**The Cantos**

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*The Cantos*is a series of 120 long poems by American poet, essayist, and cultural critic Ezra Pound. Pound began work on them as early as 1904, publishing the first three in *Poetry* magazine in 1917. The poems were originally published in eleven separate book-length installments with each individual canto numbered sequentially in Roman numerals. They are highly allusive, polyphonic, and notoriously difficult.

Pound had been interested in epic poetry from his collegiate days, and his ideas about its form were influenced by many of his poetic predecessors: Homer, Vergil, Dante, Spenser, and Milton. But in addition to western poetic traditions, Pound studied classical Chinese and Japanese art and philosophy. These interests led him to translate works by Confucius and Li Po, but they also led to his theory of *phanopoeia*, the importance of the visual elements of a poem. He was particularly interested in ideograms and the way that such characters combined multiple layers of representation, both semantic and visual. Over time, Pound’s poetic project became an ambitious attempt at a complex and dynamic structure of meaning that was an aesthetic object in itself and a representation of the process of interpretation, which engages Odysseus, Elizabeth I, Thomas Jefferson, and a large cast of other characters.

*The* *Cantos* is very loosely structured after Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as well as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* but with a form that is more elastic and able to accommodate different materials such as sections of prose or the lessons of Confucius*.* While the overall structure of the work is free verse, individual poems adopt various complex formal structures. Canto I is a particularly virtuosic example; it translates a Latin edition of Homer’s *Odyssey*—itself a translation from the original Greek—into English using the alliterative and accentual conventions of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Pound famously described *The Cantos* as ‘a poem containing history,’ a phrase that acknowledges the poem’s role as historical narrative—an important element of epic tradition—though the poem lacks a central narrative and instead tries to weave together various threads from across cultures and time. Moreover, the descriptor ‘containing’ suggests an active relationship with a past that is neither linear nor singular. Instead *The Cantos* is Pound’s attempt to bring the best of a wide array of poetic traditions in several languages forward into the modern age, reinvigorating elements of the classics with contemporary ideas and personalities: artists and philosophers, poets and politicians. Packed with allusions and quotations, most in their original languages without annotation or translation, *The Cantos* demands erudition from its readers who are met at times with stunning lyricism and at others with virulent polemics.

While it is now available in a single volume, *The Cantos* was originally published in eleven separate books; these sometimes share thematic concerns and sometimes contain multiple thematic sub-sections. I-XVI (1924) contains two notable subsections, the Malatesta Cantos and the Hell Cantos. Cantos VIII-XI focus on the life of fifteenth-century Italian poet and patron Sigismondo Malatesta. Frustrated by the effects that he thought capitalism and commercialism were having on the arts, Pound envisioned a system of artistic patronage for his contemporaries similar to that of Malatesta. In the Hell Cantos, XIV-XV, Pound populates a modern-day Inferno with some of his contemporaries: politicians, rhetoricians, journalism, and others who corrupted and perverted language to serve their own ends. Canto XV includes reflections on the Great War and the Russian Revolution. XVII-XXX (1925) focuses primarily on Mediterranean culture with a particular focus on Italy. It explores the development of its poetic and political systems, returning to the idea of artistic patronage and the Russian Revolution.

These two books were followed by XXXI-XLI, published as *Eleven New Cantos* (1934) and XLII-LI, *The Fifth Decad of the Cantos XLII–LI* (1937)*,* also known as the Leopoldian Cantos. The latter focuses on the development of the modern banking industry and [contains the famous ‘Usura’ canto](https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Pound/1939/Pound-Ezra_12_Canto-XLV_Harvard_1939.mp3), in which Pound rails against the modern practice of money lending. Such a practice, according to Pound, would not only corrupt the arts, it would ruin all of mankind spiritually and physically: ‘Corpses are set to banquet / at behest of usura’ (lines 48-49). The next published section, *Cantos LII–LXXI* (1940), contains the China Cantos (LII-LXI) and the Adams Cantos (LXII-XXI). The China Cantos are based on an eighteenth-century 12-volume set of Chinese history books. The Adams Cantos stitch together fragments from the writings of American President John Adams to depict Adams as the ideal American leader: practical, principled, and courageous. The next section of the poem, LXXII–LXXIII (The Italian Cantos), were written in 1944 and 1945 but were not published until the complete revised edition of the poem was published in 1987. These poems return to Pound’s earlier interest in Dante and adopt the formal structure of *The Divine Comedy* to focus on Italian culture, both ancient and modern.

Perhaps best-known are the Pisan Cantos, LXXIV–LXXXIV (1948), so-called because of their place of origin. These twelve poems were composed during Pound’s confinement in an open-air Italian detainment center while under arrest for treason. The tone of the poem shifts from its previously documentary pose and assumes a more personal and lyrical mode. It opens with the execution of Benito Mussolini, whose death represented the loss of Pound’s hopes for economic and social reform, for Pound, as Christine Froula points out, did not understand that Mussolini had betrayed these ideals long before. Over the course of the rest of these poems, Pound is visited by the ghosts of several late friends, Ford Maddox Ford, James Joyce, and W. B. Yeats, among others, and he revisits many of the political and economic tenets of earlier cantos. The poems were awarded the first Bollingen prize for poetry in 1949, which sparked a major controversy given Pound’s fascist sympathies.

In 1956, Pound published LXXXV–XCV under the title *Section: Rock-Drill, 85–95 de los cantares*. *Rock-Drill* was one of two sections of the poem that Pound composed while institutionalized at St. Elizabeth’s, a hospital outside of Washington DC. The mechanistic title ‘was intended to imply the necessary resistance in getting a main thesis across — hammering’ (Stock, 566). This section of *The Cantos* tries to bring together many of the ideas that Pound has included in earlier sections to realize paradise in poetic form. They are marked by exceptional density, and feature Chinese ideograms as well as lines in untranslated Greek, rendering them all but illegible for many readers.

Three years later, in 1959, Pound followed *Rock-Drill* with the second volume of *The Cantos* composed at St. Elizabeth’s, *Thrones: 96–109 de los cantares.* He explained, ‘The thrones in Dante's *Paradiso* are for the spirits of the people who have been responsible for good government. The thrones in *The Cantos* are an attempt to move out from egoism and to establish some definition of an order possible or at any rate conceivable on earth … *Thrones* concerns the states of mind of people responsible for something more than their personal conduct’ (Stock, 566).

As he neared the completion of the project late in life, he reflected with dissatisfaction, ‘It is difficult to write a paradiso when all the superficial indications are that you ought to write an apocalypse’ and also remarked that the poem was ‘too obscure’ (*Paris Review*). Many critics read the following passage from CXVI as an admission of failure:

But the beauty is not the madness

Tho’ my errors and wrecks lie about me.

And I am not a demigod.

I cannot make it cohere (26-29).

Plagued by self-doubt, Pound himself told Allen Ginsberg in 1967 that *The Cantos* was ‘A mess … my writing, stupidity and ignorance all the way through.’ Ginsberg disagreed, however, calling them ‘a great human achievement.’ The appearance of a pirated edition of *Cantos 110-116* convinced Pound reluctantly to publish the final installment of *The Cantos*, *Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII*, in 1969.

**Multimedia**

[The Ezra Pound page at Penn Sound contains recordings](http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Pound.php) of Pound himself reading several cantos as well as dozens of other poems.

**For Further Reading**

Cookson, William. *A Guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound, Rev ed*. (2002) New York: Persea Books.

Froula, Christine. *A Guide to Ezra Pound’s Selected Poems* (1982) New York: New Directions.

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