

## **Examining the Role of Reminiscence in James Joyce's Cantos**

*Dr. Reetu Khurana (Sardana), Assistant Professor, Dept. Of English,*

*Dayanand College, Hisar (Haryana)*

By 1926, James Joyce and his friend, admirer and most vigorous publicist, Ezra Pound, were launched on the two long, difficult works which were to be their last - *Finnegans Wake* and the *Cantos*. From Paris, "Jim the comedian" (74/433) sent Pound, now settled in Rapallo, an early version of the *Wake*, but Ez, for all his legendary loyalty to old friends, would have none of it. "Dear Jim," he wrote back, "I will have another go at it, but up to present I make nothing of it whatever. Nothing so far as I make out, nothing short of divine vision or a new cure for the clapp can possibly be worth all the circumambient peripherization" (L 202). There is more here than the comedy of leading avant-gardistes unable to deal with each other's most extreme texts (Joyce showed even less interest in the *Cantos*). The sub-text of Pound's snappy critique was precisely that his own ambitious poem did contain, or aspired to, both divine vision and cures for social disease - that is, for war, poverty, hunger, misgovernment and institutionalized oppression. Moreover, the "long poem containing history" was based on a profound intuition that vision and cure were interdependent. Like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the poem with which this most intertextual of texts is closely interwoven, the *Cantos*, while it wishes always to be divertente [entertaining] (41/202), is distinctly a didactic poem. It invites us to accompany its pilgrim/poet on a difficult, non-linear journey out of darkness towards light, in the course of which we meet innumerable examples of the blessed and the damned, as well as of every gradation between. In the course of that journey, we hear many specific judgements and interpretations of history, some of which are at best idiosyncratic, at worst bizarre or rebarbative. Of greater importance than those judgements, some of which we will agree with, some not, is the poet's invitation to join him in an active "volitionist" state of mind, a lively and holistic "awareness" leading toward "directio voluntatis [direction of the mil], as lord over the heart" (77/467). The poem urges us away from despair ("the wrong way about it" [89/598]), passivity, conformity, selfishness and received ideas and language ("Make it new!"), and towards such virtues as responsibility, an active sensibility and benevolence.

A long and hazardous period of probation seems to face a writer when, ceasing to be a contemporary, he becomes a classic. But in the case of James Joyce, perhaps because he was so rigorously tested during his lifetime, this further trial has been cut short. Already his work has weathered rejection by publishers, objection by printers, suppression by censors, confiscation by custom officials, bowdlerization by pirates, oversight by proofreaders, attack by critics, and defense by coteries -- not to mention misunderstanding by readers. Meanwhile he has won the most significant kind of recognition: imitation by writers. His influence has been so pervasive that, to a large extent, it remains unacknowledged. How many of those who read John Hersey's Hiroshima recognize its literary obligation to *Ulysses*? There have been other demonstrations, but none so pertinent, of how an original mode of expression can help us to grasp a new phase of experience. Is it any wonder, when we live in such an explosive epoch, that even the arts have made themselves felt through a series of shocks?

Hence Joyce's books, which a few years ago we had to smuggle into this country, are today required reading in college courses. As we study them closely, we are less intimidated by their idiosyncrasies, and more impressed not only by the qualities they share with the great books of other ages, but by their vital concern for the problems of our own age. In the light of the political exile that has activated so many writers in recent years, Joyce's artistic expatriation no longer seems a willful gesture. His escape from his native island to the continent of Europe, as it turned out, was to merge his private career with what he called the nightmare of history. It was easier for Flaubert, a sedentary bachelor with a comfortable estate and a regular income, to assume the stigmata of aesthetic martyrdom. It was excruciating for Joyce, a nomadic foreigner struggling to support a family by other means than his writing, to be bound -- as he put it -- "to the cross of his own cruel fiction."

**Could you tell us a bit about *The Cantos* and why they have been so widely studied?**

*The Cantos* are one of modernism's longest poems, begun in earnest around 1915 and incomplete at Ezra Pound's death in 1972. They cover decades of political and cultural history through which Pound was always near the center, with his readings of the world around him and of the past and the future powerfully revealing throughout and often

perplexing. I think it's the extensiveness of this poem as a cultural document that has led to its ubiquity in academic circles—whichever portion of it you turn to you're taken in many directions, with the reader keenly encouraged to learn about periods of history they're unlikely to have known about and to engage with fascinating bodies of work that are ignored by most other twentieth-century writers. Pound's intense political engagement makes his work even more fascinating, as we read this poet who has such a developed understanding of the modernist cultural world get things so catastrophically wrong with his political attachments leading up to the Second World War. All of these things, added to Pound's ubiquity as a cultural scene-maker throughout the years of High Modernism, make *The Cantos* compelling to read in its context, while the complexity of Pound's methods and sources make for a distinctively immersive reading experience.

**What is the effect of examining single or small isolated groups of cantos? Did you find that they can be interpreted differently when assessed in this way?**

The rationale for this book developed from the London *Cantos* Reading Group, which has been running at the Institute of English Studies at the University of London since 2006. We decided to organize the group by reading one canto a session, approached in a non-linear fashion according to the interests of invited guests and group members. It seemed sensible to us to look at a canto a session because of the complexity of the poem and the unlikelihood of arriving at coherent readings of the wider poem, while also not wanting to get bogged down in line-by-line readings in the way that reading groups that have sprung up around James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* often do. We felt that Pound's ideogrammic method (which works through the juxtaposition of "subject rhymes" within, across and between Cantos) demands that we approach the text in a way that gave us enough space to read at least some of those ideograms, and approaching it non-chronologically served to emphasize those

connections, with rhymes from the earliest parts of the poem repeating throughout and Pound's distinctive connective technique illuminated across the decades of the poem.

The benefits of reading the poem in this way extend to writing about it. Attempts to offer a homogeneous reading of the whole poem, and even of shorter sections of it, have often failed to account for its true complexity. We believe that bringing a multitude of critics together with differing understandings and approaches is the best way to draw out the multiplicity of Pound's poem. All of the pieces are written with an awareness of the poem as a whole, yet the close focus of the writing allows us to consider each iteration of a subject rhyme in its proper context.

**This book, the first of three volumes, draws focus on groups of cantos from the Ur-Cantos. What can we learn from these early, discarded works?**

Helen Carr's piece on the Urs in *Readings in the Cantos* volume 1 offers an extensive explication of the context in which Pound began his long poem and the many different approaches that he tried as he began his project. Pound's poem remains heterogeneous throughout, but the beginning is particularly eclectic, with Pound self-consciously running through a series of different possible approaches to his project. In the Urs Pound grapples with Browning, Homer, Ovid, Anglo-Saxon poetics and much else, experimenting with different voices and compositional strategies, before lighting on the *Cantos*-method that would come to define his project. It is incredibly helpful to watch him draft and edit here, with his rejected starting points offering key insights into the way his eventual voice developed.

At this moment we see Pound's incredibly influential version of literary modernism emerging for the first time, with the gestation of the Ur-Cantos offering a privileged insight into the

aesthetics of a wider movement. It is, therefore, fitting that *Readings in The Cantos* begins with these sections, which would be much changed in later versions of this poem. In their variousness they gesture toward the approaches we have taken here, with diversity becoming the key editorial consideration in this project.

### **How does this volume pave the way for further research into *The Cantos*?**

This book should serve as a reference resource for readers looking for information on particular sections of *The Cantos*, providing an ideal starting point for a research project. The essays offer insight into the current state of critical thinking about *The Cantos* and in that they should offer ways forward: elaboration out of, and disagreement with, these essays will offer a multitude of routes forward.

This volume and the volumes that will follow feature an impressive cross-section of today's significant Poundians, and of writers on modernism more generally. Dipping into *Readings in The Cantos* offers a primer on modernist studies, and we hope that the essays here will provide ways into some greatly rewarding critical oeuvres.

At the same time as offering this summation it is a crucial element of this project that *The Cantos* are approached heterogeneously here, with the essays offering examples of the variety of critical approaches that can be taken toward Pound's long poem. In this the collection offers examples of critical practice to follow and to contradict. While these essays necessarily foreground the kinds of source-hunting that are synonymous with Pound studies, they also move away into more speculative territories that will prove fertile for all readers of modernism.

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