

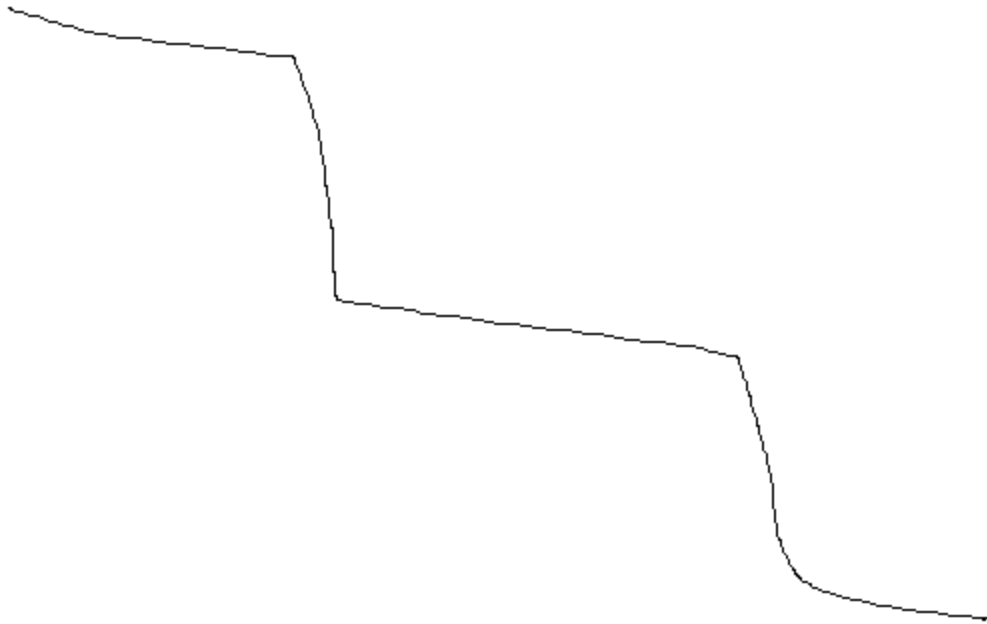
The Form Behind the Metamorphoses: the Flow of Fragments in Pound's *Canto XXIII*
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According to Ezra Pound, his obscure and allusive *Cantos* do not need annotation to be understood: "Skip anything you don't understand and go on until you pick it up again. All tosh about *foreign languages* making it difficult. The quotes are all either explained at once by repeat or they are definitely *of* the things indicated" (Selected Letters 250-51). This claim implies that whatever is necessary to the poem is inherent to it, inviting a close reading of an extremely suggestive and referential work. This paper explores two different readings of "Canto XXIII." The first will be a 'pure' and unaided reading and the second will enlist the help of annotation and research. While both readings centre around a 'directional' discourse, as informed by the constant sense of movement within the Canto, the yields of the two readings are almost opposite.

The unaided reading exhibits the poet's frustrating and futile attempt to move forward while the annotated reading reveals Pound's attempt to stabilize meaning in a fluctuating and metamorphosing world, using as its central metaphor the shape of a wave that is perceptible in a constantly changing ocean. The two processes of reading "Canto XXIII" actually mimic these two respective arguments, in that the first reading involves the reader's discouraging attempt to move forward in understanding the poem while the annotated reading involves finding the unifying form behind the relentlessly shifting world of the Canto. Considering that these two readings are so different, it becomes clear that discovering this unifying form behind the poem is next to impossible without annotation. Reading the *Cantos* thus requires a constant dislocation to other sources, creating a necessarily fragmentary reading process. For this reason, the Canto's form can only be revealed through its fragments, both within the poem and its reading process.

"Canto XXIII" is an especially challenging one for the unaided reader. It is dominated by such obscure and shadowy words and/or names such as Psellos, Gemisto, Novvy, Yperionides, Simone, and Otreus. As a result of this obscurity, one must focus in on specific clues, as, for example, the following lines: "down into, / descends, to the end that, beyond ocean, / pass through, traverse" (107). Clearly, these lines are about movement and direction. The rest of the Canto can now be reconsidered with this in mind. As it turns out, almost every line implies a direction, usually downwards: "Novvy's ship went down in the tempest" (107); sideways: "going towards the low fords of ocean" (107); or sometimes upwards: "where a man might carry his oar up" (108). The upwards motion is the one most often frustrated; no one in the poem ever seems to land on a higher plane. The last lines of the poem, on the other hand, display a frozen moment defined by this lack of movement, punctuated with the necessary period, or 'full stop': "As the sea, hard, a glitter or crystal, / And the waves rising but formed, holding their form. / No light reaching through them." (109).

I decided to map out the directions implied by each line as the poem progressed, canceling out opposing directions and static moments. It looks like this:



The diagram essentially signifies: “down and out.” The poem is an attempt to move forward, but all that is achieved is a static position that leaves both poet and reader aggravated (id est: reading this poem makes me feel “down and out”) at the lack of productive movement.

Regardless of whether or not this reading is in any way valid, curiosity burns, and the reading process must continue. Consulting outside sources reveals new clues as the second reading gets under way. The first comes in the form of “Gemisto” (107). Giorgius Gemistus is a 15th Century neo-pagan philosopher who was a favourite of Malatesta, one of Pound’s heroes, and is buried in his Tempio (Edwards, “Gemisto”). Gemisto believed that the ‘sea-god’ represents the concrete idea that exists behind the constant motion and indefinable nature of the ocean: “the sea changes every nanosecond but Poseidon, Lyr, So-Shu, the concrete images of the sea reveal a form behind the metamorphoses” (Wilson). With this in mind, the Canto is thrown into an entirely new light, teasing out the aquatic code revealed through references to boats and waves and uncovering a definable form behind its metamorphoses. In other words, the concrete idea behind the wave-like inconsistency of “Canto XXIII” is that it is about the desire to stabilize form in a fragmentary world, as signaled by this clue from Gemisto.

Another clue the annotations offered was a slew of new directions found within the Greek, Latin and French translations. I re-mapped the new directions of the poem, and, not surprisingly, I discovered a wave:



The last lines also take on renewed meaning: “the sea, hard, a glitter or crystal, / And the waves rising but formed, holding their form” (109). The Canto is a veritable tsunami of informational shards, from ancient Greece to Italian barbarians to Pierre Curie to the troubadours in Provençal France and back to the mythological figures of Anchises, Adonis, and Aphrodite (as revealed through the annotation). These diverse fragments do not always connect, and it is almost nauseating to attempt to pin down meaning anywhere in the constant motion of this poetic sea. The Canto is no longer about a futile attempt to move forward, but the revelation of the poet’s search for something concrete, “hard,” like “crystal,” in a world that is as unpredictable and transitory as the ocean.

After completing both readings, it is clear that while the ‘directional’ discourse remains paramount, its tone changes, and the poem’s meaning shifts to its almost opposite pole. The first reading revealed an attempt to move and the second an attempt to stay still. These two readings open up the possibility of a third analysis: that through its processes, the Canto actually becomes an allegory of its own reading. This analysis is catalyzed by a clue in the form of this line: “Wotever the hellsarse that is” (109). This rather crude line stands out in an otherwise elegantly articulated poem, coming directly after a reference to “Simone” and “the Manicheans,” two things I myself did not know about before I consulted the annotated index. The line can be taken in two ways: first, Pound is injecting the semi-humorous line in order to flag his sympathy for me, the uncomprehending reader who does not know “wotever the hellsarse” a Manichean is. However, because I do not know this, I become the sort of person that would say things like “wotever” and “hellsarse,” which clearly do not represent the dialect of the intelligent, credible reader. Once the annotation is consulted, the line becomes an insult to the reader who remains ignorant about the reference.

However, the enlightened reader who has consulted the annotation now knows that the Manicheans are a religious sect related to the Albigenses, led by “Simone” de Montfort that were annihilated in the Albigensian crusade alluded to on this page, and this reader can congratulate herself on not being the kind of person who would say something as inelegant as “hellsarse.” In other words, the first reader understands the poem as a futile attempt to move

forward, while she enacts the very same futile attempt to progress through her ignorant reading. The second reader understands the Canto as an attempt to hold down meaning, just as she attempts to grasp the gist of the poem, able in a sense to stop Piere De Maensac from moving around as restlessly as he does on this page, because she already knows his story. Something becomes coherent to this second reader, and she wishes to hold it still on the page, just as she understood Pound to be doing in the Canto.

Clearly, much of what has been written here would have been completely obscured without the help of annotation. Understanding is simply incomplete without the aid that Pound so flippantly scorned. Something can be revealed through internal clues in the poem, as the first reading demonstrates, but what is revealed is ultimately ineffectual and opaque, a scramble in the dark for some shape to hold onto, a wave through which "No light reach[es] through" (109). At the same time, it is similarly trying to have to resort to another text to read the first. Still, this process is no more frustrating than the fragmentary nature of history and life itself, as Pound attempts to show through this Canto. The Cantos are a constant movement of contradictory and fluctuating moments of history, mythology, translation, and allusion, a real "rag bag" (Bush 5), in Pound's own words, that continue to metamorphose not only from one Canto to the next but within every line of the poetry. The poem becomes beautiful through the discovery of the translations and allusions, but without that annotation, it is an ugly aesthetic mess.

If this Canto is a wave that shows its form through the force of its fragments, it feels wrong to attempt to read it as a coherent and uninterrupted whole (unless, of course, one is Ezra Pound. Or a Manichean. Whatever the hell that is). The poem requires fragments to reveal its form, just as its reading requires the intermittent movement from the poem to other sources in order to understand its meaning. Flow requires stoppage in The Cantos, and unity cannot be achieved without interruption. The form behind "Canto XXIII"'s metamorphoses becomes definable only through the constant and fragmentary movement of the poetic, and interpretative, ocean wave.

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