

“AND AS FOR TEXT WE HAVE TAKEN IT...” Retranslating Ezra Pound’s Renaissance Cantos

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Abstract – Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, a Modernist classic, present many challenges for the translator, who has to follow in Pound’s footsteps and often divine the intention and context of the fragments that compose his historic and lyric collage. A new Italian translation of the first extensive installment of the poem, *XXX Cantos* (1930), appeared in 2012; a previous Italian rendering of the same work, by the poet’s daughter Mary de Rachewiltz, was published in 1961. By comparing representative excerpts of the two translations, this paper discusses different approaches to one source text. While the 1961 target text aimed at concision at the expense of fluency, the 2012 text employs a more colloquial style, attempting to make an arduous and complex work more reader-friendly. However, the two translations adopt the same strategy when rendering the many passages Pound paraphrased from medieval and renaissance Italian writings. Rather than retranslating Pound’s English, they print excerpts from the Italian originals he worked from, with their quaint spellings and often obscure wording. Just as Pound asks his readers and translators to work with him on the texts he presents in the poem, so the translators presuppose a reader who is also a collaborator, and who will be intrigued by the old documents appearing opposite Pound’s modernist paraphrases. Translation is always a work in progress, but this is particularly the case when approaching the uniquely intricate and collaborative project of Pound’s *Cantos*.

Keywords: translation; poetry; Modernism.

2012, the 90th anniversary of the publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and of Ezra Pound’s *Eighth Canto* (eventually included in *A Draft of XVI Cantos* of 1925), was a good year for the Italian translation of these monuments of Modernism. A new translation of *Ulysses* was presented by a young scholar, Enrico Terrinoni, in a popular inexpensive edition, with an illuminating introduction and extensive apparatus. Though it may not replace the standard translation, which appeared in 1960, it is a noteworthy contribution by Italian scholarship and by the Italian publishing industry to the long story of the reception of James Joyce.

Later in 2012, in time for Ezra Pound’s 127th birthday (and for the 40th anniversary of his death in Venice), I received the first copies of my new translation of *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, the volume which in 1930 brought together the two earlier large-format instalments of Pound’s “endless” poem

– cantos 1-16 (1925), and cantos 17-27 (1928) – with the bonus of three additional cantos (28-30). The new 853-page Italian *Ulisse* was addressed to the mass market, also because since 2012 Joyce’s works are in the public domain, and so the publisher did not have to negotiate translation rights. Instead Pound is still under copyright and certainly *The Cantos* are not as widely admired, read and taught as *Ulysses*. Thus the new Italian *XXX Cantos* (383 pages) was published in a distinguished poetry series and priced at €28,00 (as against €9,90 for the 2012 *Ulisse*). Still, given the current recession in the book market and elsewhere, it was courageous of Ugo Guanda Editore of Parma and Milan to produce an elegant new edition of *XXX Cantos*, with all the work this entailed for the editors that saw the book through press. It must be added that, unlike *Ulisse*, *XXX Cantos*, being a poem, has the English text and the Italian translation on facing pages.

Readers familiar with Pound know how complex is the layout of his highly irregular poem. Even newly setting it up for printing is no small matter. Then, if the translation is to run parallel, care must be taken since the quantity of material Pound gathers in his “rag-bag” (as he once called it), spills over and will not always fit within the same lines or pages. Besides, the 2012 *XXX Cantos*, like the 2012 *Ulisse*, includes an ample apparatus: “Introduction”, “Note on the Text”, “Annotations” (for each canto), “Chronology”, “Bibliography” (i.e., the poem’s complex publishing history in the original and translation, as well as a list of sources) – and, importantly, an “Index” of names, places and authors cited. The latter, like the list of sources, is very useful in finding one’s way through Pound’s labyrinth, and also allows us to locate quickly the passages where, say, T. S. Eliot or Ernest Hemingway are mentioned or referred to. Interestingly, this is the first edition anywhere of a book of *Cantos* which carries an index with it, so the volume could also be useful for non-Italians, and perhaps set a precedent.

In fact, Marianne Moore, reviewing *A Draft of XXX Cantos* in “Poetry” (October 1931), already complained about the lack of an index (Erkkila 2011, p. 188). Passages from this searching review by one of Pound’s most canny readers are reprinted in the 2012 *XXX Cantos* after my “Introduction” in a section called “Il poema e i suoi lettori” (The Poem and Its Readers), which offers first Pound’s own comments and queries on his project as he was engaged in it, and then a series of responses of different kinds: Ford Madox Ford’s rather fulsome eulogy, James Joyce’s friendly parody of Pound’s barbarous canto-style, Yeats’s well-known account of Pound’s explanation of the form of *The Cantos* as communicated on his Rapallo terrace to the puzzled great old man, and comments by T. S. Eliot and Allen Ginsberg (the latter as a closing document on how Pound despite his “many errors” continued to inspire later generations). A poem is to some extent a history of its readings, and *The Cantos* do enjoy a mythical status, even for those who have scarcely read them. As Pound’s friend Basil Bunting wrote in the poem

“On the Flyleaf of Pound’s Cantos”: “There are the Alps. What is there to say about them? / They don’t make sense” (Bunting 1970, p. 122).

But to translate *The Cantos* one has to read them and try to make sense of them. This means to some extent replicating Pound’s own engagement with his material, following his steps through countries, libraries and fantasies, and trying to convey the particular tone of his voice – an epic voice, for he is telling (tall) tales of himself and the “many men” and places he, as a novel Odysseus, has visited. Just as the 2012 *Ulisse* implies a dialogue with the standard 1960 translation, so the 2012 *XXX Cantos* benefitted from reference to the 1961 translation *I primi trenta Cantos* by Pound’s daughter Mary de Rachewiltz. The benefits were even greater, since Mary collaborated and consulted with her father, who was living as her guest while the remarkably accurate 1961 edition was being prepared by her and her young friend the publisher Vanni Scheiwiller.¹

Mary de Rachewiltz’s translation is unusual because of its familiar, or in-house, genesis. Mary had worked on it for decades, and her many drafts were profusely corrected by her father. Pound’s knowledge of Italian was relatively good, but still very intuitive and uncertain when it came to choosing some unusual term or neologism. He insisted with his Italian translators that just as Dante had made up words, so they should coin words if they did not exist. In principle we would agree with this line of reasoning, because great writers always do violence to the nature of their language. But this is something you can do only in the tongue that you master – otherwise the result may be laughable. Though occasionally archaic in diction, *The Cantos* show a great feeling for current colloquial language in its peculiar Poundian variants. In the Italian translation the result is not always felicitous, and what sounds like a simple pithy statement in English, like “There is no substitute for a lifetime” in a late canto (98/711),² becomes sometimes unrecognizable and unquotable in the translation: *Nulla surroga il campar* (Pound 1985, p. 1309).

But Mary did mostly an excellent job and was not intimidated by all of Pound’s borrowings from obscure sources that had to be identified, that is, by the need to unearth the original context for his brief quotations. She had the benefit of her father’s library, but often he had transcribed passages (accurately or not) from standard collections or manuscripts to be found only, if at all, in special libraries. Today it is a little easier, thanks to the web, to locate books and passages. So I am all admiration for what Mary did more or less singlehandedly. She went on to translate the rest of the poem and in

¹ The 1961 slip-cased volume was sold for 3,000 Italian lire. Given that in those days one could have a good meal for less than 1,000 lire, the price would seem comparable (or possibly in excess of) the € 28,00 of the 2012 *XXX Cantos*.

² References to *The Cantos* are in the standard format: canto number/page number, in the 1995 New Directions edition.

1985, the centenary of her father's birth, published a complete translation of *The Cantos*, which was the first complete edition of the poem anywhere (including the long-suppressed cantos 72-73) and may still be the most accurate edition (of the English text) in print (the current U.S. edition, of 1995, is riddled by mistakes and unauthorized corrections).

The above explains why I submitted the project for a new Italian edition of *XXX Cantos* to Guanda, a publisher long associated with poetry, who courageously brought out a translation of *The Pisan Cantos* in 1953. *XXX Cantos* is a classic of Modernism, belonging to the heroic age of *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, with which it has much in common. It is self-contained, like a new *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* through exotic parts of the Mediterranean (with some ironic and damning depictions of the U.S. and England). A new translation would try for a more colloquial tone, and would avoid the asperities dictated by Pound to Mary, and would thus find new readers, and perhaps prove that unimaginable thing: that *The Cantos* can in fact be read for pleasure and instruction, as Pound certainly intended.

Mary de Rachewiltz generously supported the project, her father having always maintained that his work should have multiple translators, clearly agreeing that the main point is finding new readers, circulating the text, and also reminding an audience puzzled and offended by the use of Pound's name in Italy in the last decade by a prominent group with neo-Fascist leanings, CasaPound, which has an intellectual cover but also resorts to violence – reminding these readers that there is another Pound that we can cherish and who has produced one of the most exciting poems of the last century.

Not that *XXX Cantos* is apolitical. Far from it. The contempt for the Fabians (placed in the Inferno of canto 15) already shows the poet's extremism – which would have been shared by the Bolsheviki (to whom he devotes a few pages in canto 16 and again in canto 27 – the lyric about one “Tovarish”), but also and chiefly by the illiberal right. His fulminations against bankers and financiers in cantos 13 and 15 sounded extremely topical in 2012. And in canto 22 he records a discussion with John Maynard Keynes, in which predictably the liberal Keynes is shown as incapable of grasping the reality of the Depression. So cantos 1-30 are no idyll, and we can see in them the well-developed attitudes that would lead Pound to his later aberrations. But here everything is still held in equilibrium, and Pound is never so happy as when he is telling tales of the Renaissance, or just imagining some sensual scene in which the landscape of the old poets and painters comes to life.

In *XXX Cantos* his passion for condensation and cryptic utterance had not yet dried up his style (as in the work of the 1950s) and he wrote generously and at length creating his world of history and vision. These cantos are indeed long (7 pages for canto 20, 14 pages of Venetian annals in 25-26, and 25 pages devoted to Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta in 8-11).

Which doesn’t mean that they are boring – but they are certainly a challenge for the translator who has to find equivalents for all those words and gestures. I somehow underestimated the effort necessary when I proposed the project to Guanda. When the publisher accepted with enthusiasm I had to face the music. And when I first reached the precincts of Malatesta’s Renaissance squabbles in canto 8, I began to falter. I was daunted by the prospect of traversing twenty-five pages among arcane sources, of trying to make out what Pound extracted from his material, and of checking the poem against countless originals. So I moved on to the easier canto 12 on contemporary subjects (Baldy Bacon, John Quinn, the financiers) and to the magisterial Confucius of canto 13: “Kung walked / by the dynastic temple / and into the cedar grove, / and then out by the lower river”. Here was relief, since the translation could proceed directly from source text to the new “verbal manifestation” (a favourite phrase of Pound’s), and deal only with questions of rhythm and diction, a translator’s true business, without (as often in historical cantos) going from source text to quoted sources, and from this correlation attempt a new version (or triangulation).

Pound’s writing in *XXX Cantos* is mostly spatial, a description of a scene or landscape, as in the opening of the Confucius canto mentioned above. It is not easy in translation to suggest all this quiet movement. It may be instructive to compare the 1961-1985 translation (Mary de Rachewiltz) and mine (Table 1):

1925	1961	2012
Kung walked by the dynastic temple and into the cedar grove, and then out by the lower river, And with him Khieu, Tchi and Tian the low speaking And “we are unknown,” said Kung (13/58)	Kung vagò dal tempio dinastico Nella cedraia lungo il fiume inferiore, Khieu e Tchi con lui e Tian dalla voce profonda Disse Kung: “siamo ignoti” (p. 129)	Kung passò accanto al tempio dinastico e nel boschetto di cedri, e proseguì a valle lungo il fiume, E con lui erano Khieu, Tchi e Tian dalla voce lieve E Kung disse: “Siamo sconosciuti” (p. 147)

Table 1.
Confucius Compressed and Expanded.

The 1961 version is more compressed, approaching the source text in using only one verb in the first sentence, *vagò*. “Vagare” (“wandered”) is a more literary word than Pound’s absolutely prosaic “walked”. Hence my choice, in line with my general preference for down-to-earth, everyday, diction: *passò*. Why not *camminò*, which is literally “walked”? Because it does not quite

suggest the vagueness of “walked” – but this is a matter of taste. The most noticeable difference is that the 1961 version makes one sentence out of Pound’s three parallel actions, marked by the repetition of “and”, from which Mary shied away here and elsewhere (Italian is less tolerant of repetition than English). The 2012 text is closer to Pound’s tripartite arrangement, at the cost of adding another verb in line four. In the second sentence about the disciples, 1961 again avoids the “And” and nominalises the sentence: “Khieu and Tchi with him”. Whereas 2012 makes the implied verb explicit as if Pound had written: “And with him *were* Khieu, Tchi [...]” Both choices are defensible. 2012 presents a lower-keyed text, more prosaic, as one can see again in the difference of register between the higher *Siamo ignoti* and the lower *Siamo sconosciuti*.

There is a movement away from the literary, which is in accord with Pound’s appreciation of the prosaic. These slight variations make for a text more available to the reader today. This reader will not be arrested by a slightly anomalous usage, but will be able to get into the rhythm of the text and proceed in the not easy task of assimilating so much material. The idea is to carry her along, just as easily as Kung walking in the middle of this ideal Chinese landscape. Another example is the “cedar grove”, translated as the equally common *boschetto di cedri* rather than the less familiar, semi-technical *cedraia*. “Cedraia” is actually a false friend referring to a winter citrus fruit garden, so it is also a mistranslation.

Returning to the poetry, the choice is always between compactness, which Pound insisted on, and a more relaxed movement for the sake of readability. One could also suppose that the older Pound, who was advising his daughter on the translation, may have been more insistent on condensation, given his late style, than he would have been at an earlier date. Indeed, his *XXX Cantos*, a notably long and effusive 150-page poem, was clearly the result of a desire for amplitude.

So, as mentioned above, I began by drafting the shorter and less intricate cantos before returning to the asperities of the Malatesta sequence and its multitudinous quotations – for the “Malatestiad” (as it has been called) of cantos 8-11, was the section on which Pound expended more labour, using a whole library of references, whereas in his later historical cantos he was content with a handful of sources. It would be interesting to compare the Hell cantos 14-15 in the two translations, since both must take into account Pound’s own model, i.e., Dante. One curious detail in the otherwise felicitous 1961 translation of the Hell cantos is that “condom” is rendered as *olla*. I discovered thanks to the web that this is still a current brand of Spanish condoms. *Olla* became *hatù*, a long-familiar brand of Italian condoms, in the 1985 complete translation of *I Cantos*. Perhaps the metonymy (brand for thing) was due to some reticence on the part of Mary, or perhaps to her father’s own suggestion. But it is a little forced to put a Trojan (U.S.

equivalent of Hatù) in an Inferno composed around 1920, so I would defend my more literal translation (Table 2):

1925	1961	2012
chewed cigar-butts, without dignity, without tragedy,m Episcopus, waving a condom full of black- beetles, monopolists, obstructors of knowledge, obstructors of distribution. (13/63)	mozziconi di sigaro masticati, senza dignità, senza tragedia,m Episcopus, agita un olla pieno di nere blatte, monopolisti, intralciano e bloccano sapienza e distributo. (p. 139)	cicche di sigari masticate, senza dignità, senza tragedia, Episcopusm, che stringe un preservativo pieno di blatte nere, monopolisti, strozzatori della conoscenza, strozzatori della distribuzione. (p. 157)

Table 2.
The English Inferno.

One can see here that the two translations of this passage are independent. 1961 has a few better choices (*mozziconi* vs. *cicche*, *agita* vs. *stringe*). In the last lines 2012 is closer to the rhythm of the original. Pound makes great use of repetition throughout, as if hammering rhythmically and creating a hypnotic effect. So the repetition of “obstructors” in the final lines (which happen to be the close of canto 14) is worth preserving, as 2012 tries to do. 1961, on the other hand, chooses compactness, and the rendering of “knowledge” as *sapienza* (wisdom) moves into a diction more elevated than the plainer English “knowledge”. (And *distributo*, for *distribuzione*, is indeed a strange coinage.) I wonder what Pound was thinking of when he associated his bishop (“episcopus”) with a condom. Is the condom one of the “obstructions” to be assailed? Or is it just supposed to convey disgust (black-beetles rather than sperm?). I believe the satisfactory answer is to be found in Pound’s essay *The Serious Artist* (1913):

[...] it is a crime rather worse than murder to beget children in a slum, to beget children for whom no fitting provision is made, either as touching their physical or economic wellbeing. [...] On this count the bishop of London, as an encourager of this sort of increase, is a criminal of a type rather lower and rather more detestable than the souteneur. (Pound 1954, p. 42)

The Bishop of London is associated with condoms precisely because in those days his church apparently assailed the use of contraceptives. Arthur Foley Winnington-Ingram was Bishop of London from 1901 to 1939. His second name Ingram would seem to fit well the five dots followed by the letter ‘m’ of canto 14. I do not know about his professed opinions on birth-control, but probably evidence could be found for Pound’s fulminations. In his Hell,

Pound used this novel system of giving only the final letters of the names of the damned, claiming that the names themselves had been eroded and were unworthy of being recorded. This however makes for difficult reading, and one would like to know how he recited these passages.

The above is an example of the never-ending process of deciphering *The Cantos*, and of the surprises they offer the reader willing to follow Pound's footsteps. For example, after the inferno of 14-15, we find a sort of purgatory, complete with its "Valley of Princes" (as in Dante) in 16, which rather hastily goes on to an extended passage in demotic French describing the disillusion and horror of trench warfare. Pound's English transliteration of French argot is problematic *per se*, even more so for the translator (e.g., "Poo quah? Ma foi on attaquit pour manger" – 16/73). He or she can simply reprint Pound's quasi-French, which is what happens in 1961; or one could transliterate, bearing in mind the reader of the translation ("Pour quoi? Ma foi, on attaquit pour manger"). I opted for an approximate translation in broken Italian (*Perché? Giuro che si andava all'attacco per mangiare*). This seems hard to justify, since (as a general rule) an untranslated quotation in another language in the source text should remain untranslated in the target text. However, given that the passage is somewhat (possibly intentionally) inchoate, I thought the reader of 2012 would be thankful for an Italian rendering, which he or she can compare at discretion with Pound's approximate French. In this case the translation becomes a tool for the reader, who should make selective use of it. It is no use pretending that there exists a naive reader of this kind of work. The reader brings presuppositions, attitudes, and must contribute a willingness to cooperate, to go half way in this strange enterprise. This is what Pound claimed, believing that his audience would wholly participate in the struggles and rewards of his poetic labours.

This concept of the poem as workshop, and the translation as toolbox, is particularly appropriate when we come to the question of how to handle Pound's innumerable quotations and borrowings. Of course a Latin, Provençal or Greek borrowing will remain as in Pound's text, though I have occasionally used a standard version of the quoted original rather than Pound's sometimes faulty transcription. I am quite sure that Pound's own alleged misspellings and other errors should not be corrected (as has happened in some editions), but the translation can help the reader by providing the standard form of names and phrases, when appropriate. Thus in canto 20 we find "peur de la hasle" (fear of sunburn), a mistake for "peur *du* hasle" in the original Pound is recollecting. In the translation on the right-hand side I have used the correct form, again as an aid to the reader. This does not imply a wish to correct Pound, who often quoted from memory and could not care less about correctness. It is just another instrument in the toolbox.

A different problem arises when Pound translates from Italian originals – as he frequently does in the cantos dealing with Italian history. *XXX Cantos* is largely concerned with the Renaissance, following a time-honoured Anglo-Saxon tradition (from Shakespeare to Rossetti and Browning) of making much of Italian subjects. Thus when, after drafting a translation of all the following cantos 12-30, I eventually returned to the daunting Malatesta sequence, I was once again confronted with a series of documents in translation:

Letter received, and in the matter of our Messire Gianozio,
 One from him also, sent on in form and with all due dispatch,
 Having added your wishes and memoranda.
 As to arranging peace between you and the King of Ragona,
 So far as I am concerned, it wd.
 Give me the greatest possible pleasure (8/28)

It is worth noting that rather than romanticizing the Quattrocento, Pound chooses to present it through the voice of one of its notable figures, an unscrupulous warrior, lover and patron of the arts: Sigismondo Malatesta, with whose ill-fated career (and his fighting on all fronts) Pound clearly identifies. In his translation of the Italian original Pound suggests the qualities of the *condottiere*: his matter-of-fact tone, his getting to the point, his businesslike peremptoriness – all very much Poundian qualities. He wants to arrange peace, not a bad endeavour after all. And (he goes on to say) he wants to offer a stipend to a painter working for him, unnamed in the current text (but in the 1925 limited edition the rubric “*Piero della Francesca*” appears in the margin).

Now, it would be possible to retranslate Malatesta’s letter in Italian reproducing the tone of Pound’s adaptation, but it would be a highly problematic and artificial procedure. So since the Malatesta original is available, the best procedure appears to be to print the authentic Italian opposite the English, making what small adaptations may be necessary to bring it down to the size of Pound’s rendering. This is what Mary de Rachewiltz did in 1961, with her father’s approval, and what I again did in 2012 (see Table 3). As usual, 1961 prefers concision over expansion, giving for Pound’s six lines five lines that make little attempt to include all the material on which the English is based. 2012 has eight lines, which in fact show all the original segments used in the English. Probably, 1961 works better as an easier read, while 2012 presents a number of obstacles. In particular, the old Italian words and spellings have to be parsed somewhat carefully (for example, the source’s lack of accents, as in *seguira* for “*seguirà*”). In 2012, the Italian text provides the reader with the material, while at the same time attempting to keep the narrative going.

1961	2012
Ho ricevuto vostra lettera et Circha al facto de Messer Gianozzo, Le ho remandato in dietro... Circha la pace tra voi e il Re di Ragona, Me ne farete grandissimo apiacere (p. 69) ³	Ho ricevuto vostra lettera Et circha el facto de Messer Gianozzo nostro È stato a mi uno suo mandato el quale ho rimandato In dietro spacciato in bonissima forma, Et tanto piu agionti li preghi et recordi vestri. Circha la pratica de la pace tra voi et el Re de Ragona Ve prego de quanto seguira me ne voliate dare aviso Che me ne farete grandissimo apiacere (p. 87)

Table 3.
A Letter of 1449: Translation or Adaptation?

But clearly at this point the reader is expected to do at least some of the work. He or she will have to check the Italian original against Pound's adaptation in order to fully understand what is happening and what kind of person Pound's Malatesta is.

On the other hand, this should also become clear to those who have no English through the selection of the episodes of Malatesta's life that Pound chooses to emphasise. Cantos 8-11 are hard going for any translator who decides to go back to Pound's sources, since he or she will have to mark every page, and hunt down clues, though, fortunately, the letters themselves mainly come from Charles Yriarte's magnificent *Un condottiere au XV siècle* (1882). The on-line PDF of the Yriarte in the Houghton Library is particularly interesting in that there are marks against some of the phrases quoted in Pound's Malatestiad. Clearly at least one other reader of Yriarte at Harvard had tried to follow in Pound's erring footsteps. These are the difficulties. Yet Pound put so much of his passion and energy in resurrecting Malatesta that this tornado of documents does stand up as an attempt at a modern epic, in the footsteps of Byron and Browning. The disreputable and joking, occasionally cruel, finally unfortunate, Malatesta is in the end a very Byronic character, though Pound entertains the illusion that by presenting the original documents he is showing us the man himself.

For the Italian reader, being confronted with the old Italian historical and literary texts that Pound worked from should be revealing. He can listen to these old nearly forgotten voices and words as spoken and written centuries ago and wonder or discover why in the early twentieth-century an American should have been so passionate about reviving them and using them to build up his poet's world of examples to be followed or censured. For

³ Sic in the 1985 revision (Pound 1985, p. 55).

Pound is always didactic (a didacticism laced with his raucous humour). The reader will wonder about the principle of selection, and disagree with the emphasis, but he or she should be thankful for this tour, though somewhat laborious, of forgotten annals.

As a matter of fact, precious few Italian scholars have been stimulated by these or any of the other Italian cantos to study in any depth Pound’s use of sources, which only specialists of Italian Renaissance history and texts can fully evaluate. Thus the conscientious translator has the pleasure of making many discoveries. For example, canto 26 quotes a letter from the famous painter Pisanello, that Pound presents as addressed to one Sforza. Pisanello writes about horses, and Pound often referred to this document as an example of the artist’s practical knowledge: if he is good at drawing horses, as Pisanello doubtlessly was, he can also be trusted to assess them for purchase. The original of this letter has not been located so far as I know, but there is a reproduction of the manuscript in 1961 (pp. 238-39), with a reference in the endnotes (p. 333) to the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan. When I asked a colleague versed in palaeography to transcribe it so that I could use the original on the facing page, she told me that Pound or whoever helped him mistook some word for “Sforza”, a worthy who appears in the English paraphrase but not in the original. So the name does not occur in my redaction of the Italian source facing Pound’s English. Here, however, the story does not end, since Sforza may have been mentioned in the source from which Pound took the letter and the name may have been added to the text for clarification. So the translator needs to look further, and even into popular accounts which Pound also used, as when he writes about the Medici and Borgia, or the ill-fated lovers Ugo and Parisina.

It’s worth mentioning that many of Pound’s Renaissance subjects had been well-exploited by previous writers and seekers of the sensational – and that lurid tales of the Borgia are still being broadcast in the twenty-first century for popular television audiences. Pound is very much part of this tradition of Renaissance enthusiasts, unconventional though his way of evoking that glorious and infamous age may be. Like Edwin Arlington Robinson’s Miniver Cheevy, he “loved the Medici, / Albeit he had never seen one; / He would have sinned incessantly / Could he have been one”. To this quip, one could reply that Pound claimed to have indeed “seen” them, and strong-minded friends like Yeats and Eliot believed him; and that, as for sinning, he did his best, so much so that he still is *persona non grata* in his home country.

Pound had great ambition and belief in his enterprise, and this also carries us across some more arid stretches, as readers and translators. Actually in *XXX Cantos* there is scarcely a page that is not rich in some curious discovery, visionary passage or lyric grace. Everything moves, though everything is rather static. *XXX Cantos* was compared by its author to

the Schifanoia frescos in Ferrara, and indeed one reads these cantos, or rather contemplates them, as a series of set scenes and frozen episodes. In hell as in paradise, one moves from frame to frame, and Pound very much wants us to notice repetitions and parallels between the various compartments of his fresco. “Some hall of mirrors”, he called it much later (114/813), for in the end all characters are projections of his likes and dislikes, of his imagination of hell and (Italian) paradise. He believed he had invented or developed a new form that would bring together history, vision and actuality, or, as he put it in canto 11, “the usual subjects of conversation between intelligent men”. Nevertheless, he must have been relieved when he put an end to the first ample section of his major opus, with canto 30, and wrote on the last page:

and as for text we have taken it
from that of Messire Laurentius
and from a codex once of the Lords Malatesta...

And in August that year died Pope Alessandro Borgia,
Il Papa mori.

Explicit canto
XXX

(30/148-49)

One can see why it would be easy to parody this, since the Italian phrase, despite its resonance, does not seem particularly significant (and Pound even forgot the necessary accent on *mori* – an accent still missing in the current U.S. edition). The death of the Pope is probably symbolic of the death of the old order. Yet Pound washes his hands of the whole business and, again with an affectation of learning, concludes in Latin with words that amount to saying, “I’ve done it, believe it or not”. We still do not quite believe it, but there is lots of incidental fun and marvel in *XXX Cantos*, Pound’s poetic notebook as we might call it.

Pound was probably also intrigued by the coincidence between the magic “XXX” of his title and closing line, and the year in which his friend Nancy Cunard published *XXX Cantos* at The Hours Press in Paris: 1930. The lines about the source of the text are from Gershom Soncino’s preface to his great *editio princeps* of Petrarch, published “that year”, i.e. 1503. And of course they are particularly apt because they refer both to the Malatesta, the poem’s principal heroes, and also to the celebration of printing, publishing and editing – a subject Pound was much concerned with. In both instances a publication is being lauded for its novelty and for its completion.

In a little-known letter to Carlo Linati about the first volume of *Cantos I-XVI*, Pound wrote that this was:

[...] perhaps the first American book in which author, designer and printer have collaborated to create a unity. Since they could not erect another Parma Baptistery, and didn’t have the money for a unity of the arts in a single architectural structure, they have chosen to integrate three arts in a small thing: drawings, capitals, as in the manuscripts of the Middle Ages.⁴

This statement is very representative of Pound’s neo-medievalism, and of his program for a unity of the arts in which craftsmen would collaborate. Both the subject and the material form of *XXX Cantos* take their bearings from the “mediaeval dream” (Pound 1960, p. 104), of which John Ruskin had been the great Victorian exponent.

As an end-piece to these notes, let me quote the two translations of the above conclusive passage of *XXX Cantos* (Table 4):

1961	2012
Questo testo abbiamo Da Messire Laurentius e da un codice Già dei Signori Malatesta...	Quanto al testo l’abbiamo tratto da un codice del litteratissimo homo Messer Laurentio Abstemio, qual fu già degli Signori Malateste.
Nell’agosto di quell’anno morì Alessandro Borgia, Il Papa morì.	E ad agosto quell’anno spirò Papa Alessandro Borgia, Il Papa morì.
Explicit canto XXX (pp. 318-19)	Explicit canto XXX (p. 335)

Table 4.
Colophon as Envoi.

The reader can make his or her own observations on the use of sources and the avoidance or duplication of repetition. In any case, reading and translating *The Cantos* is an ongoing and open-ended project, though one may breathe for a moment, with the poet, having at least come this far.

⁴ To Carlo Linati, 6 June 1925 (Pound 1980, p. 96): “Come nel XVI Canto, di Pound, forse il primo libro americano dove l’autore, l’ornatore e lo stampatore hanno collaborato per fare un’unità. Non potendo fare un altro battistero di Parma, non avendo denaro per una unità delle arti in una struttura architettonica, hanno voluto reintegrare tre arti in una cosa piccola, disegni, capitali come nei manoscritti del Medioevo [...]”. My English translation.

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