impressions of Pisan architecture, and there is a pleasing harmony in the fact that Pound, in his cage at the DTC, restores Chaucer to the site of Landor's dialogue.

Pound is acutely aware of the dangers of reading Chaucer, as one of his letters to Iris Barry makes clear:

And English poetry???? Ugh. Perhaps you shouldn't read it at all. Chaucer has in him all that has ever got into English. And if you read Chaucer you will probably (as I did though there is no reason you should be the same kind of imbecile) start writing archaic English, which you shouldn't. (The Letters of Ezra Pound 89)\(^{19}\)

The poem “Villonaud for This Yule”\(^{20}\) seems to revel in just this kind of clumsy and wilful archaism, but even poems which have been accorded a kind of authenticity in the Pound canon often recall Chaucer, if in a more sophisticated fashion. Lustra's “Ancient Music” is one such poem,\(^{21}\) and its opening words “Winter is icumen in” (Personae 121) draw from the medieval roots, but it is a distinction worth making that although the roots of that language do rest in the poems of that era, Pound's own garrulous mock-frontier American language has many affinities with medieval diction and spelling. In fact, the line “winter is icumen” might well have been written by Pound, who, in his correspondence with Ford Madox Ford, drove his older friend to numerous complaints about his idiosyncratic spelling. The mingling of these voices is very much like Pound's willingness to improve upon Van Dyke's modernisation.

* * * *

The fact that Chaucer—who had been present in the “Three Cantos” of 1917
before being excised from the final version of those Cantos—reappears in the “Pisan Cantos” is telling. It is in the Pisan sequence that Pound reaffirms his own presence in ways which had only been intermittently evident since the “I sat on the Dogana’s steps” of Canto 3. This reaffirmation—which suggests that Pound was recalling the origins of the Cantos—is tempered, however, by a mingling of Pound’s own voice with the voices of Chaucer and of others. As a result, what is accomplished is not so much the creation of another persona as it is a revealing expression of a sophisticated engagement with Chaucer’s achievement.

Many ghosts return to life in the “Pisan Cantos,” but none of them exerts more influence in the original “Three Cantos.” The text of those originals shows Pound confronting Chaucer almost as much as Browning, and the somewhat stilted manner in which the presence of both those poets is asserted in the “Three Cantos” is proof that Pound was still searching for a language and a method for his “poem including history.” When Pound returns to Chaucer in the “Pisan Cantos,” he does so with renewed assurance and an acute sense of fraternity. The quotation and the paraphrase of Chaucer’s poems are significant specifically because they are so muted—that is, they do not come accompanied and surrounded by the elaborate historical information which characterises the first books of the Cantos.

The fact that Chaucer’s poetry was receiving new attention both by scholars and readers in the early years of the century helps contextualise Pound’s use of him. Root’s catalogue of new editions of Chaucer provides evidence of a growing interest in his poetry, as does the variety of authors whose work reveals the influence of Chaucer. It is only relatively recently that scholars have begun exploring particular ways in which
Chaucer's influence asserts itself in the works of modern authors. To be sure, the presence is often muted--as it is in the case of the "Pisan Cantos"--and still more often the inquiry is no more than an allusive footnote. Hugh Kenner describes Henry James as "chronicler of pilgrims" in Index of *The Pound Era*, and this brief note provides a subtle hint about Chaucer's relevance to the novels of James. Several parties, including Deborah Schlacks, who argues that Fitzgerald found "a source of creative renewal" in Chaucer's dream visions (27), have explored the case of Scott Fitzgerald's use of *Troilus and Criseyde* in *The Great Gatsby*. The same might well be said of Pound, who begins the *Cantos* with his nose in a book ("Lie quiet Divus"). More pointedly, however, Cassie Hermannson has observed that "To compare directly the world views offered by Chaucer's poem and Fitzgerald's novel is to conclude that the real tragedy is that of 1920s America, unable to repeat even the tragedies of a more mythic-heroic past." Pound in post World War II Europe was a long way from 1920s America, but Hermannson's comment reflects interestingly on many of the most important aspects of Pound's interest in Chaucer. Both Pound and Fitzgerald reveal a fascination with the question of origins, but the most interesting aspects of their use of Chaucer stems from the ways in which they differ from one another.

At the DTC, Pound's "Pisan Cantos" become a "repeat in literature" as well as a "repeat in history," just as his "poem including history" becomes a "poem including the present." Literature and "the outside world of real things" become fused. It can be said of the *Cantos* in general that anecdotes rhyme with one another and thereby assert the power of continuity, but the question is still more relevant to a consideration of the
"Pisan Cantos." In the DTC at Pisa, Pound, confronted by the urgency of his situation, shores up fragments of Chaucer's poetry specifically because the tragedies of the mythic-heroic past do repeat themselves.

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1 Ford authored several scandalous romans-a-clef under the name Dan Chaucer.

2 Hugh Kenner writes that Pound "was in a tent in the medical section of the compound, regaining his wits, wits as always shaped by myth: a man of no future and with a name to come, Odysseus in the Cyclops den. He might even have reflected, though probably he did not, that Eliot also, a quarter-century before, had written a masterpiece in a 'decayed hole among the mountains', recovering from a nervous breakdown" (The Pound Era 471-474). Notwithstanding the uncharacteristically cautious wording of Kenner's statement, the verse of the "Pisan Cantos" supports the notion that Pound was conscious of a number of such parallels, including the one provided by Eliot. Just ten lines into the first of the "Pisan Cantos", Pound revises lines from Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men": "yet say this to the Possum: a bang, not a whimper, / with a bang, not with a whimper" (74:445).

3 Stavros Delogioris has suggested that Pound may have titled his ABC of Reading after Chaucer's poem "An ABC" (Gugelberger 139).

4 Helen May Dennis' A New Approach to the Poetry of Ezra Pound: Through the Medieval Provencal Aspect, and Georg M. Gugelberger's Ezra Pound's Medievalism are just two works among many that provide detailed studies of Pound's use of a variety of medieval sources and conventions.

5 The term translatio studii designates the transmission of knowledge from one civilization to another (Bruckmann 4).

6 Carroll F. Terrell writes: "It is known that Pound had very few books at Pisa: the Bible, The Four Books he had with him when arrested, The Pocket Book of Verse he found in the camp, a few copies of Time magazine that were passed around, perhaps a random newspaper at times, and a small number of unidentified books available in a collection in the quarters of the DTC cadre" (361-362).

7 The "Three Cantos" were written in 1915, and were intended, even then, to be a "fragment from a more important opus" (Carpenter 286). They were published serially in 1917 in Poetry, and they underwent heavy revision and re-structuring (to arrive at their present form) in 1923. Pound rejected much of what he had composed, and Humphrey Carpenter wrote that the "Three Cantos" were "too derivatively Browningesque to represent quite all the facets of Ezra as he was by 1915" (290). The long address to
Browning which opened the first canto ("Hang it all, there can be but one Sordello!") was shortened and moved to Canto 2 during the revisions. Pound's English version of Andreas Divus' Latin translation of Homer was originally part of the third canto, but Pound later recognized that it would be better suited as an opening for the Cantos. As Humphrey Carpenter writes: "It was a perfect example of the 'ply over ply' method. It is a reworking of Medieval Latin (itself a reworking of ancient Greek) into English that is at once modern and a re-creation of Anglo-Saxon. We therefore observe (by implication) Ezra discovering Andreas Divus for himself, rediscovering Homer for a medieval audience, Homer 'rediscovering' Odysseus and his experiences, and finally, Odysseus himself summoning up the dead—which is what Ezra had been trying to do in different ways throughout the "Three Cantos" (Carpenter 291-2).

8 The dates of Pound's chronology regarding the relative ages of Marlowe (1564-93) and Shakespeare (1564-1616) are generally not accepted.

9 Lila Gross observes that "Judging from the number of manuscripts in which it is preserved (twenty-two, plus the early editions of Caxton and Thynne), 'Truth' was Chaucer's most popular lyric; of all his other works, only The Canterbury Tales and A Treatise on the Astrolabe are preserved in more manuscripts than 'Truth'" (Benson 635).

10 Humphrey Carpenter observes that 'beare' is possibly "a typing error for 'heare,' since it is clear that Chaucer's advice (especially in the modern version Ezra had) is intended to lead to being heard and attended to, not to improving oneself for the sake of being bearable. Ezra apparently wants people to listen to him again, and feels that a more subdued approach might succeed" (A Serious Character 679). Carpenter may be right, but the more significant part of the quotation is the phrase "master thyself." With it, Pound emphasizes another kind of "repeat in history", as Pound's paraphrased Chaucer echoes Pound's Kung: "Till a man have order within him / He cannot create order around him . . . And if the prince have not order within him / He cannot put order in his dominions" (13:59).

11 In the Introduction to the first volume of J.H. Ward's The English Poets, Arnold writes: "something is wanting, then, to the poetry of Chaucer, which poetry must have before it can be placed in the glorious class of the best. And there is no doubt what that something is. It is . . the high and excellent seriousness, which Aristotle assigns as one of the grand virtues of poetry. The substance of Chaucer's poetry, his view of things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, shrewdness, benignity; but it has not this high seriousness. Homer's criticism of life has it, Dante's has it, Shakespeare's has it" (xxx). It is particularly telling of the difference between the critical sensibilities of Pound and Arnold that Pound groups Chaucer with the very poets from whose company Arnold excludes him. Pound attacks Arnold's notion that poetry is a "criticism of life" in The Spirit of Romance, where he writes: "Poetry is about as much a 'criticism of life' as a red-hot iron is a criticism of fire" (S of R 222). It is pleasing to think that
Pound was criticizing Arnold’s lines regarding the lack of “high seriousness” in Chaucer’s “criticism of life” with and echo Absolon and his “iron hoot” in “The Miller’s Tale.”

12 The language of the canto anticipates the rhythms of the famous usury canto:

with usura the line grows thick
with usura is no clear demarcation . . .
Usura is a murrain, usura
blunteth the needle in the maid’s hand . . . (45:229)

13 It is interesting to observe that Pound’s division of the lines into separate quotations preserves the enjambment of the verses as they appear in Canto 1 of “Three Cantos.”

14 Pound’s definition of the term phantastikon appears in The Spirit of Romance: “As to [man’s] consciousness, the consciousness of some seems to rest, or to have its center more properly, in what the Greek psychologists called the phantastikon. Their minds are, that is, circumvolved about them like soap-bubbles reflecting sundry patches of the macrocosmos”(92-92). Interestingly, Pound’s definition of the term suggests that the ghosts in “Three Cantos” are an aspect of his individual consciousness. It is a fact that further emphasizes the link between Pound and Chaucer (who appears in the phantastikon).

15 One of Yeats’ own accounts of his valuing of Chaucer also preserves Pound’s disgust over the manuscript of Yeats’ play The King of the Great Clock Tower. It also preserves signs of their disintegrating friendship, as well as Pound’s growing political mania. Having urged Pound to read the manuscript, Yeats writes that: “[Pound] said, apropos of nothing, ‘Arthur Balfour was a scoundrel’, and from then on would talk of nothing but politics. All the other modern statesmen were more or less scoundrels except ‘Mussolini and that hysterical imitator of his Hitler’. When I objected to his violence he declared that Dante considered all sins intellectual, even sins of the flesh, he himself refused to make the modern distinction between error and sin. He urged me to read the works of Captain Douglas who alone knew what caused our suffering. He took my manuscript and went away denouncing Dublin as ‘a reactionary hole’ because I had said that I was re-reading Shakespeare, would go on to Chaucer, and found all that I wanted of modern life in ‘detection and the wild west’. Next day his judgement came and that in a single word, ‘Putrid’” (Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats 1309-10). Ironically, Yeats’ description of the conversation with Pound anticipates the way in which Chaucer will assume a position amidst the ruins of post-war Europe in the “Pisan Cantos.” Chaucer will be reintroduced into Pound’s ongoing political discussion long after the fall of Mussolini and Hitler: proof, perhaps, that Chaucer can be felt “more near than the daily paper.” And Pound, like Yeats, spent his last years reading Chaucer.

16 Recent criticism such as Ann W. Astell’s Chaucer and the Universe of Learning
follows such seminal works as Chaucer and the French Tradition by emphasising the importance of Chaucer’s achievement as an enlarger, an absorber, and an assimilator. This achievement is similar to the role Pound claims for himself in his critical prose, his correspondence (as in the letters to Iris Barry, where Pound is constantly setting the curriculum for what his editor James Laughlin called “Ezuversity”), and in the Cantos. Astell’s analysis of the erudition that Chaucer demanded of his readers implies that Chaucer made proto-Modemist demands on the learning of his readers.

17 F.T. Flahiff’s articles “Scott Fitzgerald’s Chaucerian Rag” and “Mysteriously Come Together: Dickens, Chaucer, and Little Dorrit” map the intertextual resonances between Chaucer’s poetry and the works of these modern novelists. The Fitzgerald connection, in particular, has been pursued in such works as Cassie Hermannson’s “An Elusive Rhythm: The Great Gatsby Reclaims Troilus and Criseyde,” Deborah Schlacks’ The American Dream: Chaucer’s Surprising Influence on F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Nancy Hoffman’s “The Great Gatsby: Troilus and Criseyde Revisited?”. While a more detailed discussion of these articles and their findings is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the papers argue for an active effort on the part of Dickens and Fitzgerald to absorb the influence of Chaucer.

18 Burrows has in mind the tales told by the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, and others.

19 In the same letter, Pound also warns Iris Barry of the similar dangers posed by Browning: “. . . the hell is that one catches Browning’s manner and mannerisms. At least I’ve suffered the disease. There is no reason why you should.” Pound counsels Barry about his own struggle with the mannerisms of both authors. (Letters of Ezra Pound 90)

20 The first stanza of “Villonaud for this Yule” is typical of the way in which medieval spelling and language manifests itself in Pound’s early poetry:

Towards the Noel that morte saison
(Christ make the shepherd’s homage dear!)
Then when the grey wolves everychone
Drink of the winds their chill small-beer
And lap o’ the snows food’s gueredon
Then makyth my heart his yule-tide cheer
(Skoal! With the dregs if the clear begone!)
Wining the ghosts of yester-year. . . . (P 10)

21 TLS re-printed the poem “Ancient Music” to mark the occasion of Pound’s death:

Winter is icumen in,
Lhude sing Goddamm,
Raineth drop and staineth slop,
And how the wind doth ramm!
   Sing: Goddamm.
Skiddeth bus and sloppeth us,
An ague hath my hamm.
Freezeth river, turneth liver,
   Damm you, sing: Goddamm.
Goddamm, Goddamm, 'tis why I am, Goddamm,
   So 'gainst the winter's balm.
Sing goddamm, damm, sing Goddamm,
Sing goddamm, sing goddamm, DAMM.  (P 120-21)
In the essay "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris," Ezra Pound places Chaucer at the highest level of literary achievement by numbering him with Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare as one of four authors exemplifying what Pound calls "distinct phases of consciousness." Pound uses the phrase to describe four different relationships between the artist and the world:

Among the poets there have been four men in especial virtuous, or, since virtues are so hard to define, let us say they represent four distinct phases of consciousness:

Homer of the Odyssey, man conscious of the world outside him: and if we accept the tradition of Homer's blindness, we may find in that blindness the significant cause of his power; for him the outer world would have been a place of mystery, of uncertainty, of things severed from their attendant trivialities, of acts, each one cloaked in some glamour of the inexperienced; his work, therefore, a work of imagination and not of observation;

Dante, in the Divina Commedia, man conscious of the world within him;

Chaucer, man conscious of the variety of persons about him, not so much of their acts and the outlines of their acts as of their characters, their personalities; with the inception of this sort of interest any epic period comes to its end;

Shakespeare, man conscious of himself in the world about him--as Dante had
been conscious of the spaces of the mind, its reach and its perspective.

(SP 29-30)

The passage makes a number of interesting points: first of all, it is specifically the Homer of the *Odyssey*, and not of the *Iliad*, who interests Pound. It is a significant detail, since, as Kenner observes in *The Pound Era*, “Homer in most times has been the poet of the *Iliad*” (44). Likewise, although perhaps not unexpectedly, it is the Dante of the *Divina Commedia* and not, for instance, the Dante of the *Vita Nuova*, or of the political writing, who interests him. Only the achievements of Chaucer and Shakespeare are discussed without reference to specific works, and Pound’s description of the relationship between their poetic works and the worlds that inspire and receive them is particularly interesting in the case of Chaucer. Pound’s description of Chaucer’s “phase of consciousness” is the only one of the four categories to refer to “persons” rather than “the world,” and the distinction represents a significant emphasis on detail and particularity. Whereas Pound describes Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, in relation to their worlds, he argues that Chaucer’s art is founded on the observation of individuals. There is an element of generalisation in Pound’s description of Dante as “a man conscious of the world within him,” and it is a generalisation which belies Pound’s respect for the lyrical aspect of Dante’s poetry (*SR* 119-126).

Pound praises Chaucer for seeing the world in all its variety and it is a view that distinguishes him from the other poets. Pound’s Dante is forever inward-looking; Pound’s Shakespeare reduces all things to the self; and, surprisingly, Pound puts forward the notion that Homer is a man for whom “the outer world would have been a
Pound’s Chaucer, however, is again, as he is in the *ABC of Reading*, a “participant.” The shift in perception which Pound describes is a significant one in the history of literature, and his observation implies that such a preoccupation with variety among individuals brings the epic period to an end by emphasising character at the expense of action. In spite of Pound’s attempt to resurrect the epic tradition by engaging with Browning’s *Sordello*, his natural affinity for the observation of individual characteristics—what he called his “Chaucerian busy-ness”—helps account for his inability to do so. Nowhere in the *Cantos* is this more apparent than in the Pisan sequence, where Pound’s attention to immediate lyrical detail is consistently focused on the idiosyncrasies of his fellow prisoners in the DTC.

Chaucer’s consciousness of variety in the individuals around him, and his effort to preserve and re-fashion that variety as poetry makes it nearly impossible—and almost always unproductive—to make assumptions about the autobiographical content of his poems. This fact, however, has not prevented critics from attempting to do so. R.K. Root observed that the best bibliographical information about Chaucer is to be found in John Wesley Hales’ entry in the *Dictionary of National Bibliography*, but Hales constructs his entry around the notion that the best biographical data is to be found in the poetry itself. Hales quotes from a famous passage in “The Boke of the Duchesse” to argue his case about events in Chaucer’s own life:

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But men might axe me why soo
I may nat slepe and what me is.
But natheles, who aske this
Lesseth his asking trewely.
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Myselven can not telle why
The sothe; but trewly, as I gess,
I hold hit be a sickness
That I have suffred this eight yeer;
And yet my boote is never the new,
For there is phisicien but oon
That may me hele; but that is don. (ll. 30-40)

Hales attributes the lines to Chaucer’s supposed unhappiness in marriage, but the lines seem to caution against this very kind of supposition. The speaker professes not to know the cause of his melancholy, and he suggests that inquiring too closely into the matter is counterproductive: “who so aske this / Leseth his asking trewely.” Hales, however, interprets the passage as a moment in which Chaucer’s true self is revealed to the reader. Clinging to the notion that Chaucer was unlucky in love, Hales links the lines with other passages from Chaucer:

In the “Troylus and Cryseyde” we also hear the cry of one crossed in love. Even more suggestive of failure and rejection is the picture he so fully draws of himself in the “House of Fame”. . . . It is the picture of a heavy-laden person who tries to forget his cares in excessive application to “business” and studies, not forgetting the pleasures of the table. He was certainly married when he wrote this.

(DNB 158)

Hales goes on to compare such passages with comments made by the Host and the Merchant in the Canterbury Tales, and he concludes:

It seems impossible to put a pleasant construction on these passages. It is incredible that they have no personal significance. The conclusion clearly is that Chaucer was not happy in his marital relations. . . . And unless the passage in the “Boke of the Duchesse” refers to his wife and some estrangement between
him and her, we must suppose that Chaucer was for many years possessed with a great passion for some other lady—a passion not merely conventional—and that when he was certainly married, he spoke of himself as hopeless of bliss because in that grand passion he had met with no success. (DNB 158)

Hales’ insistence on reading autobiography into these passages finishes by undermining Chaucer’s ability to create and render fictional characters. It may, as Hales said, be “impossible to put a pleasant construction on these passages,” but it is certainly possible to see that Hales’ argument is also a construction of sorts.

Modern criticism does not accept such assumptions readily, and Colin Wilcockson’s introductory note to “The Book of the Duchess” in The Riverside Chaucer even adopts a cautionary tone about assumptions of the kind made by Hales:

Critics have argued about the possibility that Chaucer’s depiction of the Narrator in The Book of the Duchess may contain autobiographical elements. No doubt there are instances in his works when this is so, as in some details of the self-portrait in The House of Fame; but the highly formalized narrator-persona of French courtly poetry, often melancholy and lovesick, is such a common figure that we should be very wary of assuming that the I of The Book of the Duchess represents Chaucer himself. (330)

Hales spoke of putting “a construction” on the passages, and the phrase stands as an example—albeit an unintentional one—of the way in which such interpretations are imposed on texts. More modern criticism than Hales’, however, suggests that the moment in which Chaucer seems to step out from the poem and identify himself for the
reader's benefit is the very moment in which remains most subtly disguised by poetic conventions. The details which bring us close to the historical Chaucer are trivial—documents, for instance, providing for the gift of a pitcher of wine from the King's butler, or household receipts for the purchase of "an entire suit of clothes, consisting of a plack or short cloak, a pair of red and breeches, with shoes" (DNB 155)—but there are, in these incidental details of diet and dress, facts that remain distinct from psychological constructions derived from the poetry of a man who died five-hundred years ago. They are details that cannot be hitched by any amount of inquiry into the personal lives of Chaucer's narrators.

In the Introduction to his book Chaucer's Narrators, David Lawton subjects these various narrators to detailed scrutiny and concludes that "No reader of Chaucer can avoid the issue of narrative persona or voicing (xiv). It is a conclusion that does a great deal to undermine the search for autobiography in Chaucer's poetry by the mere fact that it acknowledges these narrative figures as fictive constructs (even if many details are drawn from life). And if the notion that characteristics as melancholy and misfortune in love are drawn from life is a possibility, the notion that they represent Chaucer's engagement with the rhetorical figurations of courtly love, is a certainty.

Lawton's analysis of the function and construction of these narrative personae provides an interesting approach to the problem, and a point worth making that the OED (4a) lists "1909 E. Pound (title) Personae" as the first occurrence of the word persona in the sense of "A character deliberately assumed by an author in his writing." The fact that the term which exerts such a powerful influence over Chaucer studies has its origins in
the poetry of Pound does a great deal to locate one of Chaucer’s more significant influences on Pound's poetry. The origins of the modern critical use of the term personae also suggests that Pound influenced the study of Chaucer by providing critics with a new language for analysing Chaucer's narrators.

In *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*, Pound discusses the *Personae* volume in terms which suggest that he understood the volume—even if it was a selection of his early collections—as a coherent exercise:

In the “search for oneself,” in the search for “sincere self-expression,” one gropes, one finds some seeming verity. One says “I am” this, that, or the other, and with the words scarcely uttered one ceases to be that thing. I began this search for the real in a book called *Personae*, casting off, as it were, complete masks of the self in each poem. I continued in long series of translations, which were but more elaborate masks. (85)

Pound speaks of “sincere self-expression” and his quotation marks imply a certain reticence about using the term. Pound also speaks of “casting off” the masks, and the term provides a clue to the nature of the process which Steven Helmling, in an article entitled “Unmasking Pound,” has identified as being somewhere between what he sees as the two extremes in the poetic use of masks:

While Eliot’s *personae* image possible selves Eliot wishes to disown or exorcise, Yeats throughout his career, and increasingly at its close, identifies with his *personae* as aspects of his personality he wishes to encourage, or to which he wants to extend a fuller license of expression. (503)
The difficulty, of course, in attempting to locate Pound’s attitude between these two extremes, is that the poems in the 1909 *Personae* volume were all written at least five years before Pound met Eliot, and before Yeats began to shape his own theory of the mask.

Pound shares with Helmling’s understanding of Eliot’s use of *personae* the desire to “cast off” or “exorcise” the masks, but whereas Eliot’s treatment of the process consistently emphasises the importance of detachment,⁴ Pound is searching for “self-expression.” Eliot’s famous line from the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” argues the point: “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (*Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* 41).

Pound seems to yearn for an identification or fusion with the figure (as in the poem “Cino”), only to reject the mask, and even the endeavour, as insufficient. In this, at least, Pound is closest to Yeats in “Per Amica Silentia Lunae”:

> . . . when I shut my door and light the candle, [Yeats wrote] I invite a marmorean Muse, an art where no thought or emotion has come to mind because another man has thought or felt something different, for now there must be no reaction, action only, and the world must move my heart but to the heart’s discovery of itself, and I begin to dream of eyelids that do not quiver before the bayonet: all my thoughts have ease and joy, I am all virtue and confidence. When I come to put in rhyme what I have found, it will be a hard toil, but for a moment I believe I have found myself and not my anti-self. It is only the shrinking from toil, perhaps, that convinces me that I have been no more myself than is the cat the medicinal grass it is eating in the garden. (*Mythologies* 325)
If Yeats seems less deliberate in the steps by which he arrives at a recognition of the
distance separating the self from the other it is because he is describing his earliest
conceptions of the problem at hand. The Yeatsian drive for the self and for “sincere
self-expression” reaches into other selves, though, for the same reason Pound’s does:
because even the drive to be other than what one is helps describe and define the self.
This “other” becomes a construct of the self that proves to be ultimately unsatisfying or
unattainable, and, for Yeats, the very unattainability of the mask is a part of its
ennobling attraction; for Pound, it represents a rejection of what had been a methodical
search. When Pound writes that “One says ‘I am’ this, that, or the other, and with the
words scarcely uttered one ceases to be that thing”, his words reveal a kind of
dissatisfaction with the exercise undertaken in the Personae poems. Helmling is right
to suggest that the lines seem to describe “a past effort” (508).

The winters Yeats and Pound spent together at Stone Cottage in Sussex
represent significant periods during the formation of Yeats’ theory of the mask. Yeats
refers to Pound in A Vision, which is prefaced in modern editions by “A Packet for Ezra
Pound,” and which includes Yeats’ recollection of one of Pound’s descriptions of the
structure of the Cantos: “There will be no plot, no chronicle of events, no logic of
discourse, but two themes, the Descent into Hades from Homer, a Metamorphosis from
Ovid, and, mixed with these, medieval or modern historical characters” (A Vision 4).
Yeats’ paraphrase of Pound’s words dates from 1928 when the Cantos were already
well underway, and, in spite of Yeats’ observation that Pound’s art “is the opposite” of
his own (3), he demonstrates an understanding of just how close their approaches
could come in such matters as masks of the self and the hamessing of tradition. Yeats
closes his “Packet for Ezra Pound” by quoting Pound’s poem “The Return” in its
entirety:

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
Movements, and the slow feet,
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
         Wavering!

See, they return, one, and by one,
With fear, as half-awakened;
As if the snow should hesitate
And murmur in the wind,
     and half turn back;
These were the “Wing’d-with-Awe,”
       Inviolable.
Gods of the wingèd shoe!
With them the silver hounds,
      sniffing the trace of air!

Haie! Haie!
   These were the swift to harry;
   These the keen-scented;
   These were the souls of blood.

Slow on the leash,
       pallid the leash-men! (P 61)

The most interesting lines in the poem--at least in terms of Yeats’ decision to quote the
poem at the end of his Introduction to A Vision--are the last two. The lines describe, on
the one hand, the delicacy of the vision, and, on the other hand, the power of the
ghosts being so hamessed. It provides a testament to the glories, as well as the
dangers, of harnessing voice from the past.

Yeats describes the fragility of such visions in the “Per Amica”:

. . . the passions, when we know that they cannot find fulfilment, become vision;

and a vision, whether we wake or sleep, prolongs its power by rhythm and
pattern, the wheel where the world is butterfly. We need no protection, but it does, for if we become interested in ourselves, in our own lives, we pass out of the vision. Whether it is we or the vision that created the pattern, who set the wheel turning, it is hard to say, but certainly we have a hundred ways of keeping it near us: we select our images from past times, we turn from our own age and try to feel Chaucer nearer than the daily paper. It compels us to cover all it cannot incorporate, and would carry us when it comes in sleep to that moment when even sleep closes her eyes and dreams begin to dream; and we are taken up into a clear light and are forgetful even of our own names and actions and yet in perfect possession murmur like Faust, “Stay, moment,” and murmur in vain.

*(Mythologies 342)*

For Yeats the vision can only be sustained by deliberately avoiding self-interest, and it might seem paradoxical to suggest that what Pound refers to as “sincere self-expression” could be arrived at by such means. The solution to the problem, though, rests in Yeats’ observation that the vision “prolongs its power by rhythm and pattern.” This faith in the enduring value of rhythm and pattern informs all of Yeats’ work--from the early poems to prose works such as the “Per Amica” and *A Vision*--and it helps account for Yeats’ apparent mistrust of superficial self-interest. Mere self-interest brings about the end of the vision, but the merit of rhythm and pattern rests in their ability to assert the enduring relevance of the past--that is, they help justify the value and the relevance of trying to “feel Chaucer nearer than the daily paper” through an act of identification.

Eliot noted the apparent paradox of using what he called “impersonality” in art to
achieve greater expressions of personality (the “Yeats” essay amounts to an exploration of that apparent paradox), but he drew a fine distinction between the terms:

The lyric poet—and Yeats was always lyric, even when dramatic—can speak for every man, or for men very different from himself; but to do this he must for the moment be able to identify himself with every man or other men; and it is only his imaginative power of becoming this that deceives some readers into thinking that he is speaking for and of himself alone—especially when they prefer not to be implicated. (On Poetry and Poets 258)

Even if Pound does not attain this difficult transition in his early poetry, this seems to be his goal. In particular, the bravado of the narratorial voice in poems such as the “Sestina: Altaforte” (which opens with the lines: “Damn it all! all this our South stinks of peace. / You whoreson dog, Papiols, come! Let’s to music! / I have no life save when the swords clash”(P 26)) reflects Pound’s drive (apres-Yeats) to create a persona to which certain aspects of his own character might aspire. It is perhaps this element of bravado that characterises Pound’s use of personae in his pre-Cantos poems, and it could be said that Pound embraced it as an alternative to the mysticism of the Yeatsian approach.

Richard Sieburth, however, observes that Pound’s earliest verse “still remained very much under the sway of a post-romantic exoticism that prized Provence not as a potential version of the present, but rather as a secret Yeatsian land whose very glamour (heightened by supererogatory cedilla) depended on its remoteness and whose hieratic rites of love could only be intimated by negation”(WTSF ix). Sieburth
quotes from the opening stanza of the early poem “The Flame” to support his argument:

'Tis not a game that plays at mates and mating,
Provençe knew;
'Tis not a game of barter, lands and houses,
Provençe knew.
We who are wise beyond your dream of wisdom,
Drink our immortal moments; we “pass through.”
We have gone forth beyond your bonds and borders,
Provençe knew;
And all the tales of Oisin say but this:
That man doth pass the net of days and hours.
Where time is shrivelled down to time’s seed corn
We of the Ever-living, in that light
Meet through our veils and whisper, and of love. (P 48)

The lines—notwithstanding Sieburth’s judgement as to their merit; a judgement which is in accordance with Pound’s later rejection of most of his early verse as “stale creampuffs” (A Lume Spento, Foreword)—demonstrate a certain dependence on Yeats for access to the patterns and rhythms of the past. This lingering romanticism is one of the lingering conflicts in Pound’s early poetry. “The tales of Oisin” are Yeats’ “Wanderings of Oisin,” and if Pound turns to Yeats to “pass the net of days and hours,” it is significant that Pound conceives of the same effort as an attempt to “feel Chaucer nearer than the daily paper.”

In a letter to written in 1935 Yeats told Florence Farr of a plan for the Spring: “I have an idea for a bicycle trip when I get back. I have my imagination full of Chaucer and would like to hire a bicycle and go the journey of the Canterbury pilgrims from Southwark and Greenwich to Canterbury through Rochester” (Letters of W.B. Yeats 456). A month later, Yeats wrote to A.H. Bullen and informed him that he was still absorbed in Chaucer: “... my imagination is getting so deep in Chaucer that I cannot get it down into any other well for the present” (457), and the letters argue for the
significance of Yeats' engagement with Chaucer's poetry. Yeats' desire to repeat the Canterbury pilgrimage (with the modern luxury of bicycle travel) demonstrates how fully Yeats' "imagination" was full of Chaucer. It is significant that Yeats should say that it was his "imagination" that was full of Chaucer, because the term helps describe the kind of mature example Chaucer provided for Yeats. The word signals something other than a merely stylistic influence, and it is the same pattern of example which Pound followed after he managed to rid himself of the self-conscious archaisms that marked his early engagement with Chaucer's poetry.

Yeats' conviction that "if we become interested in ourselves, in our own lives, we pass out of the vision" bears an interesting relation to Pound's undertaking in Personae when one considers the fact that it is in the short poems of the pre-Cantos period that Pound explores "complete masks of the self." The demands of the undertaking make it difficult to sustain, and it is important to recognise that Pound's description of the Personae poems as "complete" masks marks an important distinction between his use of the device in the shorter poems and his creation of masks of the self in the Cantos. Yeats suggests that vision must never be interrupted by self-interest, but Pound--at least the Pound of the "Pisan Cantos"--neatly avoids the protective mysticism of the passage from "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" by passing from immediate detail into timeless detail--that is, from self-consciousness into vision, and thereby into personae.

This particular movement--whereby Pound uses self-consciousness as a means of accessing masks--seems to be a reversal of the process described by Yeats, but it is more interesting when considered as a refinement of that method. The "completed
masks” of the self as they appear in *Personae* become “incomplete” or “open” masks in the “Pisan Cantos” by virtue of the way in which Pound allows descriptions of the immediate details of his surroundings to grade into timeless details:

Butterflies, mint and Lesbia’s sparrows,
the voiceless with bumm drumm and banners,
and the ideogram of the guard roosts
el triste pensier si volge
ad Ussel. A Ventadour
va il consire, el tempo rivolge (74:448)

Terrell has observed that the lines in Italian (which Terrell translates as: “The sad thought turns/ toward Ussel. To Ventadour goes the thought, the time turns back”) are based on Ventadom’s “Lo tems vai e ven e vire” (“Time goes and comes and turns”) and that they also recall Dante’s “era gia’ lora che volge il disio” (“It was now the hour that turns back the longing”), but Pound’s lines are most striking for the way in which they serve as a kind of annotation for the lines which precede them (Terrell 366-367). They describe a rhythmic movement between places which parallels the way in which the preceding lines move back and forth between immediate and timeless details. The first line, in particular, begins as an enumeration of local sights and smells but it grades into literary allusion as Pound finishes by recalling lines from Catullus (Terrell 366).

The line “Butterflies, mint and Lesbia’s sparrows” begins with Pound’s own immediate surroundings, but Pound uses those details to access vision. The dexterity of the movement of this passage from self-consciousness to self-effacement (while the butterflies and mint remain very much a part of the world of the DTC, the sparrows are the sparrows of a former age) is characteristic of Pound’s method in the “Pisan Cantos,” where the various masks of the self are sustained only briefly.
Steven Helmling draws a distinction between the highly mannered language of the early *persona* poems (encompassing the 1909 *Personae* volume as well as "Mauberley" and "Homage to Sextus Propertius"), and the spare language of the *Cantos*:

If the *Cantos* are a poem "without style," they are also a poem without *personae*. We hear from "E.P." and "ego scriptor cantilenae," but John Adams, say, is simply documentary "material," not a mask for Pound . . . . Likewise, the "materials" Pound translates from other languages: Homer and Divus in Canto 1 are not masks but part of Pound's subject, example of past sensibility that Pound's "technique" contrives to "present," to make uniquely available to us.

The final (and hardest) literary effect to "cast off" is that of "voice." The *Cantos* cannot dispense with "voice," but the poem makes audible enough other voices than Pound's to permit us to say that Pound's own voice becomes at last simply one of many. More important, Pound's mentality becomes simply one of many; it does not govern the *Cantos* as it governs "Mauberley" or *Propertius* or the Ur-*Cantos*. (516-517)

The sheer number of inverted commas in Helmling's paragraph underscores the difficulty of gauging "voice" with any real accuracy, but the term is used here to distinguish between what Pound called "complete masks of the self" and "voices" that are adopted and shed almost immediately. These voices often recur, but no single one of them dominates the tone of the "Pisan Cantos" for very long. Pound becomes another one of the "modern historical characters" he described in the conversation
recalled by Yeats in “A Packet for Ezra Pound,” albeit one like Sigismundo: a man absorbed in attempting to construct a thing of beauty. Pound quotes Beardsley’s words to Yeats (“La Beaute, ‘Beauty is difficult, Yeats’ said Aubrey Beardsley/ when Yeats asked why he drew horrors / . . . / So very difficult, Yeats, beauty so difficult”(80:531), and the words sound like Pound’s own apology to Yeats. Yeats had expressed his fears in “A Packet for Ezra Pound” that the Cantos would be a botch (A Vision 5), and although the original quotation re-creates the conversation between Yeats and Beardsley, the second iteration of the words “beauty so difficult” is full of a more personal trepidation and humility.6

The verse of the “Pisan Cantos” is remarkable for the ease with which Pound invents, adopts, sheds and merges such voices:

4 giants at the 4 corners
three young men at the door
and they dug a ditch around me
lest the damp gnaw through my bones (74:449)

The speaker is Pound and the details are documentary, but the speaker is also the Odysseus of Canto 1, and the ditch recalls “the ell-square pitkin” into which the dark blood of sacrifice is poured to appease the souls of the dead. This particular instance of what Pound called “subject rhyme” links the first of the “Pisan Cantos” with the first of the Cantos proper: Divus, Pound, Homer, and Odysseus are merged to various degrees by a rich juxtaposition of images, and to this mixture is added another Odysseus; the “no man” (Ὁ ΤΙΣ) of the cave of the Cyclops:

You who have passed the pillars and outward from Herakles when Lucifer fell in N. Carolina.
if the suave air give way to scirocco
"ΟΥ ΤΙΣ, ΟΥ ΤΙΣ? Odysseus
the name of my family. (74:445)

The lines approximate Breughel's achievement in the painting "Landscape with fall of
Icarus" where the mythical enters the quotidian world, and the ease with which Pound
passes from the sight of the fall of Lucifer (on North Carolina, of all places) to the
confessional tone of "ΟΥ ΤΙΣ, ΟΥ ΤΙΣ? Odysseus / the name of my family" suggests
that labelling such sophisticated gradations of the narratorial self as persona is
reductive.

* * *

It is a suggestion which has been addressed in Chaucer studies, where David
Lawton has observed that "the real demerit of persona-oriented criticism is that it diverts
from languages and styles into a reckoning that is dramatic and psychological." Lawton
asks:

What will replace it? Since there is no point substituting one singular term for
another, the answer must not be one device but a scale, a register, of different
ones, ranging from a highly fictionalised open persona to the shifting tones that
are unmasked, sometimes barely implied, apocryphal voices. (Lawton 7)

Lawton's notion of a register of tones is derived from his conviction that a number of
voices are active in every narratorial interjection in Chaucer's poetry, and Lawton's
opinion has been shaped not by some static sense of the history of Chaucer criticism,
but by the observations of transitions which have occurred in that criticism during the
twentieth century:

The concept of persona was probably salutary when it first appeared in Chaucer
criticism, for it helped correct an unliterary emphasis on "what Chaucer thought."
It has long since ceased to be so, for if it makes two where before there was one, it is none the less doggedly singular and univocal in its approach to each.

(Lawton Intro.)

Lawton’s point is as easily related to Pound--specifically to the Cantos, where the concept of persona has also ceased to be enlightening--for to talk of an Odysseus persona or a Seafarer persona is limiting, especially when the Odysseus of Canto 1 speaks in the simulated old-English rhythms of Pound's "Seafarer."

Lawton’s complaint that persona-oriented criticism remains “doggedly singular and univocal” reflects the fact that his own term “apocryphal voices” owes a great deal to what M.M. Bakhtin refers to as a “hybrid construction,” which is:

. . . an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two “languages,” two semantic and axiological belief systems. . . . there is no formal--compositional and syntactic--boundary between these utterances, styles, belief systems; the division of voices and languages takes place within the limits of a single syntactic whole, often within the limits of a simple sentence. (Bakhtin 304-305)

Lawton’s rejection of Bakhtin’s more theoretical terms--‘hybrid construction’ and heteroglossia--in favour of his own “apocryphal voices” is based on his sense that, like the term persona, Bakhtin’s sense of “two styles, two ‘languages’” is not dynamic enough to provide a convincing way of understanding the multiplicity of voices and
tones at work in Chaucer's poetry. Lawton's term is as applicable to Pound studies--especially in relation to the "Pisan Cantos"--as it is to the poetry of Chaucer. Chaucer critics have learned to re-evaluate what had once been labelled mere autobiography in order to consider the degree to which narratorial voices are layered in such a way as to provide a constant commentary upon one another. Narratorial voices are dynamic rather than static, multiple rather than univocal, and this fact accounts for the variety of ways in which those voices establish a number of points of intersection with the rhetorical traditions within which they operate. The "Pisan Cantos" is, for Pound, the most personal sequence in the Cantos, but these eleven cantos also exhibit the most dynamic layering of voices anywhere in the Cantos. Like Chaucer, Pound abruptly fuses and then separates narratorial voices, only to create new voices and have them speak through new masks. Bakhtin writes that the division of these voices "takes place within the limits of a single syntactic whole, often within the limits of a simple sentence," but the problem is still more acute in the poetry of Pound, where an even greater syntactic freedom leads to still more complex permutations of the narratorial voice. With Pound the sentences are never simple--they are often, syntactically speaking, not even sentences--and the combination of this linguistic freedom with Pound's deliberate exploration of the intersection of narratorial voices creates a highly textured verse which can only be damaged by the desire to read it as mere autobiography.

* * *

The unliterary emphasis on "what Pound thought" is just one of two extremes in a range of critical approaches that can, at its opposite extreme, become a mere enumeration of sources. It is true that Pound criticism cannot be expected to have
developed so methodically during the twenty or so years since his death as Chaucer criticism has during the five hundred years since his death, but the difficulty of Pound's poetry is such that his controversial nature cannot help but impinge on the reading of his verse. The difficulty of the poetry makes readers cling to such narratorial intrusions as descriptions of the immediate details of Pound's surroundings. But the opposite extreme is perhaps just as misleading: Terrell observes that the phrase “Butterflies, mint” consists of “Paradisal cues.” Terrell continues: “Even in hell or purgatory, the paradise-oriented man is conscious of his divine end. Pound takes his metaphor from Dante: “O proud Christians . . . do You not know that we are worms, born to form the angelic butterfly [Pur. X, 121-125]” (366), but the lines also provide a description of Pound's surroundings at the DTC. What reconciles these two extreme approaches is an understanding of the way in which Pound's constant masking, un-masking and remasking of the self bring about a fusion of historic, mythical and immediate details. Pound is, of course, the force that unites these patterned layers, but the self-consciousness of the immediate detail is always used first as a point of departure and thereafter as a counterpoint to ancient music.

No less a critic (and a good reader of Pound, as well) than Eliot established a damaging unliterary precedent with his oft-iterated attempt to establish “what Mr. Pound believes.” In answer, Pound provided a “Credo” which appears in his Selected Prose:

Mr. Eliot who is at times an excellent poet and who has arrived at the supreme Eminence among English critics largely through disguising himself as a corpse once asked me in the course of an amiable article what “I believed.”

Having a strong disbelief in abstract and general statement as a means of
conveying one’s thought to others I have for a number of years answered such questions by telling the enquirer to read Confucius and Ovid. This can do no harm to the intelligent and the unintelligent be damned.

Given the means I would replace the statue of Venus on the cliffs of the Terracina. I would erect a temple to Artemis in Park Lane. I believe that a light from Eleusis persisted throughout the middle ages and set beauty in the song of Provence and of Italy.

I believe that postwar “returns to christianity” (and its various subdivisions) have been merely the gran’ rifiuto and, in general, signs of fatigue.

I do not expect science (mathematics, biology; etc.) to lead us back to the unwarrantable assumptions of theologians.

I do not expect the machine to dominate the human consciousness that created it. (SP 53)

Pound enumerates individual beliefs in order to avoid “abstract and general statement,” and in so doing, he aligns himself with the very same “phase of consciousness” to which he assigns Chaucer. Like Chaucer, Pound uses detail as character description. The works of Confucius and Ovid, for instance, operate in conjunction as a cipher for an entire belief system, and it is interesting that Pound should assert that instructing others to read these works is a more precise statement that could be achieved through any summary (no matter how accurate or perceptive) of the matter contained therein. That instruction alone--complete with Pound’s observation that “this can do no harm to the intelligent and the unintelligent be damned”--serves to underscore the fact that Pound spent his whole life communicating a kind of pedagogical programme. Pound’s letters
to John Quinn, Alice Corbin Henderson, Iris Barry and others are full of lists and instructions about reading, and the urgency of Pound's persistence in this endeavour goes almost deeper than the specifics of his instructions.

Pound's answer to Eliot succeeds in defining his character in much the same way that Chaucer uses the layering of individual details to describe his characters. As a result, the "Credo" demonstrates an extraordinary degree of objectivity for what is essentially an autobiographical statement: it is as if Pound would rather leave the talking to his bookshelves. Pound's "Credo" is also remarkable for the degree to which he manages to keep himself out of the statement itself. Although writing in the first-person Pound shows no desire to provide a gloss for the precise enumeration of his beliefs, going so far as to admit that the statements may not even be helpful--only that they "can do no harm to the intelligent."

The "Credo" is most remarkable for the way in which Pound succeeds in avoiding a merely autobiographical statement, and the piece bears an interesting relationship with the Foreword Pound contributed to Cookson's edition of the Selected Prose:

To tread delicately amid the scrapings from the cracker-barrel is no easy job and Mr. Cookson has made the best of it.

The volume would be more presentable had it been possible to remove 80% of the sentences beginning with the pronoun "I" and more especially those with "we."

The substitution of "I" by a comprehensive claim in which "we" or "one" is used to indicate a general law may be a pretentious attempt to expand a merely
personal view into a universal law.

In sentences referring to groups or races “they” should be used with great care.

re. USURY:

I was out of focus, taking a symptom for a cause.

The cause is AVARICE.

Venice, 4th July, 1972

Ezra Pound (SP 6)

Much of Pound’s prose is characterised by highly opinionated pronouncements on literature and politics, and the chastened language of this Foreword amounts to a kind of retraction. Significantly, though, it is not a denial of the work, but rather a withdrawal from the work, and Pound’s words suggest that he would like to rid the works of the “I” who wrote them.

This particular retraction converges with and diverges from the most famous retraction in English literature; namely, the retraction now appended to most editions of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. Chaucer retracts his “endytynge of worldly vanitees” with the words:

Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken our Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse. / And if ther be any thyng that dispelse hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkoonninge and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd bettre if I hadde had konynge. / For oure book seith, “Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,” and that is myn entente. / Wherfore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for
me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; / and namely of my
translations and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my
retracciouns . . . (Benson 328)

Chaucer’s retraction of his “enditynges of worldly vanities” is most closely replicated by
Pound in the “Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII,” where he writes:

I have tried to write Paradise

Do not move
   Let the wind speak
       that is paradise.

Let the Gods forgive what I
   have made
Let those I love try to forgive
   what I have made. (Notes for CXVII et seq. 822)

But whereas these powerful lines are rooted in Pound’s sense of the failure of his
endeavour (“And I am not a demigod, / I cannot make it cohere.” (116:816)), the
Foreword to the Selected Prose argues for a retraction on artistic and moral grounds.
As such, it is perhaps closer to the retraction of Chaucer, if only because it argues for a
kind of immorality in the achievement it addresses.

The “end” of the Cantos is full of such self-condemnations:

M’amour, m’amour
   what do I love and
       where are you?
That I lost my center
   fighting the world.
The dreams clash
   and are shattered--
and that I tried to make a paradiso terrestre. (Notes for CXVII et seq. 822)

When such statements are considered in terms of their relation to the various tones or
moods of the different sections which form the Cantos, they are most similar to the
tones and moods of the “Pisan Cantos.” The main difference, however, is that the “Drafts and Fragments” display a directly autobiographical tone that is both more stable and more consistently maintained than is the case in the “Pisan Cantos.” This is not to say that such retractions do not occur in the “Pisan Cantos.” The Pisan sequence is even more heavily layered with retraction, but it is a retraction of the self from the work—as is the case in the Foreword to the *Selected Prose*—which is accomplished through a constant assuming and shedding of masks.

1 Kenner provides a number of interesting observations on the twentieth’s century’s fascination with the *Odyssey*, and his discussion of the subject ranges from archaeology and sailing, to modern narrative technique, philology, and speculation on the subject of Homer’s gender. Kenner’s remarks about the Homeric poems are part of his discussion of what drew both Pound and Joyce to the *Odyssey*: “And not later than 1910 on a Paris quai, Ezra Pound with four francs to spend and two four-franc books to choose from, a Renaissance Latin *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, laid his hand on the *Odyssey*, we can now say on the future of the *Cantos*, and does not record having hesitated. Homer in most times has been the poet of the *Iliad*. That *Odyssey* was an historical anomaly. The *Odyssey* is the novelist’s book of the two, and Joyce and Pound both saw a novel in its workings: a grip on detailed actuality” (*The Pound Era* 41-50).

George Chapman provided an interesting analysis of the essential differences between the two Homeric poems in the dedicatory epistle to his translation *The Odysseys of Homer*. Chapman suggests that the first words of the poems (“wrath” in the case of *Iliad*, and “man” in the case of the *Odyssey*) contain the proposition of each work: “In [the *Iliad*] predominant perturbation; in [the *Odyssey*] overruling wisdom. In one the body’s fervour and fashion of outward fortitude to all possible height of heroical action; in the other the mind’s inward, constant, and unconquered empire, unbroken, unaltered, with any most insolent and tyrannous infliction” (Chapman 47-8). Chapman’s distinction does more to account for Pound’s interest in the *Odyssey* than does Kenner’s account, for Pound was also exploring the “unconquered empire” of the mind in the “Pisan Cantos.”

2 Pound’s attitude towards Homer and “the glamor of the inexperienced” undergoes a significant change between the publication of the “Osiris” articles in 1911-12, and the 1916 publication of *Gaudier Brzeska: A Memoir*: “[During the Renaissance] observation came back into vogue, stimulated, some say, by a reading of the classics. The thing that mattered was a revival of the sense of realism: the substitution of Homer for Virgil; the attitude of Odysseus for that of the snivelling Æneas (who was probably not so bad
as Virgil makes out)"(113). Homer becomes, like Chaucer, an artist intent upon observing the world around him.

3 Jung uses the term *persona*, but not in relation to “a character deliberately assumed by an author in his writing.”

4 In, for example, the “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” where the speaker is constantly emphasising what he is not: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be.”

5 Pound read the “Sestina: Alteforte” to Gaudier at their first meeting. He thought it was the only one of his poems that could make an impression on the younger man.

6 In an essay called “The Unknown Masterpiece: Yeats and the Design of the *Cantos,*” Warwick Gould argues that Pound’s final sense that the *Cantos* had been “a botch” is a direct reference to Yeats’ early misgivings about the structure of the *Cantos* (*Pound in Multiple Perspective* 40-92).

7 This marks just one of the ways in which Pound constantly reworks the three-part structure of the *Cantos* as he described them to his father. Here, instead of a bursting through “from quotidian into ‘divine or permanent world’”(*SL* 285), we have the divine world entering the quotidian. Cf. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts.”

Pound's fascination with questions of inheritance is closely related to the sophisticated variations to which he subjects the use of *personae* in his poetry. Many of his early poems amount to verse experiments at imitating the style of his favourite authors (Chaucer, Browning, and others). Those early poems, especially those collected in the 1909 *Personae* volume, are best seen as Pound's attempt to use the major figures of his personal literary canon as "subjects" in his literary experiments. At Pisa, Pound's verse is characterised by an urgency that distinguishes it from these early experiments. It is the urgency of one who senses that his world has come to an end—Pound calls himself "a man on whom the sun has gone down"(74:450)—and in a deliberate recollection of Canto 1, Pound again associates himself with Odysseus. This time, however, Pound becomes Odysseus in the cave of the Cyclops. Pound responds to his own confinement at the DTC by re-imagining it as a story out of Homeric legend, and the entire Pisan sequence sustains this faith in the relevance of myth as a means of infusing "the outside world of real things" with meaning. In the "Pisan Cantos," questions of artistic and cultural inheritance merge with Pound's use of *personae*, and the combination produces verse in which the pronounced sense of expansiveness counteracts the pressures of confinement. Pound's consolation, to adopt a theme from the great works of prison-literature (from Bunyan and Thomas More, to Chaucer and Boethius), comes from his recognition of the fragility of beauty. Pound's consolation,
moreover, bespeaks a renewed faith in activity and industry.

Pound included a single poem from the *de Consolatione Philosophiæ* of Boethius ("Happy too much, the former age / With faithful field content, / Not lost by sluggish lust . . .") in the *Confucius to Cummings* anthology, and it is the only direct reference to the Roman philosopher in Pound's *oeuvre*. The poem (Book 2, Metre 5) is given in a translation by Queen Elizabeth I, and is followed by a note by Pound:

Boethius was a Roman senator and consul imprisoned under Theodoric the Ostrogoth, finally murdered . . . . The version is not given as a model of style, but to indicate Boethius' position in the history of occidental mind. If he had few readers, as Dante says, he had a number of translators famous in their own right: King Alfred, Chaucer, among them. All rather unreadable. But one way to gauge the culture of an age is to note the interests of those highly placed. The gamut runs from Boethius, shall we say, "downward"? (68-69)

As a work admired by both Chaucer and Dante, Pound could not but have been familiar with Boethius' *de Consolatione Philosophiæ*. Chaucer's translation of the work (to which he gave the title *Boece*) has always occupied a place in scholarly editions of Chaucer's work, and it is perhaps natural that Pound, who was given to taking liberties with texts in translation, should have found Chaucer's *Boece* unreadable. Chaucer's version is literal, but interestingly, the terms in which Ralph Hanna and Traugott Lawler have described the translation sounds surprisingly like some of Pound's own efforts at translation:

His version is an attempt not merely to translate Boethius accurately but to fuse with it, in an effort to provide a definitive guide to the work, both Jean de Meun's
French translation and the Latin commentary tradition, especially the commentary of Nicholas Trivet. (Benson 396)

Kathryn Lindberg has observed that Chaucer's "new language" is at least trebly translated--from the Greek and Latin classics through Dante's Italian and the French of Guillaume de Lorris and Jeann de Meun to his own vulgar tongue, English." Lindberg makes too fine a distinction, though, in contrasting Chaucer's approach with that of Pound, who, she says, "preferred his classics second-hand--like translating his *Odyssey* through *Divus*" (58). In spite of Lindberg's distinction, Chaucer's method of translation could in no way set up a boundary between Pound and him. On the contrary, it stands as an example of precisely that which Pound was able to appreciate in Boethius, whom he praised for his position in "the history of occidental mind." That history is preserved in Chaucer's effort to incorporate into his version of Boethius' work the history of the reception of that work. Pound achieved something very similar when he translated Homer through *Divus*, because the *Divus* translation represents, among other things, an attempt to reclaim the Greek poem from those centuries when the ancient Greek learning had disappeared from western Europe.

Pound's own exposure to Boethius was probably a similar case of receiving his thought through other sources. Victor Watts has observed that "almost all the passages of philosophical reflection of any length in the works of Chaucer can be traced to Boethius," and that Dante's *Divina Commedia* "could be regarded as a great elaboration of Boethius' concept of the ascent of the soul to the contemplation of the soul to the contemplation of the mind of God and its return to its true home or *patria* in the scheme of the universe" (*The Consolation of Philosophy* Introduction). Boethius is
just one figure among the many who have been granted the title of “last of the Romans,” but, in his efforts to translate the works of Aristotle and Plato into Latin in order to reconcile their philosophies, he might better be understood as one of the first scholars to attempt to retrieve the recent classical past.

Pound’s note on Boethius concludes with the following observation:

Boethius says that Philosophy appeared to him “of stately face, with flaming eyes, of fresh colour, and insight above the common worth of men.” The figure was sometimes the size of a woman, “sometimes towering into heaven.”

Familiarity with this form of perception would have saved several barrels of speculation re Dante’s visions. (C to C 69)

The exact nature of what Pound intends with the phrase “this form of perception” would be less than obvious had not Pound written the following passage in The Spirit of Romance:

Anyone who has in any degree the faculty of vision will know that the so-called personifications are real and not artificial. Dante’s precision both in the Vita Nuova and in the Commedia comes from the attempt to reproduce exactly the thing which has been clearly seen. The “Lord of terrible aspect” is no abstraction, no figure of speech. There are some who can not or will not understand these things. . . . That the Vita Nuova is the idealisation of a real woman can be doubted by no one who has, even in the least degree, that sort of intelligence whereby it was written, or who has known in any degree the passion whereof it treats. (126)¹

In both the Confucius to Cummings and The Spirit of Romance, Pound speaks as one
who possesses this “faculty of vision”, this “sort of intelligence.” Both phrases help account for the nature of the consolation Pound finds in the “Pisan Cantos.”

In order to observe the effects of which Pound speaks, the passage in which Dame Philosophy appears to Boethius bears quoting at length:

While I was quietly thinking these thoughts over to myself and giving vent to my sorrow with the help of my pen, I became aware of a woman standing over me. She was of awe-inspiring appearance, her eyes burning and keen beyond the usual power of men. She was so full of years that I could hardly think of her as of my own generation, and yet she possessed a vivid colour and undiminished vigour. It was difficult to be sure of her height, for sometimes she was of average human size, while at other times she seemed to touch the very sky with the top of her head, and when she lifted herself even higher, she pierced it and was lost to human sight. Her clothes were made of imperishable material, of the finest thread woven with the most delicate skill. (Later she told me that she had made them with her own hands.) Their colour, however, was obscured by a kind of film as of long neglect, like statues covered in dust. On the bottom hem could be read the embroidered Greek letter Pi, and on the top them the Greek letter Theta. Between the two a ladder of steps rose from the lower to the higher letter. Her dress had been torn by the hands of marauders who had each carried off such pieces as he could get. There were some books in her right hand, and in her left hand she held a sceptre.

At the sight of the Muses of Poetry at my bedside dictating words to accompany my tears, she became angry.
'Who,' she demanded, her piercing eyes alight with fire, "has allowed these hysterical sluts to approach this sick man's bedside?" *(Consolation 36)*

This quotation from *The Consolation of Philosophy* is intended to serve a twofold purpose. First, it provides a context for the relationship between complaint and consolation in the "Pisan Cantos," between Pound's sense that he is "a man on whom the sun has gone down," and his satisfaction that "what thou lovest well remains."

Second, the passage also shows how immediately Pound departs from the particular consolation offered by Dame Philosophy. Pound's consolation is poetry. Nevertheless, when Dame Philosophy explains the purpose of her visit to the imprisoned Boethius, her words anticipate the plight of Pound at the DTC:

> And so it is not the sight of this place which gives me concern but your own appearance, and it is not the walls of your library with their glass and ivory decoration that I am looking for, but the seat of your mind. That is the place where I once stored away—not my books, but—the thing that makes them have any value, the philosophy they contain. (49)

The fury with which Dame Philosophy drives away the Muses can be misleading, for "this implies that Boethius had first sought consolation in literature but failed to find it.... Yet presumably what has been chased away is only meretricious poetry that focuses on partial goods, for poetry is embedded deeply in the fabric of the work" *(Benson 395).* Dame Philosophy observes that it is the learning absorbed from books which is of enduring value, and the remark helps illustrate the urgency of Pound's efforts to sift through memory. For Pound, as well as for Boethius, the seat of the mind is where great works of art live on "in the mind indestructible."
Pound's "Pisan Cantos" represent a return to lyric poetry after the exercise of condensation which constitute the "Adams" and "Chinese Cantos." Pound fuses memory and his surroundings, rather than books, to construct the sequence, and the "Pisan Cantos" are no less visionary in their undertaking than The Consolation of Philosophy or Dante's Commedia. In an essay entitled "Ezra Pound as Prison Poet," David Evans discusses some of the ramifications brought about by the circumstances in which the "Pisan Cantos" were written:

On its own merits, and considered as a unit, the "Pisan Cantos" is first of all a prison poem, a genre not without honour in literature since Boethius first wooed philosophy from his cell in Alvanzano not overly far from Pisa. . . . Alone among poets of stature, Ezra Pound has had the unhappy privilege of preserving the symbol and the experience in poetry. (85-6)

Evans sees the "Pisan Cantos" as "a desperate search, a search for some sustaining force, advances, quickening the half-musing daydreams and sharpening the autobiographic memories with a sense of urgency"(82), and his observation is a perceptive one. Pound's method of "sharpening the autobiographical memories" involves stressing their timelessness rather than their uniqueness. The "repeat in history"--one of the three components of the original plan for the Cantos, which, as we have seen, Pound described in a 1927 letter to his father--comes to provide one of the truly significant forms of Pound's consolation, and faith in this repetition is restored in him by the many speaking voices of the "Pisan Cantos."

It is interesting to consider these voices in terms of Pound's remarks concerning the visions of Dante and Boethius. To be sure, Pound's temperament would not likely
suffer many of the individual pronouncements uttered by Dame Philosophy, but his faith in the visions described by Dante and Boethius provides a means of inquiring into the origins of the voices, and, in particular, the significance of the eye-imagery which dominates the “Pisan Cantos.” Scraps of overheard conversation are rendered in language that is as literal as the eyes outside the cage at night, and the “eyes,” which could be a pun on “I,” also turn introspection into observation. Even if the dynamic is still inward-looking, the sheer plasticity of the eyes (which belong, at various times, to Cythera, Ixotta, the Merciles Beaute, and Cassandra) allows Pound to populate the black night with visions. Evans comments on the dynamic nature of the tension between monologue and impersonality when he observes that:

The work has been inaccurately called a monologue. It is not. Even without the comments of the prisoners and the guards, the “dialog repartee at the drainhole,” the conversations recalled in retrospect, Pound’s imagination charges the whole with such dramatic intensity that it quivers to life in almost every line. (82)

It is in the “Pisan Cantos” that Pound is most diligent in his attempt to avoid monologue, and it is an accomplishment made all the more difficult by the urgency of his plight. It is as if solitary confinement, along with the silence that had been imposed upon him (prisoners were not permitted to speak to him), engendered an earnest drive to avoid monologue: “on doit le temps ainsi prendre qu’il vient / or to write dialog because there is / no one to converse with”(80:519).

Evans goes on to observe that Pound’s process of self-evaluation is characterised by effects that aim at disguising the most personal elements of the sequence: “Pound habitually lapses into French to disguise what might otherwise seem
like self-pity or unseemly emotion. ‘Tard, très tard je t’ai connue, la Tristesse’, he writes, or, in a moment of wry confession: ‘J’ai eu pitié des autres / probablement pas assez, and at moments that suited my own convenience’”(82). Such passages imply that Pound is attempting to isolate or distance himself from the most sentimental passages, and, especially in the address to the personified figure of “Tristesse,” Pound sounds surprisingly like the Chaucer’s narrators in “The Book of the Duchess” or “The House of Fame.” And likewise, these are moments in which the most apparently personal confessions are de-personalised by emulating the traditional figures that inhabit complaint poetry.

Stephen Sicari has discussed the pervasive eye imagery of the “Pisan Cantos” in terms of Pound’s creation of a “wanderer” persona, and he suggests that the eyes in such lines as “The suave eyes, quiet, not scomful”(74:445) are Pound’s own eyes (Pound’s Epic Ambition 117-118). This interpretation, however, places too much emphasis on the personal in the “Pisan Cantos,” where the eye imagery seems rather to suggest the presence of a confessor-figure:

Ed ascoltando al leggier mormorio  
there came new subtlety of eyes into my tent,  
whether of spirit or hypostasis,  
but what the blindfold hides  
or at carneval  

nor any pair showed anger  
Saw but the eyes and stance between the eyes,  
colour, diastasis,  
careless or unaware it had not the whole tents room  
nor was place for the full $\varepsilon\lambda\delta\omega\varsigma$  
interpass, penetrate  
casting but shade beyond the other lights  
sky’s clear  
night’s sea  
green of the mountain pool
Pound's uncertainty about the substance of the vision and about its size ("whether spirit of hypostasis," and "nor was place for the full ἐνδος" (Terrell gives "knowing, or seeing") testify to the confusion) is similar to Boethius' description of Dame Philosophy. While Pound's vision never becomes so explicitly rendered as that of Boethius, it is clear from the repetition of the eye motif throughout the "Pisan Cantos" that the eyes represent some kind of an observer, some kind of witness. Terrell has observed that "the sacred vision" of the eyes "becomes more urgent and pervasive here and in many later cantos" (453), and this passage introduces the powerful meditation on continuity which culminates in the famous "to have gathered from the air a live tradition":

What thou lov'st well remains,  the rest is dross
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage
Whose world, or mine or theirs
or is it of none?
First came the seen, then thus the palpable
Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell,
What thou lov'est well is thy true heritage
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee (81:541)

The words "First came the seen, then thus the palpable" implies a kind of incarnation of the speaking voice, if indeed the speaker is other than Pound. The voice offers the dual consolation of love and memory, and Pound is pleased to accept that bounty, even if the consolation is fleeting: "the loneliness of death came upon me / (at 3 P.M., for an instant)" (82:547).

Peter Makin's observation that the eyes of the "Merciles Beaute" are "the eyes of the Kuthera Deina . . . (Dread Cythera, Venus) who rules this book" (247) underscores a
subtle link with the role of Dame Philosophy in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, but Venus is not the only ruling goddess in the “Pisan Cantos.” Often, the eyes belong to someone else, as in the lines that address Cassandra: “Cassandra, your eyes are like tigers, / with no word written in them / You also have I carried to nowhere . . .” (78:497). The figure of Cassandra plays a significant role in the “Pisan Cantos”, and her role here as a witness to Pound's torment underscores a link with Chaucer's “Troilus and Criseyde.” In Chaucer's poem, Cassandra is called upon by her brother Troilus to interpret a dream in which he saw Criseyde in the arms of a sleeping boar.

Cassandra’s interpretation of the dream begins in a grand style:

> She gan first smyle, and seyde, “O brother deere, If thou a soth of this desirest knowe, Thow most a fewe of olde stories heere, To purpos how that Fortune overthrowe Hath lordes olde, thorugh which, withinne a throwe, Thow wel this boor shalt knowe, and of what kynde He comen is, as men in bokes fynde. . .” (Benson 579)

The argument is Boethian in its emphasis on the betrayals “lordes olde” have suffered at the hands of Fortune, and Cassandra’s observation that “if thou a soth of this desirest knowe, / Thow most a fewe of olde stories heere” is a maxim that could well be used to prepare readers for Pound’s *Cantos*. Interestingly, Cassandra’s interpretation of the dream of Troilus--which Troilus had immediately, and correctly, understood as a sign of Criseyde’s unfaithfulness--becomes a lesson spanning the time between the fall of Thebes and the Greek siege of Troy. Cassandra tells of how Meleagre slew the boar Diana had set upon the Greeks to chastise them for their negligence in paying her homage, and how Melagre's descendants figured so prominently in the fall of Thebes:

> “This ilke boor bitokeneth Diomede, Tideus sone, that down descended is
Fro Meleagre, that made the boor to blede;
And thy lady, wherso she be, ywis,
This Diomede hire herte hath, and she his.
Wep if thow wolt, or lef, for out of doute,
This Diomede is inne, and thow art oute." (Benson 580)

The irony is obvious, for Cassandra is re-telling the story of the fall of Thebes from inside the walls of the besieged Troy, but her story also serves a greater purpose. The weight of the personal loss under which Troilus is suffering is reckoned as part of a greater loss: a loss that is linked with the fall of Thebes and the imminent fall of Troy. The story of Troilus' loss of a woman named Criseyde is absorbed into the Trojan drama even as Troy is buckling under the attack of the Greeks—and the entire story of the fall of Troy was also occasioned by the loss of a woman. Cassandra's explanation of Troilus' dream is also her prophecy about the fall of Troy, and her story serves as an example of the way in which the personal is absorbed into a larger and more universal scheme.

Chaucer's Cassandra provides an interesting perspective for the consideration of Pound's reference to Cassandra in Canto 78, where his admission that he has carried her "to nowhere" again recalls the journey of Æneas. Pound's journey, like Cassandra's explanation of Troilus' dream, is closely tied to the importance of the "dream city" (of Ecbatan, of Dioce, of Wagadu) which permeates the verse of the Cantos. Cassandra describes the fall of Thebes even as Troy teeters on the brink of ruin around her, and Pound, having worked his way northward through the rubble of another empire, is compelled to face the destruction of a dream. The particular torment of this "repeat in history" is the fact that Pound is compelled to sift through memories even while what James Laughlin called Pound's "personal tragedy" seems to resist the
promise of memory. As W.S. Di Piero has observed in an essay entitled “Notes on Memory and Enthusiasm”: “memory is the oceanic flow of images, spectral feelings, lore, all the history-bound matter of intellection and sensation stirring in the present. It promises futurity, extension” (4). For Pound, however, memory’s promise of futurity and extension is directly contradicted by events in his immediate surroundings:

Pisa, in the 23rd year of the effort in sight of the tower and Till was hung yesterday for murder and rape with trimmings plus Cholks plus mythology, thought he was Zeus ram or another one Hey Snag wots in the bibl’? wot are the books ov the bible? Name’em, don’t bullshit ME.

OY ΤΙΣ

a man on whom the sun has gone down (74:450)

The execution of other camp prisoners must have been, for Pound, a terrifying and constant reminder of the possible outcome of his situation. It is precisely this question of potential futurity and extension that would have seemed doubtful under such circumstances. Pound still sees the past alive in the present (and he demonstrates that “repeat in history” by suggesting a link between the executed rapist and Zeus), but it is the future that is in question: “in short shall we look for a deeper or is this the bottom?” (74:458).

Just as the promise of memory seems to fail, or rather, just as its promise seems to be foiled by the uncertainty of Pound’s own future, Pound begins to cherish the consolation of the impersonal. As Pound’s intrusions begin to grade more and more systematically into literary, historical, and mythical precedents, Pound is able to attain the kind of perspective which impersonality can grant. It is like the perspective granted to Troilus in the moment of his death, when he is swept up into the eighth sphere:
And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
This litel spot of erthe that with the se
Embraced is, and fully gan despise
This wrecched world, and held al vanite
To respect of the pleyn felicite
That is in hevene above; and at the laste,
Ther he was slayn his lokyng down he caste,

And in hymself he lough right at the wo
Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste,
And dampned al oure work that foloweth so
The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,
And sholden al oure herte on heven caste;
And forth he wente, shortly for to telle,
Ther as Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle.

................

O yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she,
In which that love up groweth with youre age,
Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte,
And of youre herte up casteth the visage
To thilke God that after his ymage
Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire,
This world that passeth soone as floures faire. (Benson 584)

E. Talbot Donaldson’s discussion of the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* provides a useful analysis of the different tensions that arise from the narrator’s apparent struggle against the conclusion of this own poem. Pandarus damns his niece Criseyde, but the narrator suggests that his sources might be lying, and that mankind’s opinion of Criseyde is unjust. Donaldson suggests that this tension is a deliberate experiment on Chaucer’s part:

The *moralitee* of *Troilus and Criseyde* (and by morality I do not mean ‘ultimate meaning’) is simply this: that human love, and by a sorry corollary everything human, is unstable and illusory. I give the moral so flatly now because I shall be following the narrator in his endeavour to avoid it . . . . The meaning of the poem
is not the moral, but a complex qualification of the moral. (Donaldson 92)

Significantly, Troilus' new perspective grants him a view of the chaotic war which had been subordinated by his affair with Criseyde, and his laughter at the sight of the soldiers mourning his body is a harrowing indictment of human values. However, as Donaldson observes, Chaucer seems to intend a qualification of that moral. The sheer delicacy of the narrator's observation that this world "passeth soone as floures faire" seems to contradict his own assertion. As Donaldson wrote: "All the illusory loveliness of a world which is man's only reality is expressed in the very lines that reject that loveliness"(98).

This tension informs Pound's "Pisan Cantos," where, in spite of what Laughlin has written about "the revelation of the poet's private tragedy," Pound is constantly struggling to attain objectivity or impersonality. Pound is consistently at pains to emphasize the greater context of a world which he thinks is ending "with a bang, not with a whimper," and if the revision of Eliot sounds insufficient, it is perhaps deliberately so. A similar note is struck when Chaucer's narrator remarks that "Swich is this world, whoso it kan byholde; / In ech estat is litel hertes reste. / God leve us for to take it for the bestel!"(583). As Donaldson writes of these lines from Chaucer: "How true! And how supremely, brilliantly, inadequate!"(93).

No wonder, then, that critics sense "a natural falling off" from the lines which conclude Canto 81, in which Pound attains a newer and richer perspective:

But to have done instead of not doing
this is not vanity

.......... To have gathered from the air a live tradition
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
This is not vanity.
Here vanity is all in the not done,  
all in the diffidence that faltered . . .

The fact that the “Pisan Cantos” continue beyond these lines is an amazing feat of optimism, and one that is seldom acknowledged as such. The statement sounds definitive, sounds final, but, as the ellipse warns us, there is more to come. And what comes is an effort to qualify the apparent finality of that statement.

The lines preach the value of action, but they do so with a pronounced air of resignation. They also represent the moment in which, as Eliot would say, impersonality affirms the most significantly personal verse in the “Pisan Cantos.” Pound finds consolation in the virtue of action, and, in the last occurrence of the eye imagery that dominates the sequence, he is able to accomplish something still more significant:

A fat moon rises lop-sided over the mountain  
The eyes, this time my world,  
But pass and look from mine
   sea, sky, and pool
   alternate
   pool, sky, sea

morning moon against sunrise  
like a bit of the best antient coinage (83:555)

What Pound does is to absorb the eyes, but the vision is not personal, it is an invitation to the reader: “The eyes, this time my world, / But pass and look from mine / sea, sky, and pool / alternate / pool, sky, sea” to see through those eyes. It is interesting to consider whether the lines recall the last lines of Yeats’ poem “Under Ben Bulben”:

Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by! (Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats 328)

If so, the lines offer a more optimistic view than do the words of Yeats. Pound’s lines,
with their spare, lyrical beauty, are like those lines in which the narrator of the *Troilus* observes that the things of the world “passeth soone as floures faire.” Donaldson reads those words as “a recognition that some human values transcend human life,” and he suggests that this is what can be salvaged “from the human wreck of the story” (96).

Pound finds consolation in the “Pisan Cantos” by turning from a kind of despair or frustration at the impermanence of beauty, to a faith that such things can never truly be lost. “Beauty is difficult . . . so very difficult” specifically because it is so vulnerable, and this accounts for the indignation that characterises many of Pound's pronouncements:

300 years culture at the mercy of a tack hammer
thrown through the roof
Cloud over mountain, mountain over the cloud
I surrender neither the empire nor the temples plural
nor the constitution nor yet the city of Dioce (74:454)

Gradually, however, the indignant tone gives way to a more generous expression of faith:

Quand vous serez bien vieille
remember that I have remembered,

mia pargoletta,

and pass on the tradition
there can be honesty of mind
without overwhelming talent
I have perhaps seen a waning of that tradition (80:526)

Pound concludes that the magical city of Dioce, and all those things he was unwilling to surrender, are “now in the heart indestructible” (77:485). It is an acknowledgement that the destruction around him is as much a “repeat in history” as are the mythical stories that represent what Pound has claimed as his inheritance from antiquity. Pound's observation that “4 times was the city remade” conditions the new sense that the
activity to which he has aspired is as nobly spent in acts of restoration as it is in preservation. The phrase represents a new acknowledgement that the past we inherit as humans is a legacy of continuous restoration.

This sentiment finds its most eloquent and passionate expression in Canto 81 ("What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross / What thou lovest well shall not be reft from thee"), and this eloquence grades into an equally passionate attack on the vanity of the world (rendered in synecdoche as the vanity of Paquin, a Parisian dressmaker):

The ant’s a centaur in his dragon world.
Pull down thy vanity, it is not man
Made courage, or made order, or made grace,
    Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.
Learn of the green world what can be thy place
In scaled invention or true artistry,
Pull down thy vanity,
    Paquin pull down!
The green casque has outdone your elegance.
“Master thyself, then others shall thee beare”
Pull down thy vanity
Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail,
A swollen magpie in a fitful sun,
Half black half white
Nor knowst’ou wing from tail
Pull down thy vanity
    How mean thy hates
Fostered in falsity,
    Pull down thy vanity,
Rathe to destroy, niggard in charity,
Pull down thy vanity,
    I say pull down. (81:541)

The vitriolic tone of the passage recalls the image of Troilus, laughing at his weeping comrades and damning “al oure werk that foloweth so / The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste.” And what lasts, for Pound, is often surprising. In Canto 84, the last of the “Pisan Cantos,” Pound imagines a Chinese context for the fall of Troy, turns to the
economics of entrepreneurship, and recalls, triumphantly, the achievements of his great aunt:

and at Ho Ci'u destroyed the whole town for hiding a woman, Κυνηγός δέινα
and as Carson the desert rat said “when we came out we had
80 thousand dollars’ worth”
(“of experience”)
that was from mining
having spent their capital on equipment
but not calculated the time for return
and my old great aunt did likewise
with that too large hotel
but at least she saw damn all Europe
and rode on that mule in Tangiers
And in general had a run for her money

. . . . . . . . . .

Under white clouds, cielo di Pisa
out of all this beauty something must come (84:559)

There is a kind of joy in the five lines Pound devotes to the travels of his great aunt, and it is significant that Pound’s thoughts return to her in Canto 84. Again, achievement and activity are set alongside the destruction of a city, and this time the achievement functions as an act of rehabilitation. The juxtaposition of the two themes provides a tacit recognition that the act of faith that manifests itself as an act of restoration or rehabilitation is perhaps the most significant “repeat in history”. To repeat Donaldson’s phrase, the anecdote provides another instance in which “All the illusory loveliness of a world which is man’s only reality is expressed in the very lines that reject that loveliness.” The destruction of the city represents an immense loss of continuity with the past, and this continuity is precisely what Pound is attempting to restore in the Cantos. What he realises, however, at Pisa, is that the endeavour requires the very catastrophes it seeks to repair.
It is a realisation that culminates in one of the most haunting lines in the “Pisan Cantos,” a line that combines the necessity of action with the conjoined concepts of destruction and beauty: “out of all this beauty something must come”. In the relative calm of Pound's position in his cage at Pisa, he recognises that the effort to rebuild from the rubble of the war is a noble one. Pound’s cage becomes, once again, the “ell-square pitkin” into which Odysseus pours blood to allow the ghosts of the dead to speak in Canto 1.

T.S. Eliot considered the nature of the artist’s achievement in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, where he wrote that “the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously”(38). It is a comment that can be easily applied to the poetry of Pound, and specifically to the “Pisan Cantos,” which are arguably his greatest achievement. Pound demonstrated a concern for the renewal of tradition and the perpetuation of things of beauty throughout his poetic career, and, for Pound, these concerns manifest themselves in his obsession with erecting an historical context around his works.

Pound’s Cantos recall the medieval form of the compilatio, and, his mingling of forms, voices, and authorities can be described by words Bakhtin used to describe medieval literature:

The role of the other’s word was enormous at that time: there were quotations that were openly and reverently emphasised as such, or that were half-hidden, completely hidden, half-conscious, unconscious, correct, intentionally distorted, unintentionally distorted, deliberately reinterpreted and so forth. The boundary lines between someone else’s speech and one’s own speech were flexible,
ambiguous, often deliberately distorted and confused. Certain types of texts were constructed out of the texts of others. (69)

More than anywhere else in his oeuvre, Pound cultivates this sort of flexibility in the “Pisan Cantos.”

The fact that Chaucer, having been excised from the original “Three Cantos” during Pound’s 1923 revisions, is quoted and paraphrased at Pisa, is a sign of the way in which memory can revive the beauties and the losses of another time: “So thirleth with the poyn of remembrancce / The sword of sorowe.” And the fact that Pound recalls a roundel of great lyric beauty, and an exhortation to “master thyself” provides a significant comment on the kind of example Chaucer had become to Pound. Gone are the clumsy and self-conscious archaisms of Pound’s earliest poetic efforts. Gone, too, are the more playful and more accomplished tones of Pound’s “Winter is icummen in.” Instead, what remains is the sense, first articulated in the *ABC of Reading*, that Chaucer provides a significant cultural link between England in the Middle Ages and the Romance language traditions of continental Europe. More importantly, in the final stanzas of the *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer’s poetry provides an example of the way of salvaging true beauty from the many vanities of the world. It is from this reconciliation of beauty and loss that Pound derives his consolation in “The Pisan Cantos”.

Whereas Chaucer was excised from the poem, along with the monologue form, when Pound revised the “Three Cantos” in 1923, Chaucer reasserts his presence in the “Pisan Cantos” by providing a means of avoiding monologue. It is an ironic twist, but one which underscores the importance of Pound’s use of *personae*. The modern
critical term is Pound's own coinage, and it has provided Chaucerians with a means of escaping the source-oriented criticism which Pound lamented in Chaucer studies. Pound's presence is more obviously asserted in the "Pisan Cantos" than in any other sequence, but the intermittent autobiographical data in the "Pisan Cantos" is always used as a point of departure. Consolation comes to Pound, not in the shape of Dame Philosophy, but in the shape of eyes seen in the night, surrounding his cage. More explicitly, consolation comes in the form of Pound's own great aunt, the woman with whom he first travelled to Europe.

Pound's walk north from Rome through the rubble of a fallen Italian empire is deliberately rhymed with the journey Æneas undertook to found the original Roman Empire. Pound intends more than a hint of irony in that juxtaposition, but it is faith that sustains the endeavour and prevents it from lapsing into mere cynicism. "Remember that I have remembered," Pound says in Canto 80, and he follows the words with the instruction to "pass on the tradition." This tradition is, among other things, the legacy he inherits from Chaucer, whose achievement means as much to Pound--or more perhaps--than any of the individual lyrics he so highly prized.

Donaldson senses, in the final stanzas of Chaucer's *Troilus*, an implicit recognition "that some human values transcend human life." Pound's contempt is often as venomous as is that of Troilus, who damned the world and its vanities after being swept away to the eighth sphere of the heavens, but Pound, who is very much of this world, arrives at a qualification of that notion of transcendence. For Pound, the human value that transcends human life is to be cherished; it is the faith that such values exist, and, more importantly, that they can be attained. When Ford spoke of supporting
suffering with dignity, and when he suggested that doing so sounded "a calling to arms in the night," he made the very point that would become the central element of Pound's consolation at Pisa; the fact that "out of all this beauty something must come." These words stand out with a kind of mature clarity in the "Pisan Cantos" as a kind of call to arms, a call to activity. This expression of Pound's faith in the value of activity becomes sharper still in what he intended to be the last line of the Cantos. It is a line which sums up his sense of duty, and one which calls to mind his valuing of Chaucer. It is verse of Chaucer that returns to Pound at Pisa because of the specific example the English poet set for Pound; the duty of participation in the broader culture of one's time, and the responsibility each artist has of enlarging their native tradition. It is a responsibility described in the final line of the Cantos: "to be men not destroyers."

1 Pound was more tentative in a note added to the text of The Spirit of Romance in 1929: "One is less emphatic twenty years later and less certain just what passion is implied, or one is, at least, less vigorous about those who held an opposite view." The note in Confucius to Cummings suggests that Pound's more cautious view underwent another revision during the thirty-five years between the addition of this note and the 1964 publication of Pound's and Spann's anthology.
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