

From Noman to Everyman: Chinese Characters in the *Pisan Cantos*

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All his life, Ezra Pound was fascinated by the visual concreteness he found in Chinese poetry and language. Obviously, this fascination is an important part of the *Pisan Cantos*, as they are sprinkled with characters, like ginger root in beef and broccoli. Yet while recognizing the value of the Chinese to the *Cantos*, the critics still disagree with each other as to the exact value of the *Cantos* themselves, and even as to what they are all about. Some critics, such as Hugh Kenner, refuse to allow Pound any single theme or purpose at all.¹ On the other hand, Daniel Pearlman tells us that the aim of the *Cantos* is "the unfolding of the human spirit in the medium of time."² George Dekker maintains that the *Cantos* are an attempt to recapture wasted potential.³ Beyond these broad views, individual sections of the *Cantos* have also had their own quest-makers.⁴

In the case of such disagreement about abstract things like "purpose," it is a good idea to go back to the concreteness of the Chinese characters and build up an interpretation from there. If we can't agree on the purpose of the *Cantos*, at least we can agree on the following basic facts:

1. That wandering Greek, Odysseus, wanders in and out of the *Cantos*, probably looking for something.
2. There are a large number of names dropped in the *Cantos*, covering a wide range of nationalities and times, but focusing often on a Chinese character.
3. There are a large number of languages and dialects spoken in the *Cantos* by a wide range of human voices, but focusing often on a Chinese Character.

These three facts are the main highway of the *Cantos*. The *Cantos* begin with a clear reference to Odysseus' setting out on his quest for home, only this time Ezra Pound sets out with him. The *Cantos* then move with Pound and Odysseus through the peoples and languages of the world. But the question remains, "to what end do Pound and Odysseus journey together?" This question is not fully answered until the *Pisan Cantos* and their Chinese characters.

Like the *Cantos* themselves, the *Pisan Cantos* begin early with Odysseus, but this time it is not Odysseus setting out for Ithaca, but instead Pound as a noman detained in the prison of the giant, in this case the U.S. Army "Disciplinary Training Center" (or prison) at Pisa, in search not of an external home, but an internal one; a permanent self. Unlike Odysseus the general, who used his cunning to trick the giant and escape from him, Pound the poet uses his cunning to inscape from the giant while remaining in his cage all the time. Pound's inscape is to a ringing affirmation of the permanence of "what thou lovest well" (81/98-99).⁵ But Pound not only achieves an inscape to what is permanent in himself; he also escapes to what is permanent in all mankind. Pound's escape to a new unity with everyman occurs only after the inscape to himself has been initiated and apparently resolved, and hence many critics have failed to notice it. Most critics have viewed cantos 82-84 as an anticlimactic sixth act after the thundering tones of canto 81. For instance, Pearlman states: "Now in Canto 83, the poet's strained sensibilities can relax into peaceful accommodation with the light of the sun."⁶ The poet's sensibilities may indeed be relaxed, but he is still in the process of completing his quest to know himself. Only at the end of the *Pisan Cantos*, after most critics have gone home with what they lovest well, does Pound find the common bond which unites all peoples and languages; which unites noman and everyman, and through which he can therefore find himself.

In one sense, to find one's self is to gain the ability to name one's self accurately. This is where the Chinese characters become significant. Certainly one of the central problems which Pound the questing noman faces in the *Pisan Cantos* is to learn to name things correctly. The basic movement of the *Pisan Cantos* is for Pound first to get his own name right and then to begin to name things outside himself. And the first name which Pound takes upon himself is in fact "Oÿ, TIΣ, Oÿ TIΣ? Odysseus/ the name

of my family" (74/3). Very shortly thereafter Pound adds another name in close juxtaposition to his name of noman: "OY TI ξ/ a man on whom the sun has gone down" (74/8). This refers to the bleakness of Pound's situation in the prison.

At the opposite extreme from the going down of the sun is the Chinese character "ming," which stands for brightness and clearness in the sense of intelligence.⁷ The quest for this intelligence becomes the initial goal of the man on whom the sun has gone down. But before Pound can reach this goal he must find the right way to proceed. This way, associated with the ming principle, is symbolized throughout the *Pisan Cantos* by whiteness, brightness, and light. On the first page of the *Pisan Cantos*, Pound begins to seek for the way by asking:

What you depart from is not the way
and olive tree blown white in the wind
washed in the Kiang and Han
what whiteness will you add to this whiteness,
what candor? (74/3)

Quickly following this, the ming principle is brought forward explicitly:

in the light of light is the *virtu*
"sunt lumina" said Erigena Scotus

明

(74/7)

The sun is next advanced as the major source of illumination in the poem:

Light tensile immaculata
the sun's cord unspotted
"sunt lumina" said the Oirishman to King Carolus,
"OMNIA
all things that are lights" (74/7)

From there on the sun breaks out at crucial points in the *Pisan Cantos*, and goes behind a cloud during bleak moments. For instance, canto 76, in which Pound is struggling to control memory, begins: "And the sun high over horizon hidden in cloud bank/lit saffron the cloud ridge/dove sta memora"

(76/30). Or, to cite just one more example, from canto 77:

Bright dawn
next day



on the shit house
(77/44)

The "shit house" is the place where Pound first heard that the war was officially over. Throughout the *Pisan Cantos* light, especially sunlight, concretely captured in two Chinese characters, is central to the accurate naming of things.

However, there is also an immediate complicating factor in the naming process, which provides the major obstacle which Pound must overcome on his quest. It is not enough to know that the sun is the source of all light. Pound must use that source efficiently. This is the meaning of the Chinese character "ch'eng," which Pound himself translates as "the word made perfect" (76/32). Edwards and Vasse provide important supplementary information on the ch'eng character: "pictorially the sun's lance coming to rest on the precise spot verbally."⁸ The introduction of ch'eng indicates that Pound is beginning to understand his quest more perfectly. He is beginning to discover what he can and cannot accomplish. Pound understands what gift he can offer, although at this point he is still only trying to offer it to a nation:

the word is made

perfect



better gift can no man make to a nation (76/32)

Notice, of course, the pun on "no man" in these lines. Pound the noman will make this better gift to his nation, better than which no man can offer, again symbolized by a very concrete Chinese character.

There is, however, a great temptation to misuse the sun's power, i.e., to name things inaccurately; to offer a false gift. Pound the would-be namer remembers another mythical namer of things who was kept from naming because he couldn't name accurately:

permanent name, but he is unable to find it. He looks in history: “Roi je ne suis, prince je ne daigne/Citizen of Florence, cd/ not receive noble titles” (77/51). Pound is forced to reject these noble titles. The names of “king” and “prince” are not accurate or permanent. Pound next looks around him in the DTC: “and Tom wore a tin disc, a circular can-lid/ with his name on it, solely:/ for Wanjina has lost his mouth” (77/52). Tom’s name on his dogtag is overtly identified with the false namer Wanjina. Clearly this name will not do permanently. Pound then looks at his fellow prisoners in the DTC: “‘wherein is no responsible person/ having a front name, a hind name and an address’” (78/57). But none of these names will satisfy noman. Pound sums them up with the phrase, “‘definition can not be shut down under a box lid’” (78/57). Pound even looks unsuccessfully for accurate names in simple everyday objects: “his helmet is used for a pisspot/ this helmet is used for my footbath” (80/92). Even a simple helmet can not hold its own name, but becomes transformed into something else. By the end of the *Pisan Cantos* Pound has concluded that all official names fail to achieve either accuracy (“no soldier he although his name is Slaughter”) (84/115) or permanence (“and now Richardson, Roy Richardson,/ says he is different/ will I mention his name?”) (84/115). The search for a permanent name is still on, but it must be based on new understanding of names themselves.

The new view of names comes via a new view of language itself, which is introduced by a new Chinese character. Pound again provides his own translation:

in

discourse

what matters is



to get it across e poi basta

(79/64)

This new view of the function of language leads immediately to a new name for noman. Notice the close juxtaposition between the new name and the light of the sun, the Chinese “ming”: “and when the morning sun lit up the

shelves and battalions/ of the West, cloud over cloud/ Old Ez folded his blankets” (79/66). The end of the quest is now in sight because language now has a goal: “To communicate and then stop, that is the/ law of discourse/ To go far and come to an end/ simplex munditiis” (80/72). Pound is not yet sure of what the end is going to be, but he knows he is on the way and that the end exists. He has begun to accept his own external situation, to fold up his blanket, and to concentrate on knowing himself. To accept his goal has become his goal. He begins to identify himself more unabashedly with his fellow prisoners, calling them all (himself included), “men of no fortune and with a name to come” (80/92). Pound has simultaneously accepted his external status and affirmed his human status. Even though he is a noman, he knows that there is a name to come.

And the new name does come, and it is the name of everyman. Pound’s new name is introduced by the ming character (clarity) and is identified by the Chinese character for balance or middle (chung):

These are distinctions in clarity

ming 明 these are distinctions

John Adams, the Brothers Adam
there is our norm of spirit

our 中
whereto we may pay our
homage (84/117-118)

Pound’s new name for himself is in fact the oldest name for man, Adam, our norm of spirit.¹¹ In their relationship to Adam, all men are the same. It is this common bond alone which Pound will accept as an indication of a permanent and valid name for himself. The journey is complete because Pound has arrived at a name for himself which transcends his personal goal. Throughout the *Pisan Cantos* Pound has referred to Micah 4:5: “For all people will walk every one in the name of his god.”¹² But at the end of

the *Pisan Cantos* man is for the first time on his own, with his own name.
The name of god is suppressed:

Saith Micha:

Each in the name of. . .

So that looking at the sputtering tank of nicotine and
stale whiskey

(on its way out)

Kimrad Koba remarked:

I will believe the American.

Berlin 1945 (84/118)

Belief in the post-war world must be in man. The name of god no longer appears.

The final page gives several brief sayings which illustrate concretely the unity of all mankind. These last passages admirably fulfill the goal of discourse: to get it across simplex munditiis. There is a discussion between an Italian peasant girl and an American traitor. This discussion, about the relative virtues of Germans and Americans, is carried out in Italian:

e poi io dissi alla sorella
della pastorella dei suini:
e questi americani?
si conducono bene?
ed ella: poco.
Poco, poco.
ed io: peggio dei tedeschi?
ed ella: uguale (84/118)

The peasant girl indicates that the Germans and the Americans are the same as far as she can tell from her contact with them. The implication is that her contact with the soldiers is indeed on the most elemental human level. And finally Pound ends with a very universal statement with which every man can agree readily: "If the hoar frost grip thy tent/ Thou wilt give thanks when night is spent" (84/118). The cold is the same for everyone, whether young or old, male or female, prisoner or free, loyalist or traitor. Every man gives thanks when night is spent and the sun comes out again. In the norm of the spirit, the Chinese "chung," Pound finds an accurate and permanent name for himself.

Notes

1. Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (Norfolk, 1951), pp. 300-14.
2. Daniel Pearlman, *The Barb of Time* (New York, 1969), p. 17.
3. George Dekker, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound: A Critical Study* (New York, 1963), p. 196.
4. Forrest Read, "The Pattern of the *Pisan Cantos*," *Sewanee Review* 65 (Summer 1957), 405-19.
5. In any references to the *Cantos* the first number given is the canto number, and the second number given is the page number. The specific edition used here is *The Cantos of Ezra Pound (1-95)* (New York: New Directions, 1956).
6. Pearlman, p. 291.
7. John Hamilton Edwards and William W. Vasse, *Annotated Index to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley, 1959), p. 271.
8. Edwards and Vasse, p. 271. *
9. Edwards and Vasse, p. 241.
10. See for example 74/8, 76/32, 77/51.
11. Edwards and Vasse seem to me to miss the point completely on page two, where they expend quite a little effort trying to track down all the possible Adams brothers in history whom Pound might possibly have in mind.
12. For instance, see 74/13, 76/32, 78/57, and 79/65.

