

CRISIS EPISTEMOLOGY: THIS TOO IS OF THE PROCESS

Quentin Mahoney



The enormous complexities of Hegelian philosophy can be roughly surmised by acknowledgement of a single formula: that epistemic systems are historically constituted events. Overlaying our hard-wired Kantian biological faculties – sensory data collection, physiological communication with the external, and a recursively-endowed language capacity – are social conventions learned over a brief human lifetime, conventions that will determine how judgements are made over that raw collection of data, and condition our self-conception as individuals as well as our shared picture of the world at large. The shared social space over which these conventions govern is the macrocosmic isotope of what Hegel calls *Geist*, or ‘Spirit.’ *Geist* is also individual self-consciousness, and the concept considered in total is the fraught continuum of aggregate individual *Geist* in relationship to its larger body; sometimes at shaky equilibrium, sometimes breaking down.

The so-called ‘idealism’ of Hegelian philosophy is just that very materialist revelation: that our conception of the world, and our place in it, is predicated on the cultural information we have access to within a given historical moment. Institutions built in the social space – be they religion, the government, the education

system, or the media we consume – ground the judgements or facts that we consider to be true. Crises within the social space – such as war, financial meltdowns, environmental disaster, the lack of a coherent national or community project – hollow out the trust that these institutions require for truth-statements to find common agreement. Verification principles break down, and facts untethered from a grounded reality float off into uncertain and capricious winds.

This new paradigm of epistemology — as process, rather than stasis — was profoundly influential on the Modernist project, and the Europhilic Americans who became Modernism’s primary exponents in the early 20th century. Language was no longer seen as something static, but as a dynamic world-organism; in touch with itself across space and time thanks to epochal advancements in communication technology as well as linguistic research. Poetry was becoming something more of an archaeological exercise than a merely epistolary one. The goal of this project began to reveal itself across the innovations of literary Modernism, and finds its apotheosis in two of the tradition’s most ambitious works: Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* and Pound’s *Cantos*.

Both works are self-consciously epic in scope, and present an entirely new kind of written idiom: a form of verse or prose that attempts to contain the colossal variety of world-myth; the mutations of language over time, its rhymes and remembrances; the very origins of civilization and literature hauled back to the contemporary moment, re-instantiated over and over again in a perpetually shifting vernacular. Both the *Wake* and the *Cantos* are best known for the legendary demands they make upon the reader – whether or not the time and struggle required is worth the rewards hidden in either text is still a matter of open debate (Eliot can be difficult, but at least he's quick).

The *Wake*, while intensely difficult, is suffused with good humor (if, it seems, at the expense of the reader) and often still pleasurable to read. Joyce succeeds at his construction of an internally coherent idiom despite the total opacity (or lack) of narrative, and his dispensation of apparent nonsense is executed with sublime precision. This alone would make the *Wake* superior to Pound's erratic *Cantos*, even before we take into account that Joyce is unburdened by the shadow of Axis collaboration. The *Pisan Cantos*, the strongest and most elegant sequence of Pound's epic, become even harder to read as we realize that the poems are a criminally insane man's elegiac farewell to Italian Fascism.

The *Pisan's* begin with a benediction for Mussolini, executed and hung by the heels at Milan. Anxious that a fate similar to Il Duce's was coming for him, either from an Italian Partisan's rifle or a noose at Nuremberg, Pound's typical garrulity, confidence, and taste for the polemic is tamped down compared to earlier *Cantos*. The first *Cantos* set course by strong winds: "And then went down to the ship,/ Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and/ We set up mast and sail on that swart ship" (i.1-3). Pound announces that his purpose here is isomorphic to Joyce's in *Ulysses*: to create not just a contemporary Homer, but a *modernist* Homer—a Homer that is both personal and in contact with the whole genealogy of literature since the time of Ionian bards. Pound's is also a somewhat Gnostic Homer. He does not narrate as Odysseus, but as a midshipman in the crew. He is not concerned with replicating received authority, but with uncovering deeper and hidden truths; raising overlooked apostasies to the level of gospel; speaking a street vernacular of world-myth that brings voice to lesser thugs among the gods.

If this sounds similar to the work of a conspiracy theorist, that is because the *Cantos* often read like the hallucinogenic ravings of a paranoid lunatic. Armed with the world's largest corkboard and an endless spool of yarn, Pound makes vertiginous leaps across the public consciousness; identifying literary and historical figures separated by centuries and hemispheres within a single line break. The *Cantos* are just as concerned with the development of world-mythology as with the origins of global finance, tracing Marco Polo's account of paper money in Kublai Khan's China to the gestation of modern monetary systems in the womb of the Medici banks. As Joyce said of Pound, the enigmatic poet was equally capable of digging up brilliant discoveries or committing howling blunders. The *Cantos* accurately demonstrate the contradictions inherent to a

system in which surplus labor-value is the dominant organizing principle of social life. However, as the *Cantos* become more tunnel-visioned and polemic, Pound betrays his considerable intellectual gifts by—like many cranks before and since—embracing the anti-Semitic propaganda that falsely identifies the machinations of international finance with the Jewish diaspora at large.

By the *Pisan* sequence, Pound's confidence was shattering along with the firebombed desolation of his beloved Europe: "As a lone ant from a broken ant-hill/ from the wreckage of Europe, ego scriptor." (lxxvi.208-9) The *Pisan's* reflect the epistemic breakdown that Hegel tells us will happen in the event of such ruptures in the social fabric. Amid the collateral damage of WWII, the old world was dying, and a new world was struggling to be born. The only nation left standing in the rubble was the country Pound had exiled himself from three decades before. Insulated from the global carnage by two oceans, the United States came out of the second world war in an historically unprecedented position of power. Armed with an economic and military juggernaut vitalized by wartime stimulus, the US quickly set about remaking the new world in its own image, with American finance ready to target its true enemies: 1) the Soviet Republic that had just,—at catastrophic national expense — eliminated the Nazi menace; and 2) the anti-colonial liberation movements emerging across the Third world.

The *Pisan* sequence finds Pound reconstructing his entire project in real time, as the new world order was being assembled. Gazing out from behind his cell at a cloud ridge, "dove sta memora [where memory liveth]," Pound reflects on the necessity of breaking Mussolini's "political/ but not economic system" (lxxvi.3-5). The *Pisan's* oscillate between excursions into economic theory, considering the vagaries of finance, and more personal reveries – how the world erupted into such conflict, how he found himself on the wrong side of it. Under the shadow of the postwar epistemic malaise, Pound seeks light from his early literary loves: Provencal poetry, the Confucian Odes, even a simple *brododactylos* – the Sapphic instantiation of Homer's rosy-fingered dawn. Attempts at polemic are softened by a Taoist acceptance of a world in flux: this too is of the process.

Pound does not find resolution in his *Cantos*, just more oscillations. After being extradited to the US, Pound would be deemed mentally unfit to stand trial for treason, and spend the next decade interned at St. Elizabeth's Hospital for the Criminally Insane. The only immediate truth found in the *Pisan's* is that "there is a fatigue as deep as the grave" (lxxxiii.160). But there would be no rest for the war-weary world: under the foggy cover of crisis epistemology, the battle lines of the Cold War were already being drawn out.

☞ *Quentin Mahoney is a musician, writer, and bartender. His band HARMONIUM will be playing at the Avalon Lounge in Catskill, New York on 4/11/24*

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