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## The Metrical Contract of *The Cantos*

### I

THE FREE VERSE EPIC has claims to be the central poetic genre of this century. It derives largely from a fusion of two traditions, the ancient line of epic and the more recent essays in egotistical sublime by Wordsworth and Whitman. Several critics have treated it as a distinct and recognizable genre, known by its subject matter or its rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> But no one, I think, has discussed the significance of its metrical form as an identifying feature. Yet a poetic genre is often tied to its metrical form. Renato Poggioli, in his important essay "Poetics and Metrics," asserts it as a law of literary history: "The apparition of a new literary genre is always accompanied by the invention or the exclusive adoption by that genre of a definite verse form." The association of genre and meter is, at first, part of the "unwritten poetics" of that genre, and always, "legislation comes after, rather than before, the fact."<sup>2</sup>

Ezra Pound is the central figure in the development both of the free verse epic and of free verse itself. When his *Cantos* began to appear, readers were confused by their form; but gradually we have learned to read Pound, and other poets have treated his major work either as a direct model or as an enabling precursor. It is now possible to state more precisely than before the terms of the formal metrical contract that Pound strikes with his readers in *The Cantos*. These terms appear as

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<sup>1</sup> See James E. Miller, Jr., *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1979); Michael André Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton University Press, 1980); M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Renato Poggioli, *The Spirit of the Letter* (Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 347.

principles rather than as strict prosodic rules, for the form is free. Many are self-evident, for the poem has succeeded in establishing them. But no one has attempted to state them explicitly.

The metaphor of the metrical contract was advanced by John Hollander in his essay "Romantic Verse Form and the Metrical Contract," first published in 1965. Most of the recent studies in prosody, he observes, "have been devoted to showing the relation of patterned sound and semantic sense in particular poems." But in concentrating on these local nuances, critics have lost sight of another dimension: "This dimension I should call purely conventional, or formal, rather than expressive, and its function is rather like a definitive or axiomatic one for the whole literary work. It involves the elements of convention which link a metrical style or type to the whole poetic genre and, hence, a poet's choice of metre to a larger intention."<sup>3</sup>

For classically minded poets, relations among metrical choice, genre, and authorial intention were more or less agreed upon. But the English Romantics, as Hollander shows, broke the agreement, Wordsworth openly challenging Classical associations of meter and subject matter, although without of course abandoning meter altogether. That step was left for Whitman, who rejected the constraints of traditional meter in the name of liberty, democracy, and evolutionary progress. These two great inventors of the "personal epic" thus generated two metrical traditions for subsequent poets, one revisionist, the other liberationist.

Pound, suspended between these two alternatives as he contemplated his "poem of no known category,"<sup>4</sup> was at once a vocal champion of free verse and a classically minded poet intent on his major life work. He was particularly uneasy with the free verse movement in 1917, the year that saw the first published Cantos. Together with Eliot, he "decided that the dilution [sic] of *vers libre*, Amygism, Lee Masterism, general floppiness had gone too far and that some counter-current must be set going."<sup>5</sup> "Rhythm MUST have meaning," he protested. "It can't be merely a careless dash off, with no grip and no real hold to the words and sense. . . ."<sup>6</sup> But Amy Lowell won the day in

<sup>3</sup> John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 188-89. This essay first appeared as "Blake and the Metrical Contract," in Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom, eds., *From Sensibility to Romanticism* (Oxford University Press, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> *Pound/Joyce: The Letters of Ezra Pound to James Joyce, with Pound's Essays on Joyce*, ed. with commentary by Forrest Read (New Directions, 1967), p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> Ezra Pound, "Harold Monro," *Criterion*, XI (July 1932), 584.

<sup>6</sup> *The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (Harcourt Brace, 1950), January 1915, p. 49.

America for free verse "as for a principle of liberty,"<sup>7</sup> leaving Pound with the dilemma of defending free verse while at the same time making its liberated rhythms perceptible and meaningful. The immediate result of his anti-free-verse countercurrent was *Mauberley* (with Eliot's quatrain poems as a bonus); but this impulse also affected his prosodic decisions in the making of the earliest Cantos.

*The Cantos*, as we now have them, do strike a metrical contract, and they fulfill it triumphantly: "the most beautiful metrical invention in English since Chaucer," according to James A. Powell, who backs his claim with sensitive analysis.<sup>8</sup> But the contractual aspect of Pound's prosody—its redefinition of formal conventions, the new decorum uniting rhythm with meaning—needs to be better understood.

## II

### Quantity and Stress

To arrive at clear principles, the analyst must brave two perils: on one side stands Pound, with all his magisterial utterances about rhythm; on the other lies the quagmire of unformed theory, the mass of quarreling prosodists, linguists, and other hair-splitting dogmatists. Analysis must grasp Pound's statements about prosody as evidence of his understanding and intention; yet it cannot lose touch with the established conventions of English poetry or the possibilities and limitations of the English language.

There are three features of language commonly regulated in the various prosodies familiar to Pound: syllable, stress, and quantity. (Syntactic rhythm is a separate dimension that I will not explore here.) Syllable count does not figure in *The Cantos* in any systematic way. But if we turn to Pound's prose for direction, we find repeatedly two major concepts: "absolute rhythm" and—notoriously—quantity. When Pound declared in his famous Credo, "I believe in an absolute rhythm" he meant essentially that he believed in an exact correspondence between rhythm and feeling and, furthermore, that this correspondence exists independently of any metrical paradigm—that is, it may occur in metrical verse, in free verse, or in prose.<sup>9</sup> This assumption is the basis

<sup>7</sup> Amy Lowell, quoted in Peter Jones, ed., *Imagist Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> James A. Powell, "The Light of Vers Libre," *Paideuma*, VIII (Spring 1979), 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 9. I discuss the concept of absolute rhythm more fully in "Pound's Quantities and 'Absolute Rhythm,'" *Essays in Literature*, IV (1977).

of Pound's free verse practice. Pound's hankering after quantity is more problematic. It is ironic that the poet who flayed Milton for writing English as if it were Latin should have spent so much energy hunting out English quantities. Linguists rule out quantitative meter from English: not that quantities do not exist, but that they are not recognized by speakers of the language as "an essential sign of the system." Stress, on the other hand, serves "to distinguish not only 'words' as when we say *convért* or *cónvert*; it serves to form larger units of speech—phrases, clauses, and sentences—and to distinguish noun from adjective, subject from verb."<sup>10</sup> Thus in striving to base a metric on English quantity, Pound stood opposed to both literary convention and linguistic plausibility.

This does not mean that we have to write off *The Cantos* with the experiments of Gabriel Harvey and Robert Bridges, so the value of Pound's invention is not in dispute here. Fortunately, Pound relied not on rule, but, as his "Treatise on Metre" insists, on intuition, and the finished product is original and beautiful rhythmic language. But what we hear differs, I think, from what he seems to have intended.

One clue to Pound's intentions is the 1912 poem "Apparuit," his only published experiment in pure quantitative meter. Given the Sapphic paradigm, "Apparuit" scans smoothly, with perhaps one major problem. I have marked all quantities, but only those stresses that do not coincide with a long quantity, for despite the assertion of Harvey Gross, Pound is careful not to make each long syllable a stress.<sup>11</sup> My scansion looks odd because Pound's rhythms strain against the limits of typography, so that the markings must account for four variables: (1) long with stress and (2) short with slack ("crímsön," l.5); (3) long with slack, marked with accent grave ("glámöroùs sún," l.6); (4) short with stress counterpointed against it, marked by italics ("dělícàtelÿ," l.21):

Góldēn róse thē hóuse, ĩn thē pórtāl í sáw  
thée, ä márvēl, cárvēn ĩn súbtlē stúff, ä  
pórtēnt. Lífe díed dówñ ĩn thē lámp äñd flíckèred,  
cáught ät thē wóndēr.

Crímsön, fróstÿ wíth dēw, thē rósēs bēnd whēre  
thóu äfár, móvĭng ĩn thē glámöroùs sún,  
drínkst ĩn lífe öf éarth, öf thē áír, thē tíssùe  
góldēn äböút thèe.

<sup>10</sup> John Thompson, *The Founding of English Metre* (London: Routledge, 1961), p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Harvey Gross, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry* (University of Michigan Press, 1964), p. 141.

Gréen thē wáys, thē bréath óf thē fíelds ìs thíne thèrè,  
 ópēn líes thē lánd, yēt thē stéelý góìng  
 dárklý hást thóu dáred ánd thē dréadēd æthēr  
 pártēd bēfóre thèe.

Swíft át cóuráge thóu ìn thē shéll óf góld, cást-  
 ìng ā-lóose thē clóak óf thē bódý, cámešt  
 stráight, thēn shóne thíne óríēl ánd thē stúnned líght  
 fádēd ábóut thèe.

Hálf thē grávēn shóuldēr, thē thróat áflásh wíth  
 stránds óf líght ìnwóvēn ábóut ìt, lóvelý-  
 èst óf áll thíngs, fráil álbástēr, áh mé!  
 swíft ìn dēpártìng.

Clóthed ìn góldísh wéft, dēlícàtely pérféct,  
 góne ás wínd! Thē clóth óf thē mágícal hánds!  
 Thóu ā slíght thínq, thóu ìn áccéss óf cúnñìng  
 dár'dst tō ássúme thís?

I have difficulty only in line 5, in which “with”—although required to be long by position—is not convincing, and “dew” cannot be made to sound short. Pound does follow the advice that he later gave Mary Barnard: “Try writing Sapphics, and NOT persistently using a spondee like that Blighter Horrace [sic], for the second foot.” I scan seven trochees in this position. Furthermore, Pound has written quantities audible enough to conflict with stress, thus creating tension. “Remember,” he wrote Mary Bernard, “the SWAT must strain against the duration now and again, to maintain the tension. Can’t have rocking horse Sapphics any more than tu TUM, iambs.”<sup>12</sup>

On pressing closer, however, questions arise. Line 5, for instance, scans more smoothly in this way:

Crímsōn, frósty wíth déw, thē rósēs bēnd whère

But such a substitution violates the essence of classical meter, marking all the difference between the Sapphic line and the hendecasyllabic. Pound’s line would, nonetheless, strike English ears as satisfying, were it not for the nagging rules.

Furthermore, Pound’s determination of quantity is inconsistent. Like most English quantifiers, he allows stress to stand for quantity. Thus

<sup>12</sup> *Letters of Ezra Pound*, pp. 252 and 262. The false quantity in line 5 was apparently brought to Pound’s attention by Edward Marsh; see Charles Norman, *Ezra Pound*, rev. ed. (Minerva Press, 1969), p. 82.

“súbtlē” (l.2) is a trochee only by virtue of stress, while the syllables are distinctly short-long; elsewhere, it could have acted as stress counterpointed against the metrical scheme, and the ear understands it as a trochee here only because the paradigm demands a trochee in that position. Pound’s syllables may be long by nature, or by position, or by stress, but sometimes a stressed syllable is insisted upon as short and counterpointed. Pound’s principles for determining English quantity are thus, unlike those of Greek or Latin, inconsistent and self-contradictory. Compare “ópēn” and “yēt” in line 10, in which the short syllables could have served as long according to their position, with the lovely effect of “glámōroùs sún” l.22, in which the doubled consonants win out over both short quantity and lack of stress. Compare “flíckēred” (l.3) or “cúnning” (l.22), in which stress alone makes a short syllable long, with “fráil ālābástēr” (l.19), in which the stressed syllable must remain short.

This is not to say that Pound’s Sapphics are failures—they are among the most successful such experiments in our language; but they are an illusion. The pleasure they bring is the surprise of English words fitting to a Greek metrical frame. But the frame, the Sapphic paradigm, must be kept in the mind to begin with, or it cannot be heard at all. If this is so, we may question how quantities can be useful in free verse, where there is no paradigm.

They are not useful, at least as true quantities, according to Powell, who nevertheless traces elaborate Greek metrical patterns in Pound’s verse. Pound’s rhythms, Powell notes, are “almost without the *slightest* precedent in English versification,” and since “traditional English prosody does not offer tools to help us,” he turns to Greek metrics, with results that seem highly persuasive. Powell, however, includes a proviso based on the notion of absolute rhythm, saying, “In Pound’s mature poetry, there is no meter. Rhythm is all.” And he concedes that the Greek feet are somehow illusory, not “distinct ‘units’ of rhythm,” but more like a “useful fiction which can help us to understand the way Pound manipulates and combines rhythmic patterns.” But Powell avoids the issue of English quantities, assuming (as discreetly as possible) that long and short are “in Pound’s adaptations, accented or unaccented.”<sup>13</sup>

Here is a sample of Powell’s scansion of a passage from Canto XXIII:

<sup>13</sup> Powell, pp. 6, 9-16, and 27.

Whère ã mán míght cárrÿ hīs óar ūp,  
 Añd thē bóat thére ĩn thē írlēt;  
 Ās wé hãd lãin thére ĩn thē áutŭmn  
 Úndér thē afrãs, ór wáll páintēd bēlów líke árrãs,  
 Ānd äbóve wĭth ä gárdēn öf róse-trēes,  
 Sóund cömĭng úp fröm thē cróss-stréet;  
 Ās wé hãd stóod thére,  
 Wátchĭng ród fröm thē wíndöw,  
 Fâ Hán änd Í ät thē wíndöw,  
 Ānd hēr héad bóund wĭth góld córds.  
 Clóud övēr móuntãin; híll-gãp, ĩn míst, líke ä séa-cóast.

I have no argument here, but a few points do need clarification. First, it must be said that Greek feet are so infinitely various that it is possible to cut up virtually any piece of prose into metrical segments. We must still ascertain what is distinctive in Pound's rhythms. Is it recollection of the metrical frame, the aeolic rhythms that Pound took for model? If so, what can we poor Greekless readers do? Powell himself, however, describes the Greek presence here as a "useful fiction" and concludes his analysis commenting, "by this point, we have probably exhausted the utility of the Greek analogue." Pound's reader may have an advantage, then, if he carries a supply of quantitative *metra* in his head, but this is not (as it is in "Apparuit") a necessity. Powell instead appeals quite rightly to an expectancy theory, citing Pound's oft-quoted statement in *Antheil*: "The verbal rhythm is monolinear. It can form contrappunto only against its own echo, or against a developed expectation."<sup>14</sup>

But we may wonder how this expectancy develops. The repeated features are not real quantities but Greek-derived groupings of stress unusual in English poetry. Prominent here, as in many of the lyrical passages, are the adonic (---) and the ionic (---). These groupings are often longer than three syllables, that is, longer than the normal English foot; they show frequent spondees which disrupt the normal alternating patterns of English meter; they avoid exact repetition; and they avoid sequences of three or more slack syllables, common in stress meters and in prose. Pound did not stake his career on genuine English quantity, and his lyrical measures arise largely from patterns of slacks and stresses that merely suggest classical meters.

But if the organizing feature is stress after all, perhaps Sally M. Gall is correct to insist that the stress patterns are isochronous. Pound's rhythms, she claims, have a "temporal order that can be expressed by

<sup>14</sup> Ezra Pound and Music, ed. R. Murray Schafer (New Directions, 1977), p. 258.

a time signature—4/4 or 6/4, for example.”<sup>15</sup> There is some merit in this approach, but much that is misleading as well. Although Gall does not appeal to linguistics, she could have found support in David Abercrombie’s “A Phonetician’s View of Verse Structure,” which points out that in any language “either the stress-producing pulses or the syllable-producing pulses can be in isochronous sequence. . . . English is a typical example of a language with stress-timed rhythms. French is a typical example of a language with a syllable-timed one.”<sup>16</sup> The trouble with this, as Charles O. Hartman notes, is not that isochronous stress plays no role in English, but that it plays too much. “Every utterance in the language tends to equalize the intervals between accents,” whether the utterance is metered verse, free verse, or prose; to find isochronous stress in Pound is hardly more surprising than to find words.<sup>17</sup> It does nothing to isolate distinctive features, which in the lyrical passages arise from controlled numbers and patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Being so basic a rhythm to the language, however, isochronous stress plays an important role in Pound’s prosody. Indeed, as Joseph Malof has argued, native English stress rhythms tend to reassert themselves in historical periods when other poetic artifices are weakening.<sup>18</sup> In any free verse, the tendency of syllables to form isochronous groups around primary stresses often serves to regulate line units into roughly equivalent lengths. Stress metric is most useful, therefore, in describing not the lyrical parts of *The Cantos*, but the looser, more colloquial parts. I borrow an example from John Kwan-Terry, who notes, “The three-stress line gives an unobtrusive pattern to the easy colloquialism of the following passage in Canto XII”<sup>19</sup>:

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<sup>15</sup> Sally M. Gall, “Pound and the Modern Melic Tradition: Toward a Demystification of ‘Absolute Rhythm,’” *Paideuma*, VIII (Spring 1979), 36. Gall rightly urges the importance of isochrony in Pound’s prosody; her musical notation, however, places too much emphasis on specific performance of a poem and obscures the structure of syllabification. In “The Return,” for example, a syllabic notation makes clear the metrical equivalence of the lines “Gods of the winged shoe,” “With them the Silver hounds,” and “Sniffing the trace of air”; but in Gall’s musical notation the lines appear wholly unrelated. Compare her scansion with my own in “Pound’s Quantities and ‘Absolute Rhythm,’” pp. 103-04. Despite our differences of approach, however, I am grateful to Sally Gall for her generous criticism of an earlier version of this paper and for several points of detail.

<sup>16</sup> David Abercrombie, “A Phonetician’s View of Verse Structure,” *Studies in Phonetics and Linguistics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 17. See the acute critique of temporalist metrics in Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982), pp. 18-27.

<sup>17</sup> Charles O. Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Malof, “The Native Rhythm of English Verse,” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, V (1963-64), 580-94.

<sup>19</sup> John Kwan-Terry, “Pound and the Limits of Prosody,” *Studies in English Literature* (Tokyo) (1979), pp. 99-100. My own markings of stress would differ somewhat, but not the principle; I have added the marks on





these poems, but none expands on the most surprising fact about them: they are written in blank verse.

When Pound finally turned to his cherished project, worrying "whether there can be a long imagiste or vorticist poem,"<sup>21</sup> he apparently had doubts about the appropriate meter; shunning the free verse of Imagism, he at first placed himself squarely in the tradition that originated (however much filtered through Browning) in *Paradise Lost*. Milton himself, of course, had been deeply concerned with the proper metrical contract for his English epic, and after considering a more expected form, he chose blank verse and defended it as a needed innovation. Today, a *Paradise Lost* in heroic couplets seems as unthinkable as eight hundred pages of Cantos in blank verse, but if either Milton or Pound had been more overawed by the epic challenge, this is what they might have left us.

Pound was two-and-a-half Cantos into his poem when he introduced the Nekuia passage and brought about several unexpected results. He discovered that his elastic form could not only allude freely, but could actually contain ready-made texts as "images," simply presented as synecdoche for a culture or a sensibility. In the process, he could remove the narrating voice to the background. And this translation introduced a metrical base from which he could proceed in many different directions—in fact, it broke the pentameter and suggested that meter itself could form part of the subject of the poem.

The passage in *Ur-canto* III that introduces the Nekuia expresses Pound's immediate concern with the sound and rhythm of his translation:

Uncatalogued Andreas Divus,  
Gave him in Latin, 1538 in my edition, the rest uncertain,  
Caught up his cadence, word and syllable:  
"Down to the ships we went, set mast and sail,  
Black keel and beasts for bloody sacrifice,  
Weeping we went."  
I've strained my ear for *-ensa*, *-ombra*, and *-ensa*  
And cracked my wit on delicate canzoni—  
Here's but rough meaning:  
"And then went down to the ship, set keel to breakers. . . ."

One peculiarity about this is that the subsequent passage, supposedly in imitation of the four-stress alliterative line, and supposedly catching the Latin cadence of Divus, follows smoothly out of the blank verse that went before.

<sup>21</sup> Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska* (1916; Hesle: Marvell Press, 1960), p. 94.

This same translation, somewhat revised in the final text, still (unlike Pound's "Seafarer") bears resemblance to unrhymed iambic pentameter. Thus the finished product is not only a marriage of Old English meter with Greek ritual, as we have always known, but it is also an excavation into the pre-history of blank verse. Some lines sound clearly as four-stress lines:

Héavy with wéeping, and wínds from stérnward  
Bóre us out ónward with béllýing cánvas,  
Círce's this cráft, the trím-coif'd góddess . . . .

But many can be heard, I think, only as pentameter:

Sēt kéel tō bréakērs, fóρθ òn thē gódlý séa, änd . . . .  
Còvèred wíth clóse-wèbbed míst, ùnpíercèd évèr . . . .  
Ă shéep tō Tírésíās ónlý, bláck änd ä béll-shèep . . . .

And many more can be heard ambiguously as either:

Bóre sheep abóard her, and our bódiēs álsó . . . .  
Bóre shéep äbóard hër, änd òur bódiēs älsó . . . .

Then sát we amídships, wínd jámming the tíllèr . . . .  
Thèn sát wě ämídshíps, wínd jámmīng thē tíllěr . . . .

Came we thén to the bóunds of déepest wáter . . . .  
Cáme wě thén tō thē bóunds óf déepèst wáter . . . .

The lines in this translation are end-stopped and show strong traces of the Old English medial caesura; but they hover between a four-stress line and pentameter.

To complicate matters further, many lines in Canto I exhibit the adonic pattern (---), Pound's most recognizable quantitative fingerprint. It appears as the basis of short lines: "With glitter of sun-rays," "Aforesaid by Circe." And it marks many other lines at beginning or end—too many to be coincidental: "Heavy with weeping," "Bore us out onward," "bellying canvas," "jamming the tiller," "Sun to his slumber," "black and a bell-sheep."

The conclusions I draw are these: the adonics, acknowledging Homer's Greek and Divus' Latin, signal quantitative patterns that will emerge soon afterwards in the poem. The Old English patterns signal not only the origins of English poetry, but the native stress-timed rhythmic stock onto which later importation have been grafted; they imply a survival of the Old English meter as an underlay to the modern iambic pentameter. The pentameter presence, furthermore, marks a familiar point of departure for Pound's long poem—although the poem quickly departs for

other territory. When Pound wrote his famous line in Canto LXXXI, "To break the pentameter, that was the first heave," he was perhaps referring not only to free verse in general, but to his own abandonment of pentameter in the *Ur-cantos* and his final farewell in Canto I.<sup>22</sup>

Thus the rhythm of Canto I, whose ground is often thought to be firm, can be explained by no one system. It refers to three, but fits no one exactly. It is, then, simultaneously an avowal and a disavowal of meter. It claims the relevance of three different metrical systems, but it also claims the poet's freedom from the specific constraints of any. This relation to metrical convention is characteristic of Pound's prosody.

Finally, at the end of Canto I, a different rhythm breaks in for a moment, a rhythm associated with the narrator's voice:

Lie quiet Dívus. I méan, thāt ĩs Āndréas Dívus,  
 Īn öfficína Wechéli, ĩ538, out of Hómer.  
 And he sáiled, by Sírens and thénce óutwārd ānd āwáy  
 And únto Círce.

Two more points can be added: first, this intrusion signals the principle of rhythmic juxtaposition in *The Cantos* (a principle, incidentally, that looks ahead to George Antheil's notion of musical "time-space"<sup>23</sup>). Second, although Pound has been alluding to the Old English line, he has not only ignored the alliterative pattern, but, more subtly, he has in large part avoided more than two consecutive slacks between stresses. But here, at the appearance of Pound's colloquial voice (so dramatic in Pound's recorded reading), we find several instances of three consecutive slacks. This is another general principle: in the heightened, lyrical passages, Pound carefully restricts the intervening slack syllables; but in the looser, more colloquial passages, he allows slack syllables to crowd in:

Ānd thēre wās thē rōw ābōut thāt Gērman-Burgúndian fémale  
 Ānd ĩt wās hĭs méssĭānĭc yéar, Póliorcétes,  
 but hé was béing a bĭt tōo PÓLUMÉTIS  
 Ānd thē Vēnétians wóuldn't gĭve him síx months vacátion.

*The Cantos* do not get far, of course, before they begin to incorporate blocks of prose—"one of the decisive turning points in modern poetics," according to Michael Bernstein, "opening for verse the capacity to include domains of experience long since considered alien

<sup>22</sup> As Sally Gall pointed out to me, the context of this oft-quoted line points to the example of Whitman.

<sup>23</sup> See my article, "Musical Neofism: Pound's Theory of Harmony in Context," *Mosaic*, XIII (Winter 1980), 49-70.

territory." If Pound can exhibit a block of verse such as the Nekuia as synecdoche for a culture, nothing could stop him from similarly exhibiting a piece of prose, for example, the Malatesta letters. The prosodic range of *The Cantos* is not just more or less tightly controlled free verse, but a full spectrum from prose through degrees of free verse through the disciplined form of Cavalcanti's canzone, and even, ultimately, to wordless music itself in Canto LXXV. The result is not merely to open wide the possibilities; rather, as Bernstein says, "Pound's quotations treat language itself as an 'object of representation,' using the words of historical characters 'as documents' freely transposable into his epic."<sup>24</sup>

Thus Pound's metrical contract is not a single decision made definitively at the beginning of the poem: each successive shift of verse form is a new decision and a new sign of intention, and the contract is constantly evolving. These prosodic juxtapositions make the poem appear self-conscious about its own conventions: the Malatesta letters are significant partly because they are "prose," Cavalcanti's stanzas because they are "a poem." The effect—"poem" within "the poetical" within "narrating voice" within "prose document"—is not unlike the tradition of novel within novel that runs from *Don Quixote* through Post-Modernist fiction: there is an illusion of realistic depth and a questioning of reality, a clash of "more" real against "less," transient against permanent, all implied through the shifting verse forms.

Turning back to Canto II, we find a rhythm quite different from that of Canto I but not wholly unrelated:

HÁNG it all, Róbert Brówning,  
 there can bé but the óne "Sordélló."  
 But Sordélló, and mý Sordélló?  
 Lo Sordéls si fó dī Mántóvána.  
 Só-shu chúrned in the séa.  
 Séal spórts īn thē spráy-whītēd círclēš óf cliff-wásh,  
 Sléek héad, dáughtēr óf Lír,  
     éyes óf Píccássó  
 Úndēr bláck fúr-hòod, líthe dáughtēr óf Océān;  
 Ānd thē wáve rúns īn thē béech-gròve:  
 "Éléanōr, ἐλένας and ἐλέπτολις!"  
     Ānd póor òld Hómēr blínd, blínd, ās ā bát,  
 Eár, eár fōr thē séa-súrge, múrmūr óf òld mēn's vóicēs. . . .

After four opening lines in the voice of the narrator, the verse modulates for the first time into the characteristic lyric rhythms of the poem. The new patterns are stated and repeated: two stresses followed by anapestic movement, slack syllables never exceeding two, line ends marked

<sup>24</sup> Bernstein, p. 40.

by choriamb or adonic, the adonic often heightened by a doubled initial stress, the whole explicable as combinations of Greek *metra*. The ear takes it all in. These patterns, especially the line-ends, were anticipated in Canto I. As if to point to them, Pound evokes not just Greek subject matter, but Greek melopoeia specifically: "Ear, ear for the sea surge." Finally, the opening lines modulate into fragmentary syntax, Pound's deictic of reverie, from "Sho-shu churned in the sea," a finite sentence parallel with those before it; though "Seal sports in the spray-whited circles of cliff-wash," in which "sports" is ambiguously a verb parallel with "churned" or a noun parallel with "sleek head" in the next line; and thence into the phrasal cadences that will follow. These lyric rhythms are associated with the paradisaical visions of *The Cantos*, a vision "spezzato apparently," that "exists only in fragments." As Powell remarks, for such visionary moments the devices of "stichic composition become progressively less useful: a fragmentary paradise will not sustain a continuous narration, nor a rhythmic artifice based on lines of equal weight in more or less continuous sequence."<sup>25</sup>

But Canto II juxtaposes two visions, and the second *is* narrative, an episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. So Pound shifts gears again. The new rhythm is a stress meter—generally a three-stress line, but sometimes two or four:

The shíp lánded in Scíos,  
           mén wánting spríng-water,  
 Ánd bÿ thē rók-pool a yóung boy lóggy with víne-must,  
           "То Náxos? Yés, we'll táke you to Náxos,  
 Cúm' along lád." "Not thát way!"  
 "Áyé, thát way is Náxos."  
           And Í sáid: "Ít's ā stráight shíp."  
 And an éx-cónvíct oút óf Ítaly  
           knócked me ínto the fóre-stays,  
 (He was wánted for mánsláughtēr ín Túscany)  
           And the whóle twénty agáinst me,  
 Mád for a líttle sláve móney.

This movement is different from that of the previous lyric, recognizably narrative, and recognizably a stress meter because of the free slack syllables. In addition, John Hollander has noted the "powerful effect of the graphic schema of the broken line," a device borrowed from "the scholarly space added between half-lines of early Germanic poetry." Pound, says Hollander, introduced this device in Canto II "after preparing the way with his resonant accentual six-beat 'Ear, ear for the

<sup>25</sup> Powell, p. 31.

sea-surge, murmur of old men's voices.'" "The assimilation of the German accentual and the Classical divided hexameter," he writes, led Pound to "a metrical pattern for a freely accentual line."<sup>26</sup> Thus the two rhythmic blocks of Canto II develop the different metrical references of Canto I in two directions, first toward a greater elaboration of quantitative patterns, and then toward a six-stress elongated Germanic line.

To test these observations in a later Canto, I turn to two passages, more or less at random, from Canto XXV. I look to this Canto because it contains material in Pound's documentary manner, as well as one of his most celebrated lyric expressions. In the opening, Pound translates from a historical document of thirteenth-century Venice:

THE BÓOK OF THE CÓUNCIL MÁJOR  
 Í255 bé it enácted:  
 That they mústn't shoot cráp in the háll  
 of the cóuncíl, nör ín the smáll cóurt under  
 páin of 20 danári, bé it enácted:  
 Í266 no squíre of Vénice to thrów díce  
 ánywhère ín the páláce ör  
 in the löggia öf the Ríältö ündër páin of ten sóldi  
 or hálf that for kíd's, and íf they wont páy  
 they äre tö bë chücked in the wáter. bé it enácted  
 In líbro pactórum  
 To the thín'gs everlásting  
 mémony bóth for líve mén änd för the fúture et  
 quod públice ínnotéscat  
 in the sáid date, dícto milléssimo  
 öf the illústrious lórd, Lord Jóhn Soránzo

Later, Pound modulates into the lyrical evocation of the artistic imagination that created the beauty of the city:

Whích ís tö sáy: they búilt öut övër the árchës  
 änd the páláce hángs thére ín the dáwn, the míst,  
 ín thát dímnëss,  
 ör äs öne röws ín fröm pást the múrázzí  
 the báрге slów äfter móon-ríse  
 änd the vóice sóundíng ündër the sáil.  
 Míst góne.  
 Änd Sülpícía  
 gréen shóot nów, änd the wóod  
 whíte ündër néw córtëx  
 "äs the scúlp'tör sées the fórm ín the áir  
 bëfóre hë sëts hánd tö mállët,  
 "änd äs hë sées the ín, änd the thróugh,  
 the fóur sídes  
 "nót the öne fáce tö the páintër  
 äs ívörý úncörrúptëd:

<sup>26</sup> Hollander, pp. 236-37.

The first of these is relatively regular for a "prosaic" passage, the second somewhat loose for a lyric; yet the difference is obvious, and the ear grasps it instinctively. It does not reside merely in the contrasting voices, the comically juxtaposed legalese and colloquialism of the first against the lucid imagery of the second. The difference is also metrical.

One senses immediately the greater proportion of slacks to stresses in the first passage, allowing the voice to skim forward, while the crowded stresses in the lyric force it to slow into reverie, as the syntax breaks into phrasal fragments. Pound allows several instances of three or more successive slacks in the first passage—as I have marked it, seven in sixteen lines; in the second, there is only one instance in sixteen lines, and that one is doubtful. On the other hand, spondees or adjacent stresses are infrequent in the first passage ("small court," "throw dice," and "live men" are exceptions), while they appear nine times in the second. This suggests that the forward momentum of the documentary passage resists the disruption of emphatic accentuation, as the principle of isochrony evens out the various groups of syllables into a kind of temporal regularity as in prose. This forward momentum appears as well in the frequent enjambment, which in its approximation to prose tends to dissolve the line unit (even where the enjambment has an unmistakable poetic effect: "to thrów díce / ánywhere . . ."). There is no enjambment in the second passage.

The second passage, however, modulates from documentary to lyric via an explicit transitional phrase and two finite sentences. But as the syntax stalls in "as" clauses and noun phrases, the stresses crowd, forming patterns distinct from those of the first passage, and distinct as well from those of traditional English meter. The rhythms are free, no two lines the same. The stresses are frequently adjacent; the slacks (with the one possible exception) do not exceed two in succession. The patterns, which might be endowed with Greek labels, repeat themselves with variation. The terminal adonics,

over the arches  
past the murazzi  
slow after moon-rise  
face to the painter

are truncated into choriambis,

under the sail  
now, and the wood  
form in the air  
in, and the through



(One might observe that, in the prosaic passage, adonic groupings are restricted entirely to heightening the legalistic phrases: "ǺǺ dǻnǻřĩ, bė ĩť ěnǻctėd"; "chũcked ĩn thė wǻtėř, bė ĩť ěnǻctėd"; "lĩbrǻ pǻctǻrũm"; "thĩngs ěvėrlǻstĩng.") In the second passage, after a momentary approach to pentameter in the transitional first line, the spondaic patterns emerge in the next, cutting across:

ǻnd thė pǻlǻce hǻngs thėre ĩn thė dǻwn, thė mĩst

Thereafter, spondees are repeated prominently in the isolated short lines, with variation, the last gathering the emphasis of the quoted statement:

ĩn thát dĩmnėss  
Mĩst góne  
thė fǻur sídes

And they appear with similar variation within longer lines, preventing the ear from rationalizing them into the familiar alternating rhythms of English meter:

thė bǻrge slǻw  
ǻnd thė vǻice sǻundĩng  
grėen shǻot nǻw  
ũndėr nėw cǻrtėx  
nót thė óne fǻce

As Powell has written, "No one, no fifty rhythmic systems account for all the *Cantos'* music—as no one analytic strategy will reveal them."<sup>27</sup> But perhaps enough has been said to draw up some of the terms of Pound's metrical contract in *The Cantos*:

(1) Sound, including rhythm, corresponds to feeling and is therefore integral with meaning.

(2) The rhythm of each line is "absolute"; that is, it can be understood by itself as an expressive form without reference to a metrical paradigm.

(3) Meter enters the poem most often not as a set of rules but as a point of reference.

(4) Any metrical system can serve as a possible reference, but most prominent are Greek metrical feet and Germanic stress rhythms.

(5) All metrical systems, including the quantitative, are accommodated to the nature of English stress.

<sup>27</sup> Powell, pp. 20-21.

(6) Slack syllables between stresses exhibit sometimes more, sometimes less, regularity, as rhythms fluctuate between regulated and loose. At the extremes, this fluctuation merges into metered verse on the one hand or continuous prose on the other.

(7) The contract is not made as a single decision at the beginning of the poem but as a series of juxtapositions, an evolving decorum uniting form and content. The various metrical choices are signals of intention.

(8) Whatever is most rhythmical is most memorable. *Dove sta memora*—where memory liveth, there the rhythms of the language are most vital. *The Cantos* in their most lyrical moments preserve the relation of song and oral tradition to memory and so look back beyond Homer to the probable origins of poetry. In Pound's scheme of permanent, recurrent, and casual, the permanent and memorable are most often inscribed in the classical rhythms of Greece and Rome.

When Pound began writing *Cantos*, he was embarking on a long poem of no known genre. His poem established that genre, with its attendant meter, and its influence has helped to shape subsequent examples by William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and (more indirectly) David Jones. Each has made his modifications of Pound's formal conventions: but the work of each has been made possible, at least in part, by the unwritten poetics of *The Cantos*. And each has in some sense validated Pound's work, showing it to be not merely idiosyncratic, but a treasury of original, usable principles of poetic expression.