“A Totalitarian Vision of Paradise”: Transnationalism, Individuality, and Totalitarianism in The Cantos by Ezra Pound
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Abstract
The beginning of the twentieth-century was a volatile period, with rapid technological developments, a world war, and emergence of new ideologies and mass movements. In this period, Ezra Pound, a central figure within the modernist movement, saw a world in decline. Pound blamed democracy and capitalism for the war, and spent a good deal of time during the interwar period searching for an alternative poetic and political vision. He was obsessed with the idea of reinvention, of reactivating history in the present and “making it new”. Suffering from the delusion that he could shape reality the same way he could shape a poem, Pound set about to write his own paradise, a paradise which he would then transfer into the real world. In this essay, I will explore the relationship between the different cultural and aesthetic components that made up Pound’s poetic vision, by employing Jahan Ramazani’s theory of the modernist bricolage. Through close readings of a selection of poems from Pound’s epic, The Cantos, specifically Canto “I,” “XIII,” and “XIV,” all written in the interwar period, I am going to examine how Pound’s utopian vision of cultural and historical transnationalism functions in relation to both his assertion of artistic individuality, and his attraction to totalitarian order. I will argue that these seemingly contradictory ideas, transnationalism, individuality, and totalitarianism support each other within Pound’s poetic vision of The Cantos.

Keywords: Transnationalism Totalitarianism; Individuality; History; Pound
Introduction
The beginning of the twentieth-century was a volatile period with drastic technological developments and the emergence of new political ideologies and mass movements. It was in this turbulent time, between the two world wars, that Ezra Pound, one of the leading figures of modernism, witnessed a world in decline, and sought out utopian possibilities that could be expressed through poetic creation. During the interwar period, Pound searched for alternatives to democracy and capitalism, which he considered to be the primary causes of the First World War, in order to reverse what he perceived to be a downward trend of contemporary society and to create his own utopia. In this essay, through close readings of a selection of poems from Pound’s epic, The Cantos, specifically Canto “I”, “XIII”, and “XIV”, I am going to examine how Pound's utopian vision of cultural and historical transnationalism functions in relation to both his assertion of individuality and his attraction to totalitarian forms of government, namely Italian Fascism. While I do not claim that these three poems represent the totality of Pound’s work, they do emphasize an overlaying theme that is present throughout his epic. In exploring these poems, I will argue that the seemingly contradictory ideas, transnationalism, individuality, and totalitarianism support each other within Pound’s poetic vision of The Cantos. The causal link between cultural transnationalism, artistic individuality, and totalitarianism, I will argue, is accomplished through Pound’s exaltation of the artist. In Pound’s work, the poet is placed as the individual who is capable of overcoming the present by shaping a utopia within which the future includes history.

In order to understand how Pound’s utopian vision is developed, it is necessary to briefly sketch out his attitude towards his social and historical moment. Pound perceived a downward trend in society, which was, arguably, in part due to the
economic globalization, which Pound feared would inevitably compromise cultural production. According to Leon Surette modernist poets such as Pound and Wyndham Lewis, among others, were concerned that globalization would result in a loss of cultural diversity and that economic and commercial interests would be prioritized above cultural values (Utopia 3). Indeed, during the early twentieth-century, there was a concern among modernist writers that just as literacy was increasing and cultural experience had the potential to reach a wider audience, market capitalism was already in the process of reducing the value of art to the lowest common denominator, which is its ability to sell (Bronner 9). This point is strongly emphasized by Pound in The Cantos where he states that “no picture is made to endure nor to live with / but is made to sell and sell quickly” (XLV 229). Arguably, Pound’s fear that artists would be unable to create authentic works as long as they wrote for the market was one of the reasons that first led him to seek out alternatives to the capitalist democracies of the west. The Cantos, in this context Paul Stasi argues, is an alternative to economic globalization and cultural homogenization: it is “a poem that constructs an international culture based not on ‘the elimination of differences,’ but on the ‘right of differences to exist’” (364). This resistance to cultural homogenization and claim to artistic individuality were the beginning of Pound’s vision, in which artistic success was not determined by mass appeal or numbers of books sold, but by aesthetic and cultural value.

One of the main sources of inspiration for Pound’s poetic vision was history. Pound sought to include and juxtapose historical periods and previous literary works in The Cantos through intertextuality and translation, as well as cross-cultural and historical references. This eclectic and inclusive approach to history enabled Pound to incorporate multiple cultural settings and transnational linkages in The Cantos. Within his work, Pound navigates and shapes history. He crosses borders in time, as well as in space, in an attempt to include different cultural and historical periods within his vision. Travelling and crossing of borders, both spatial and temporal, constitute a crucial dimension of Pound’s poetics, in which time does not move in a strictly linear fashion. For Pound, the past is not inaccessible, nor is history simply stories of a time gone by. Rather, history is used and reactivated in the present in order to shape the transnational utopia that Pound envisioned. It is a utopia where the future includes the past. The non-linearity of time within Pound’s work is a transnational feature; it is a
crossing of historical borders that bring together different cultural contexts such as, Homer’s Greece and Confucius’ China.

A critic who discusses Pound’s view of history and poetry is Paul Morrison. Morrison claims that “The Cantos does not simply “include” history as so much inert subject matter; rather, the poem hopes to effect a historical revolution” (26). Indeed, Pound did not simply want to write a poem that contained history; in one of the later cantos he stated: “I have tried to write Paradise” (CXVII 822). That Pound’s vision of paradise included history is a vital connection since, as mentioned above, one of the ways in which he had tried to accomplish this monumental ambition was to search through history for the cultural and aesthetic components that were necessary to create his paradise. Through this vision of the past and history Pound hoped to shape the future. Thus The Cantos are not, as Stasi argues “a nostalgic lament for the lost unity of Ancient China or eighteen-century America; rather, it is an attempt to produce a new tribe based on ‘the right of differences to exist,’ a tribe that is, fundamentally, multicultural” (366). This meeting of different cultural and historical traditions, like those of Homer’s Greece and Confucius’ China forms one of the central pillars of Pound’s utopian vision. Through the process of selection and omission, Pound shapes his utopia, and with all of recorded history at his disposal, he can realize his vision without being restricted by spatial or temporal boundaries. While traversing history Pound would scan certain periods for both political and poetic components that would be useful in his new utopian design. This “revolutionary utopianism” as argued by Gregory Betts, is an “appeal to a universal, hence transglobal conception of art” (209), in which the goal is always the prospective future product: a transnational utopia. This is the vision that Pound was trying to bring into existence: the utopia that he spent 40 years of his life writing.

However, this transnational and utopian vision of history would become a nightmare from which Pound could not awake. Pound’s almost obsessive relationship with history, and the idea that he could create something new out of the past extend from a primarily aesthetic to a political idea. Surette claims that Pound “adheres to the illusion that governing a nation is analogous to composing a work of art,” which is the product of the individual artist (Utopia 230). This exaltation of the artist, the idea that one person can shape and design the world is compatible with a totalitarian power structure where, one man, the great leader, takes the place of the artist and shapes society into the optimal state—a state that is only achievable if it is designed by a
proper vision. This vision, in Pound’s case, is a vision of justice, that is, to see the world not as it is but as it should be. The world that we currently have is insufficient “it needs to be balanced, corrected, and maybe even replaced by a contrary vision of justice—the world as it should be, and as it can be in great works of art and literature” (Kirsch 2). Thus, as I will demonstrate throughout this essay, Pound’s cross-cultural and transnational poetics that make up his utopian vision is deeply rooted in his commitment to the idea of artistic individuality and the creative authority that this idea entails.

Pound’s poetics and politics, in this respect, were intertwined, and his attraction to Fascist Italy extended to the man who shaped it. William Chace argues that in Pound’s mind, Mussolini governed the same way an artist creates: he shaped Italy like Pound would shape a poem (64). Chace proceeds to argue that Pound’s attraction to Mussolini was a form of hero worship; for Pound, the political system in Italy was simply an extension of Mussolini himself (64). Mussolini then became a contemporary version of Pound’s past political heroes like Confucius, Thomas Jefferson, and Napoleon, among others. Mussolini was an embodiment of the past, a living aesthetic and cultural component that Pound could add to his work. Mussolini was the individual leader standing proud above the mass, rather than being a part of it, capable of shaping the world into a proper vision of justice. This link between the poet and the leader, where they are both seen as the shaper of their respective fields, that is art and politics, is consistently invoked in Pound’s work, who thought that, “fundamental reform in human affairs could only be brought about by a stroke of genius” (Surette, Purgatory 5). In Pound’s poetic vision then, the concepts of individuality and totalitarianism support each other through the link between the creative freedom of the artist and the political leader. It was only through an individual genius that the world could be changed from what it was into what it should be.

Thus, the connection between Pound’s emphasis on artistic individuality, his attraction to totalitarianism and his transnational and transhistorical poetics is manifested in a desire to reshape history in order to shape the present. Pound’s attraction to transnationalism and reimagining of history were about cross-cultural navigation, it was about finding “routes not roots” (Stasi 363). Pound’s concern was finding ways to connect and juxtapose different cultures within one artistic sphere where the right to be different would be protected from the imposing standardization
of capitalism. As I will further demonstrate throughout this essay, within Pound’s epic, *The Cantos*, concepts of totalitarianism, artistic individuality, and transnationalism, transnationalism exist in a causal relationship. These concepts both support and strain against each other and are ultimately held together by the exaltation of the poet as the shaper of the vision that contains them. Most significantly, these ideas—artistic individuality, totalitarianism, and transnationalism—become visible in Pound’s poetry through a variety of cross-cultural and historical references that open up future utopian possibilities where spatial and temporal borders are consistently crossed and redrawn.

**Literature Review**

There have been many studies written about Pound’s poetry, and Pound scholarship has gone through many phases over the years. Pound’s attraction to totalitarianism, his emphasis on artistic individuality as well as his cross-cultural references have been central issues addressed in the critical discussions of his work. Despite a few passionate supporters, mostly poets like Eliot and Yeats, Pound’s work was largely ignored in the 1910s and 1920s. In this period, his inaccessible and experimental style with its mixture of languages and poetic forms was not highly regarded by the critics and reviewers in the UK and the US. And, after the 1930s Pound’s work was in large part condemned and overshadowed by his political views. However, the importance of Pound’s poetry started to be acknowledged with the publication of Hugh Kenner’s seminal work *The Pound Era* (1971). *The Pound Era* is a mixture of biographical and critical analysis of Pound’s work with a focus on his epic, *The Cantos*. Kenner traces and illuminates Pound’s poetry through references to important moments in his life, including his disillusion with the West after the First World War where one of his closest friends Henry Gaudier-Brzeska, a sculptor who had been forced to work in plaster because he could not afford stone, had died.

Kenner attempts to explain the structure of *The Cantos*, a poem that previous criticism had claimed was without any form, structure or design. Commenting on the poem, Kenner argues that no art happens by accident: “the vision that creates it is a part of it” (33). Pound’s vision, one he shared with a few other modernists such as Joyce and Eliot, among others, was, according to Kenner a multicultural one that was based on an incredible ambition of voicing a collective poetic imagination: “the province of these works, as never before in history, is the entire human race speaking,
and in time as well as in space” (95). Indeed, just the first draft of Cantos travelled between Homer’s Greece, the Italian Renaissance, and Confucian China. Pound even visited contemporary Europe in the “Hell Cantos”, which were modeled after Dante’s *Inferno*. This eclectic combination of cultural and historical settings was a way for Pound not only to incorporate these events and periods into his work, but also to integrate their culture within one interconnected literary journey. Kenner places Pound at the center of the modernist movement and describes him as the driving force behind it. Kenner does not attempt to justify Pound’s political views or actions nor does he make any excuses for them. However, by largely excluding Pound’s political views in his study, Kenner, whether consciously or not, minimalizes their importance in favor of the poet’s aesthetic and literary accomplishments.

One of the prominent Pound critics, who, unlike Kenner, emphasizes the connection between Pound’s claims to artistic individuality, his political views, and his attraction to totalitarianism, is Adam Kirsch. Kirsch argues that there is a causal connection between, on the one hand, Pound’s views of artistic individuality, which asserts the creative ability of the artist, and on the other, his attraction to totalitarian structures. Kirsch argues that if the poet can see “the world as it should be”, “the world as it is” cannot seem to be anything but an inferior version. Fascism, in Pound’s case, then, according to Kirsch, is an aesthetic idea that can be “ruthlessly shaped in order to achieve perfection” (7), and “Pound had no hesitation about sweeping away persons the way he might have struck out a bad line in a poem” (9) to attain this perfection. For Pound, this notion of the poet as the shaper of reality became more than an aesthetic idea. Kirsch argues that: “Pound’s fantasy of a perfect society – his private vision of justice – became an obsession” (7). Kirsch concludes by stating that Pound was not just a poet with an attraction to fascism, but one that actively shaped himself into a fascist poet.

While Kirsch focuses on Pound’s political views and his poetic emphasis on artistic individuality and totalitarianism, other critics draw attention to Pound’s interest in different cultural contexts. The centrality of Pound’s use of different cultural materials within his work is not something that is contested among critics; however, the nature of his cross-cultural references and transnational tendencies has been discussed in different ways. There are critics, such as Eric Hayot, who discusses the Eurocentric nature of the poetic vision of modernist poets, including Pound. Following Edward Said’s idea of “the orient” as a western invention Hayot argues
that this idea had been largely ignored in relation to modernist literature (513). He
claims that Pound is a good target for study, primarily because of his consistent
interest in China and Chinese poetry (513). In Hayot’s reading, the work that Pound
produced while translating Chinese poetry, \textit{Cathay}, was however, more a telling of
western culture and literature than it was of its Chinese counterpart (517). Hayot
suggests that while Pound used Chinese poetry to reimagine English language poetry,
China’s effect on Pound is still placed at the center, rather than Pound’s effect on
China (512). China was not simply an object of fixation and exoticism, but an
influencing agent in Pound’s work (526). However, Hayot claims that the critics who
defend Pound from accusations of exoticism and participation in European
imperialism, regardless of the validity of such claims, remain blind to the
Eurocentrism that lies behind their own defense of Pound (529).

In recent years the question of Eurocentrism and modernist poetry, including
Pound’s, has been discussed further in relation to the concept of globalization. One
critic that discusses these issues is Jahan Ramazani. Ramazani investigates modernist
poetry in relation to the phenomenon of globalization and includes it within the
discourse of transnationalism. Ramazani claims that poetry has not historically been
part of the transnational literary and critical discourse on cultural production. The
discourse of transnationalism has been reserved for other media and genres like
cinema, radio, and the novel, since their effect on the international socio-political
climate is more immediately visible (22). Poetry, on the other hand, has traditionally
been considered almost entirely local and national (22). Ramazani argues that the
separation Bakthin made between single and multiple-voiced language started to blur
in regards to modernist literature. Unlike Bakhtin, Ramazani, argues that modernist
poetry is not limited to a single voice, and just like the novel, it has the capacity to
include multiple voices and cultural contexts. In the polyglot works of poets like
Pound and Eliot, as exemplified by Ramazani, multiple voices are simultaneously
present, speaking both in standard speech and in dialect, as well as in half a dozen
other languages, especially, in the case of Pound (28). This ability to break the
standardization of English language poetry with juxtapositions of different literary
traditions, cultures and languages, formal speech and dialect, was a more important
legacy than the modernist participation in Eurocentric imperialism (114). By
emphasizing the transnational and cross-cultural aspects of modernist poetry,
Ramazani, in a way, challenges the view of orientalism introduced by critics like Hayot regarding modernist poetry.

The impact of globalization on modernist poetry, Ramazani claims, is multidirectional since it does not indicate a one-way transfer of cultural standardization (8). For instance, one of Pound’s ambitions was to recreate the poetic form and thus he helped create Imagism in which he was highly inspired by Haiku and Chinese ideograms. Ramazani argues that any movement between cultures requires a process of selection, interpretation and translation (9). Thus, whether or not modernism is “rooted in empire,” as it is sometimes accused of being, the complex interweaving of cultural elements and experiences in modernist poetry is more than exoticism or cultural appropriation (11). The transnational aspect of modernist writing involves a mutually influential relationship where cultural difference is exercised in order to create something entirely new. Indeed, I would argue that this idea is especially relevant in regards to Pound’s work, especially when one attempts to navigate the multilayered cultural landscape of The Cantos. Thus, Ramazani’s emphasis on globalization and transnationalism provides a renewed and enabling context for exploring the use of multiple cultural references in modernist poetry. However, while Ramazani does reveal and explain the cross-cultural references and the transnational nature within Pound’s work, he neglects the importance of the particular artistic vision that fueled them, including the poet’s attraction to totalitarianism and his focus on artistic individuality, which I address in this essay.

Another critic who examined modernism and modernist poets from a transnational perspective is Paul Stasi. Stasi connects Pound’s attraction to cultural transnationalism with his distaste for economic globalization and the consumer culture of global capitalism. Stasi argues that the multi-voiced narrative of The Cantos is a consequence of cultural transnationalism and economic globalization. From this perspective, in The Cantos Pound attempted to create a world where contact between different cultures could be made. This was something that Pound considered necessary to achieve a twentieth-century renaissance in literature. Similar to Kenner’s reading, Stasi argues that the world was not just shrinking in size during the beginning of the twentieth-century, but Pound was actively traversing it by looking for cultural connections and aesthetic materials that could bring about his poetic vision. This is prevalent in The Cantos not just in the cultural and aesthetic components Pound used to shape it but also in the actual form of the poem. And, like Ramazani, Stasi argues
that through globalization these artifacts could traverse the globe without concern for national boundaries. In addition to Stasi’s and Ramazani’s arguments, as I will demonstrate further in this essay, one of the major themes of The Cantos is travelling and movement, not only in space but also in time. For instance, the first Canto is a translation of the Odyssey, which includes historical references to older translations. Pound’s search for cultural and aesthetic components that could be used to shape his poetic vision explains his lifelong fascination with Chinese culture and ideograms, which allowed Pound to travel through both history and different cultures in a previously unheard manner in English language poetry.

All in all, Pound’s poetry has been studied extensively over the years. Kenner’s work focuses on Pound’s artistic and aesthetic achievements and Kirsch discusses the influence of Pound’s politics on his poetry, explaining how his poetics influenced his politics. Hayot and Ramazani, on the other hand, focus on the use of different cultural materials in Pound’s work from different perspectives. While Hayot emphasizes the Eurocentric and orientalist aspects of Pound’s work, Ramazani reads Pound and other modernist poets from a transnational perspective. While all studies of literature require a process of selection and omission, I would argue that in Pound’s work, the concepts of artistic individuality, totalitarianism, and cultural transnationalism, which have been discussed separately by these critics, are interconnected, and that the relationship between them warrants further study. Thus, my contribution to this body of criticism in Pound scholarship is that there is not only a correlation between the previously mentioned concepts of individuality, totalitarianism, and transnationalism but that they exist in a causal relationship. Through the following readings of three of Pound’s Cantos, (Canto “I”, “XII”, and “XIV”), I will claim that each of these contradicting concepts are held in tension and complements each other within Pound’s poetic vision of paradise.

**Theory**

Before getting into a detailed analysis of the poems, I should explain, in more detail, what I mean by the concepts of individuality, totalitarianism, and transnationalism. To begin with, the notion of individuality is in essence the empowerment of the individual over the collective, or as Pound sometimes refers to them as “the mass” or “the multitudes”(XIV 61). The individual artist in Pound’s vision is identified as a genius who shapes a new artistic and political vision and stands above the masses in a
similar manner to that of the political leader. The notion of totalitarianism is, then, an extension of Pound’s assertion of individuality. The idea of totalitarianism, as it is expressed in Pound’s poetry, suggests a form of society in which the leader’s power is not dependent on any outside source, such as the electorate in a democracy. The leader’s power to shape society is sustained entirely by one individual. Thus, in Pound’s poetry individuality is secured within a totalitarian system. In contrast, democracy is the emphasis on the collective over the individual. The majority rules over the minority, which, to Pound meant the prioritization of collectivity above individuality.

Finally then, the notion of transnationalism refers to the process in which an artistic work crosses national borders (Ramazani 181). Ramazani suggests that modernist poetry is neither local nor global. It exists somewhere in between specific times and places, and is subject to cross-cultural and transnational exchange (96). Nowhere is this more prevalent than in Pound’s poetry. Pound continuously employs cross-cultural and transhistorical references, shifts in settings, languages, and intertextuality to traverse both time and space within his epic.

Ramazani refers to these cultural and artistic components as part of the “Modernist bricolage” which refers to the creative use of different cultural materials to create a work of art (99). Pound’s bricolage consists of both historical and cross-cultural references, as well as intertextuality, translation, and different poetic forms and styles. Transnationalism, or the crossing of borders, is, then, a vital form of Pound’s bricolage. Pound’s poetry travels not just spatially, as in the crossing of national and geographical borders by using different languages and settings, but also temporally, since his poetry moves in time through intertextuality, historical references, and the reactivation of different poetic forms. The Cantos’ very structure, in this sense, is transnational. The modernist bricolage can be used to unravel the relationship between Pound’s assertion of individuality, his attraction to totalitarianism, and the transnational nature of his poetry. Pound’s use of bricolage helps explain the manner in which he seeks to realize his utopian vision of paradise. Through his assertion of individuality and his exaltation of the artist Pound uses these cross-cultural and transhistorical components, intertextuality, and poetic forms in his “modernist bricolage” to shape his utopia.
Analysis

Canto I

As I have mentioned in the “Introduction” of this essay, “Canto I”, the beginning of Pound’s vision of paradise, that is, his epic *The Cantos*, begins with a translation of the *Odyssey*, which is considered the oldest work in the western literary canon. However, strangely enough, the first line of “Canto I” begins mid-sentence: “And then went down to the ship” (I 3). Pound begins *The Cantos* at the foundation of western literature, and by starting the poem in *medias res*, he maintains the notion that there was something that came before this poem. Arguably, this use of a coordinating conjunction, “and then”, with which the poem begins, is Pound’s attempt to connect his epic with the previous work in the literary canon, in this case, that of Homer. However, Pound does more than simply establishing *The Cantos* as continuation of a previous work. By translating the *Odyssey* and by using Odysseus as the primary speaker of “Canto I,” Pound implies that “Canto I” is not the beginning of the poem. *The Cantos* begins with Homer’s work, which the readers are thus encouraged to familiarize themselves with. *The Cantos* then paradoxically becomes a part of the history it includes, as the poem moves through time and place, with the translation of the *Odyssey* in the beginning of Pound’s modern epic. The translation of Homer illustrates one of the crucial instances of the cultural and historical border crossings that Pound employs through intertextuality. The poetic act of translation also lays the emphasis on the role of the poet as the shaper of this vision, carefully choosing the aesthetic and cultural components within his bricolage to lay the transnational foundation on which *The Cantos* rests.

As Odysseus’s ship sets sail, so does Pound’s own literary journey: through the lens of the past, Pound looks toward his future utopia. George Kearns argues that Pound began *The Cantos* “with a clear sense of direction, but where specifically it will lead him, he can not know until he moves, canto by canto, to its end, a lifetime away” (23). In this sense, Pound’s transnational vision presents a form of cultural experience, which is imagined free from spatial and temporal boundaries. In Pound’s work the past is not beyond our grasp. Time or history is not simply a river flowing in a linear fashion, but an ocean with multiple currents, and as any other ocean, it can be navigated regardless of which way the currents flow. For Pound, then, time is not a linear concept. The past is neither forgotten, nor entirely inaccessible. Rather, for
Pound, periods of history, literary and otherwise, can be reactivated and used to shape the present into a utopian future. Pound’s transnational conception of history, in this sense, has a utopian dimension that in this poem relies on the poetic process of retranslation and reactivation of history.

As the poem proceeds, Odysseus’ single-voiced narrative is eventually broken by the intrusion of a second speaker. This second voice speaks towards the end of the canto: “Lie quit Divus. I mean that is Andreas Divus, / in officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer” (I 5). Here, Pound directly takes the stage, and his voice breaks the flow of Odysseus’ narrative to remind the reader that this is an old story, one that has been told several times before. The lines first refer to Divus, who is the Latin translator of Homer’s work, and then to Wecheli, the printer of the book where Divus’s translation of Homer appeared in 1538 (Moramarco 131). Thus, through this break in the narration of Odysseus, Pound emphasizes the historical and spatial distance the poem has travelled. The first “Canto” is not simply a translation. Pound’s version is a translation of a translation, from Andreas Divus’s Latin version and not Homer’s Greek.

Furthermore, in his creative translation of Odyssey, Pound uses the oldest English language form as the structure for “Canto I,” that of the Anglo-Saxon Seafarer, to merge “a dead past and dead languages into a living present” (Kearns 18). In other words, in the first Canto, Pound translates a translation of the oldest work in the Western literary canon through the one of the oldest known forms in the English language. Pound’s choice for the form of “Canto I,” which is the alliterative beat of the Old English “Seafarer,” works well with its setting as a “North Sea Odyssey,” even though Pound paid more attention to the “Seafarer’s” sound than its meaning (Kenner 351). This is not entirely unusual for Pound who was famous for taking creative liberties with his translations, or mistranslations depending on whom you ask, whenever he felt that the sanctity of the poem demanded it. This stress on the sound of the poem, on the alliteration and the assonance, is emphasized by Pound throughout the first “Canto” as shown in this particular line: “Thus with stretched sail, we went over sea till day’s end” (I 3). This line is a goldmine of repeating sound patterns that unify the two clauses, starting with the /s/’s of the “thus with stretched sail”; the sound pattern in the first clause echoes through the second clause with “sea” and “day’s” towards the end of the line. This is followed by the /v/ sound: “with” in the first clause preempts the triple alliteration in the second “we went over” (I 3).
Thus, in its blending of cultural references, Pound also uses poetic form as a moving cultural artifact, which, in this case, travels from the Anglo-saxon “Seafarer” to his modernist idiom in “Canto I”.

While the poem travels in space, “on the godly sea” and eventually to the underworld, it also travels in time, from Homer to Divus, through the poetic from of the “Seafarer,” and finally, to Pound the artist who would shape this cross-cultural and transhistorical vision into a poetic paradise. In “Canto I,” Pound mixes multiple historical and cultural contexts in his modernist bricolage, through intertextuality and translation, which emphasizes the importance of transnational linkages and cross-cultural connections within his utopian vision.

The first “Canto” ends similarly to the way it begins. The poem begins mid-sentence with the line “And then went down to the ship” (3), and it ends mid-sentence with the words “so that:” (5). If what came before the first “Canto” was history, literary and otherwise, what comes after is not equally certain. The poem both starts and ends in the middle, with a radiant past behind it and an uncertain future ahead. This uncertainty of the future in “Canto I” does not work against the utopian aspect of Pound’s epic. Rather, the uncertainty indicates that the future is not fully determined and thus entails multiple possibilities to be imagined. While Odysseus’s narrative is eventually resumed later on in The Cantos it does not happen immediately after in “Canto II”. While the poem progresses, and, travels in space and in time, there is no linear narrative. There is no chronological order to the events and stories that Pound presents. This non-linear and eclectic understanding of history constitutes a crucial dimension of Pound’s transnational poetic vision.

In “Canto I,” through historical and cross-cultural references, intertextuality, translation, and shifts and juxtapositions of different settings, Pound lays the foundation for his poetic paradise. This absolute confidence in his own artistic abilities to shape a transnational utopia and his exaltation of artistic genius are linked to his political views. For Pound, only a genius could transform the world from the mess that it was, into the paradise it could be. As he continued to shape his epic, Pound became increasingly convinced that the rule of ordinary people and the masses, which he saw in the populist democracies of the west, would inevitably stand in the way of the individual genius. While in “Canto I,” Pound’s poetic paradise had not yet been completely seduced by the whispers of totalitarianism. His insistence on the authoritative and shaping powers of the individual artist would set Pound on a several
decade-long obsession with totalitarian power structures. As I will show in my reading of “Canto XIII,” this connection between the artist and the political leader is consistently drawn in Pound’s poetry.

Canto XIII
In “Canto XIII,” Pound continues incorporate different cultural and historical contexts into his modernist bricolage in order to further shape his utopian vision. In contrast to “Canto I,” Pound does not speak directly in this poem: rather, in “Canto XIII,” his voice works in tandem with the character of Kung, the name Pound uses for Confucius. In “Canto XIII” the poem is set in a “cedar grove”, next to a temple and a river, where Kung converses with his disciples. This peaceful historical setting in which Kung shares his pragmatic philosophy with his followers establishes a significant contrast to the contemporary setting of the “Hell Cantos” (XIV-XV) that follow immediately after. In the discussion between Kung and his disciples, Pound emphasizes the pragmatic nature of Confucius’s philosophy: “Kung gave the words ‘order’ / and ‘brotherly deference’/ and said nothing of the ‘life after death’” (XIII 59). Kung does not say anything about “life after death,” not necessarily because he does not believe in the afterlife, but because he had more important, more practical and worldly issues to discuss, issues that could be resolved (Kearns 56). According to Confucius, “ideas were not to be discussed for their own sake but to be put into action” (Kearns 60). In this historical setting, the individual leader is positioned as the shaper of the material world by emphasizing the connection between philosophical discussions and their practical importance to the material world, which is why Kung speaks of “order” but not of the “afterlife”. The empowered individuals, in this case, the artist and the king, thus inhabit a similar position, which is that of the shaper, in the different, but, as in this poem, interconnected fields of art and politics.

This connection between art and politics is discussed further by Kung whose opinions echo Pound’s emphasis on the importance of art to society. According to Pound a nation’s greatness was measured by the art it produced and in “Canto XIII,” he makes this connection explicit. During the conversation Kung has with his disciples, he says:

“When the prince has gathered about him
“ All the savants and artists, his riches will be fully employed”.

(59)
The use quotation marks in the lines give the impression of direct speech, that is, Kung speaking: yet, the subject matter seems to suggest that these are also Pound’s
views that are being stated. What is emphasized in these lines is the elevated status that is assigned to the artist. In spite of the use of quotation marks, the ideas expressed in Kung’s speech are also Pound’s, whose perspective on the desired status of the artist in society is registered through the voice of Kung (Palandri 301). There are then two voices working in tandem within this quotation, Pound and Kung, the artist and the King, both wielding the same creative power.¹ The ruler of a nation, in this case, “the prince” functions as a patron of the arts. In the poem Pound indicates a system where “the prince” shapes a political system where the artist can create sincere art, free from the imperative of the market and subsequently that of popular opinion. Thus, freed from the state of capitalist democracy, the artist would be able to assert his or her artistic individuality within a totalitarian system. The merging of Pound’s and Kung’s voices suggests a similar merging of Pound’s political, aesthetic, and cultural views. Kung’s philosophy, and the historical context in which it was written, does, in this case, indicate the transnational and transhistorical context of Pound’s utopia where the quality of the art produced determines the quality of the nation.

Pound’s belief that a utopia could only be shaped by an individual genius resulted in the idea of the nation-state as an external manifestation of the individual leader. In order to shape this utopian vision into reality, the leader needed to be capable of enforcing his inner “order” upon the external world. This is expressed by Pound in the following section of the “Canto”:

And Kung said, and wrote on the bo leaves;
   If a man have not order within him
He can not spread order about him;
And if a man have not order within him
   His family will not act with due order;
And if the prince have not order within him
   He can not put order in his dominions.

(XIII 59)

In contrast to lines concerning the role of the “prince” discussed above, in this passage, Pound chooses not to use quotation marks. As Kung switches from just speaking to his disciples to speaking and writing “on the bo leaves” his pragmatic philosophy starts to further coalesce with Pound’s aesthetics. In this single passage, the word “order” is repeated five times, and the entire passage is determined by the first line “if a man have not order within him,” suggesting that if he does not have

¹The connection between the creative power of the leader and the artist, as we shall see, becomes more directly manifest when, towards the end of the poem, Confucius draws a link between the characteristics of the ruler and the musician.
order within, he cannot enforce order outside of him. Within Pound’s vision of paradise, individuality, inner “order”, and totalitarianism, external “order”, are then interconnected, and this corresponds with his view of artistic creation. Art, like shaping a nation, does not happen by accident or divine inspiration; the individual’s vision that first created it becomes a part of it. If the artist or the leader’s vision is not clear, he will not be able to “spread order about him” (XIII 59). In Pound’s assertion of artistic and authoritarian individuality, totalitarian rule becomes the most logical political system. It is a system where and an individual genius can ruthlessly shape society in order to achieve perfection. The totalitarian political system, as it is depicted in the poem, is thus an external manifestation of the individual king and his inner “order”.

In “Canto XIII” Pound’s worship of individuality, the exaltation of the artist and by correlation, the exaltation of the strong political leader, make up one of the overlaying themes. As mentioned earlier, Pound never directly speaks in this poem: rather his voice merges with Kung’s. The empowerment of the individual at the expense of the “multitudes,” as Pound refers to them, and the notion of the artist as the shaper of the material world result in a merging of poetics and politics. Pound’s exaltation of the individual can be seen in the following lines spoken by Kung: “Anyone can run to excesses, / It is easy to shoot past the mark, / It is hard to stand firm in the middle” (59). Accordingly, “anyone can run to excess” but “standing firm in the middle” is not something anyone can do. Whether it is shooting arrows, ruling a nation, or writing poetry, achieving precision, order, and proper technique is difficult. Both writing poetry and ruling nations are professions that demand specialists or, in Pound’s words, “savants”: they cannot be done properly by the masses no matter how passionate they are. This is further emphasized in the poem when Kung says: “without character you will / be unable to play on that instrument / or to execute the music fit for the Odes” (60). These lines, introduced towards the end of the poem, demonstrate further the connection between the artist and the leader, since, here, Kung draws a parallel between making “music fit for the Odes” and achieving inner “order,” that is, the “character” of the individual political leader. The lines indicate that art and politics require the same kind of internal order, and the individual strength of “character”. Pound’s paradise can only be brought about by an individual genius, who has to be given free reign, unrestrained by the oppressive nature of popular opinion.
In the end of “Canto XIII” the merging of Pound’s and Kung’s voices is complete: the artist and the king become one. The last lines of the canto end with what Kearns claimed to be the only lines that had no direct source in the Confucian classics (59). These lines are as follows: “The blossoms of the apricot / Blow from the east to the west, / And I have tried to keep them from falling” (XIII 60). In these lines, Pound adds a new part to the Confucian narrative. Thus, in contrast to the previous lines of the poem, here, Pound is distinctly speaking through Kung’s voice about his ideas rather than vice versa. Additionally, the phrase “from the east to the west” illustrates Pound’s utopian vision as one that can traverse geographical and historical borders. The consequence of this inversion is the emphasis on the notion of the poet’s importance as the shaper of society; the individual artist or leader who is capable of envisioning the world as it should be and proceeds to shape it by that very standard of “order”. Ultimately, in “Canto XIII,” through historical and cross-cultural references to Confucius, Pound not only asserts the notion of individuality, but also connects the individual artist and the totalitarian leader by stressing their power to impose order upon the world.

Canto XIV

In “Canto XIV” rather than establishing his search for a utopia as he does in Cantos “I” and “XIII,” Pound asserts his utopian vision by negating what he perceived to be the opposite side, which is democracy and capitalism. However, even though Pound’s goal is to assert his utopian vision by negating and establishing a contrast with the opposite side, he still employs similar poetic strategies and aesthetic components he uses in his bricolage. Juxtaposed with “Canto XIII,” “Canto XIV” is presented as Pound’s personal nightmare, and quite fittingly, he opens the poem with a line from Dante's Inferno: “Io venni in luogo d'ogni luce muto; [I came into a place mute of all light]” (XIV 61). Through cross-cultural references, shifting settings and intertextuality Pound’s epic has now travelled from Homer and Confucius to a contemporary setting, which Pound modeled after Dante’s Inferno. The present is represented as a sinister and dark time, which Pound has to walk through in order to get to the light.

This dark world that Pound presents in “Canto XIV” is the polar opposite to his vision of a transnational utopia, which he explores in the previous Cantos. It is a world without heroic figures like Odysseus or Kung, where slimy politicians, liars, usurers, slum-lords and profiteers are in power. This world is ruled
not by individuals but by a group of people capable of stirring the passions of the masses through lies and deceit. In contrast to “Canto I” and “Canto XIII,” there are no named characters used as speakers in this canto. Instead, the people in power are anonymous and interchangeable. They are spoken about in plural without any assertion of individuality. The rulers are inseparable from the mass they form. In the poem they are “Addressing crowds through their arse-holes, / Addressing the multitudes in the ooze / newts, water-slugs, water-maggots” (61). The politicians are liars, slimy creatures like “slugs” or “maggots,” living of filth and excrement, and the people they address, the “multitudes,” are stuck with them in the ooze, unable to see anything in the dark. The “multitudes,” in Pound’s words, are not given the dignity of awareness. Their crime is a perpetual lack of consciousness and vision. Not only are they unable to see the world that should be, the transnational utopia that Pound is trying to bring into existence, the “multitudes” cannot even see the reality of the world they inhabit.

However, the politicians are not the only people deceiving the “multitudes” in this dark contemporary setting that Pound had to overcome. In “Canto XIV,” university scholars and priests are partaking in this deception as well. They are described as:

Pets-de-loup, sitting on piles of stone books,
obsuring texts with philology,
    hiding them under their persons,
the air without refuge of silence,
    the drift of lice, teething,
and above it the mouthing of orators,
    the arse-belching of preachers.

(63)

The “pets-de-loup”, “orators” and “preachers” are referred to in plural, just like the “multitudes” they deceive. These figures are nameless and unspecified, lost in the mass they themselves make up. The rulers waste their time having pointless discussions of things that do not matter, which creates a sharp contrast with the character of Kung and his pragmatic philosophy in “Canto XIII”. They are “obstructors of knowledge, / obstructors of distribution” (63). These characters are obstructing both history and new revolutionary ideas, hiding them in the dark under the pretense of philology and religion. The system described in the poem is the result of a world without the “order” and “character” that individuals like Kung possess. It is
a system without dignity or order where knowledge and information are suppressed, and liars rule in the ooze.

This world that stands in stark contrast to Pound’s utopia not only lacks individuality and order, but it is also a homogenized society that lacks cross-cultural linkages. It is a place where everyone is supposed to speak and think in the same manner. The people in power are part of a collective “who dislike colloquial language” (61). There can be no divergence from the homogenized standard speech, the formal dialect that they understand and control. Throughout “Canto XIV,” Pound negates this view of society by mixing languages, he refers to university professors as “Pets-de-loup” (63), and by mixing standard phrases with slang and profanity, when he uses words like “frigging” and “sh-t” (the latter is, ironically enough, censored in the poem). This mixture of formal speech and slang indicates a rejection of not only the homogenized world the poem depicts, but also of the single-voiced and standardized language in the poetry of earlier eras.

Furthermore, there are no positive connections between politics and poetics in “Canto XIV”. Pound uses his modernist bricolage to aesthetically depict a homogenized world that lacks precisely that aesthetic vision and order, which guides the creation of Pound’s utopia. Instead this world is randomly and chaotically constructed by elected rulers without vision. This contemporary world that had to be overcome was in Pound’s mind a consequence of popular rule and democracy. Throughout his career, Pound, like other modernist, such as Wyndham Lewis, questioned whether democracies in the west actually existed, or if they were just oligarchies masquerading as democracies (Surette, Utopia 14-15). In his view, the people, or the multitudes, were unable to see the world they lived in, a world where they were abused and enslaved by “Profiteers drinking blood sweetened with sh-t / And behind them …… f and the financiers / Lashing them with steel wires” (61). These so-called democracies were in fact controlled by bankers and the owners of industry. For Pound, these were the people who were making profits from other people’s hard work, lending money at interest, selling weapons and fear, both to private citizens and governments. They were financing war and suffering and there could never be peace as long as there was profit to be made in war. This is the contemporary world that Pound saw, the one he lived in, and the one that opposed his vision of paradise.
In this world, which is depicted vividly in “Canto XIV,” Pound’s utopian ideals of transnationalism, individuality, and totalitarian “order” are traded for cultural homogenization, a dislike of “colloquial language”, a mass of gullible people, and for liars capitalizing on popular opinion. With democratic elections, based on popular opinion, liars would prosper. These liars Pound refers to in the poem are not limited to politicians. He refers to journalists and every other profession that seeks to influence and capitalize on popular opinion as “betrayers of language”:

And the betayers of language
...n and the press gang
And those who had lied for hire;
the perverts, the perverters of language,
the perverts, who have set money-lust
Before the pleasures of the senses;

In “Canto XIV” Pound portrays these betayers of language as people driven by greed, the desire for wealth, power, and fame. The poem suggests that these people would say anything they thought the masses would like to hear, and their opinions would always shift in order to appeal to the majority. The contrast between those who “lied for hire” (61) and Kung is significant: while Kung as the ruler in “Canto XIII” speaks of vital issues of “order” and art, the rulers of the society in “Canto XIV” will say anything to further their own short-term interests. In “Canto XIV” Pound presents this society with popular elections as a closed circle of lies and false promises. This circle could only be broken if the excuse for power was taken away from the general public and returned to specialist, the men of vision like Kung. Only then would these “perverters of language” (61) those “who lied for hire” (61) disappear for good.

Without the illusion of democracy there would be no precedent for their continued existence. Pound had to overcome this dark homogenized present filled with greed and deception, which he presents in “Canto XIV,” to shape his utopian future out of a radiant past.

In “Canto XIV,” Pound asserts his utopian vision of paradise by negating the world that opposed it. In Pound’s vision of Hell, unlike in previous cantos, transnational connections, artistic individuality, and totalitarian “order” are replaced by popular rule, capitalism, and by linguistic and cultural homogenization. Through intertextual references to Dante’s Inferno Pound makes a critical commentary on his contemporary moment, and asserts his poetic vision of paradise.
Conclusion
In conclusion, through my readings of three of Pound’s Cantos, “I,” “XIII,” and “XIV,” I have discussed the aesthetic, cross-cultural, and historical components that form Pound’s utopian vision. I have argued that transnationalism, in the form of intertextuality, translation, as well as cross-cultural and transhistorical references have been used to cross borders, in time as well as in space, to shape a vision free from spatial and temporal boundaries. However, Pound’s epic does not just contain history, it is formed out of history, shaped by it and is simultaneously included within it. In “Canto I,” I discussed how the process of poetic translation and intertextuality laid the foundation on which the transnational utopian vision of The Cantos rests. I discussed how the poet’s role as the shaper of this utopia, placed the artist in a similar position to the totalitarian leader, which I further discussed in the reading of “Canto XIII”. In “Canto XIII,” as I have shown, Pound emphasizes the similar traits of inner “order” and strength of “character” that the artist and leader should possess. Pound establishes this connection by using the character of Kung as the speaker of the poem. Finally, in “Canto XIV,” the first of the “hell Cantos”, Pound depicts a society that lacks all these aesthetic, cross-cultural, and totalitarian components that I argue make up his utopian vision. Pound’s utopian vision is an assertion of artistic individuality, where the individual artist carefully selects and modifies the aesthetic, political, and cultural components in order to realize this vision. Pound’s assertion of individuality, in this context, corresponds to the idea that only an individual genius, operating within a totalitarian system, can shape society into this future transnational utopia.
Works Cited


