



Publif@rum 18, 2013

Lingua e Diritto. La Lingua della Legge, la Legge nella Lingua

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The Law and How to Break It: Reading and Translating Ezra Pound's Canto 22

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Pour citer cet article :

Massimo BACIGALUPO, *The Law and How to Break It: Reading and Translating Ezra Pound's Canto 22*, Lingua e Diritto. La Lingua della Legge, la Legge nella Lingua, Publif@rum, n. 18, pubblicato il 2013, consultato il 02/05/2024, url: http://www.farum.it/publif@rum/ezine_pdf.php?id=265

Editore Publif@rum (Dipartimento di Lingue e Culture Moderne - Università di Genova)

<http://www.farum.it/publif@rum/>

<http://www.farum.it>

Documento accessibile in rete su:

http://www.farum.it/publif@rum/ezine_articles.php?art_id=265

Document généré automatiquement le 02/05/2024.

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Abstract

Published in 1929, canto 22 is a collection of vignettes in which Odyssean wit meets the Cyclops of vested interest, tradition and law, sometimes perishing, sometimes outwitting it. Pound admires human resourcefulness in its many guises. A long autobiographic section presents reminiscences of Gibraltar as he had seen it in 1908, and of a friend there, Jusef Benamore, with whom he attends a service in the old synagogue. In the final vignette, based on an anecdote recounted in Franco Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle*, a woman outwits a judge who wants to fine her for breaking Florentine sumptuary laws. The woman's language games suggest that reality escapes definition and cataloguing. Hence the impossibility and derring-do of the poet's attempt to seize the real within the covers of a book. In other important passages of *The Cantos* we find the principle that human bonds and sympathies have precedence over official regulations. Pound always conceived of himself as a breaker of rules. Pound's version of Sacchetti offers interesting challenges for the Italian translator. He/she must choose whether to retranslate Pound's idiomatic (in fact, cockney) English or import phrases from the Italian source. The two translations currently in print in Italy (1985 and 2012) follow the latter course.

Introductory

Ezra Pound's canto 22, first published in 1929, contains disparate material, much of it concerned with the opposition of the individual to society and its "laws". Since the poem's main hero is Odysseus-Pound, what we get is a new series of adventures

of the eternal traveller whose ingenuity, with luck, outwits the Cyclops. However, in our times the outcome is far from certain. The voyage home is still in progress. The battle is being fought. The past serves as an example to cheer us up.

Tradition vs. Innovation

Canto 22 opens with an evocation of Pound's congressman grandfather Thaddeus ("An' that man sweat blood / to put through that railway") and of how he was thwarted and "broken" in business by a sharper entrepreneur. It goes on with two vignettes concerning economics, in the second of which Pound and the social credit economist C. H. Douglas confront John Maynard Keynes ("Mr. Bukos"), who presents himself as "an orthodox economist" (22/102). Pound's point is that new ideas and processes meet the opposition of set ways of thinking. Macmillan, he adds for good measure, goes on making a profit out of Palgrave's superannuated *Golden Treasury*, and will obviously not publish a new (and hopefully better) anthology edited by—Pound. The equation is as follows: Thaddeus is broken by his competitor Warnehauser, Douglas and Pound are ineffectual against "the renowned Mr. Bukos", Pound is defeated by Palgrave. Things begin looking up in the sequel.

What we get next, in Pound's characteristic linguistic mix, is a folk tale about the creation of Woman by Jesus Christ—not from a rib of Adam but from the tail of a fox. The story must have an Italian, possibly Sardinian, source, judging from Pound's transcription: "Jesu Christo standu nel paradiso terrestre". He probably heard it from an acquaintance and transcribed it from memory. He clearly enjoyed it. The conclusion is that women, given their origin, are ferocious and sly ("e per questu /E [sic] la donna una furia, / una fuRRia-e-una rabbia"). The traditional theme of the unpredictable temper of women, another example of unbeatable individuality, will be picked up in the canto's conclusion.

A Little Synagogue in Gibraltar

A long section is introduced at this point, recounting the young Pound's sojourn in Gibraltar in spring 1908, when he abandoned America for Europe and survived precariously thanks, he said, to a guide called Yusef Benamore. Here he recalls a visit to the Gibraltar synagogue in the company of Yusef and describes in detail the proceedings, involving the friendly exchange of snuff. Pound had written his mother in January 1910 that "The only worship of God I can at the moment remember having witnessed was in a little synagogue in Gibraltar & in San Pietro [actually San Fermo] in Verona" (215). Here the account is somewhat more ambiguous, though the main mood, as in most of this canto, is of tolerant good humor. In the Pisan cantos of 1945 Pound was to recall this mood: "So that in the synagogue in Gibraltar / the sense of humour seemed to prevail / during the preliminary parts of the whatever / but they respected at least the scrolls of the law / from it, by it, redemption" (76/474). This recalls the moment described as follows in canto 22:

And then they got out the scrolls of the law
And had their little procession
And kissed the ends of the markers...

Canto 22 has been twice translated in Italian, the first time by Pound's daughter Mary in an edition published in 1961, the second time by me in a new edition which appeared in 2012, forty years after Pound's death and fifty after the previous attempt. Mary translates the above lines as follows: "Poi tirarono fuori i rotoli della legge / fecero il loro piccolo giro / e baciaron le punte dei segnacoli" (1961: 227). I asked a Jewish colleague if he had any suggestions concerning the "markers", and got an extensive though indecisive reply:

Ti assicuro che il problema non è semplicissimo, ma anzi ambiguisimo.

Il "marker" definisce in effetti diverse cose:

1. il bastoncino con manina a una estremità, in genere il tutto in argento, con cui si segue la lettura del rotolo della Torah in pergamena, per non rovinare l'inchiostro della scrittura con il proprio dito sudato;
2. la targhetta in metallo numerata che contrassegna ciascuna delle sette persone chiamate alla lettura (o ad assistere alla lettura);
3. l'inizio e la fine di ciascun brano letto da ciascuna delle sette persone sono contrassegnati da lettere che segnano, appunto, l'inizio e la fine, e si chiamano 'markers'.

Ora, nel caso 3 è sicuramente usanza baciare il talled (scialle di preghiera) dopo che con un suo angolo si è toccato l'inizio del brano da leggere, e poi di nuovo dopo aver toccato la lettera che segna la fine del brano letto.

Ma anche il caso 1 potrebbe fare al caso, anche se non l'ho mai visto fare, secondo le tradizioni di mia conoscenza.

Given the uncertainty, I opted in my translation for the vague term Mary had used: "Poi estrassero i rotoli della legge / E fecero la loro processione, / E baciaron le punte dei segnacoli" (2012: 245). (I wonder why I omitted "little", perhaps to keep the line short.) An interesting, though obvious, point about translation, is that one comes up against these hard bits of the real world. However, to complicate matters, this is a Hebrew service described by a Gentile who does not understand what is going on. So that using a technical and exact term would be to translate inaccurately.

Taking Communion in «Ulysses»

Joyce's *Ulysses* has a similar if reversed situation when Leopold Bloom, a Jew, watches a Catholic mass and muses on what is being done:

The priest went along by them, murmuring, holding the thing in his hands. He stopped at each, took out a communion, shook a drop or two (are they in water?) off it and put it neatly into her mouth. Her hat and head sank. Then the next one. Her hat sank at once. Then the next one: a small old woman. The priest bent down to put it into her mouth, murmuring all the time. Latin. The next one. Shut your eyes and open your mouth. What? *Corpus*: body. Corpse. Good idea the Latin. Stupefies them first. Hospice for the dying. They don't seem to chew it: only swallow it down. Rum idea: eating bits of a corpse. Why the cannibals cotton to it. (*Ulysses* 77)

"A communion" should probably be "a wafer", and indicates Bloom's scant knowledge of the proceedings and terminology. As does "the thing" for "the chalice". Giulio de Angelis (1960) translates "tenendo il coso in mano... tirava fuori un'ostia". Enrico Terrinoni (2012): "col suo affare in mano... estraendo il pane della comunione". Gianni Celati (2013): "con quel coso in mano... tirava fuori un'ostia". Apparently none of the translators has felt that "a communion" was a non-standard word to indicate a wafer and should possibly be translated "una comunione". The question however remains open. Just as when in 1925 Joyce sent a friend a parody of Pound's style with the phrase "1 Inferno is enough. Basta, he said, *un'inferno perbacco!*" (*Pound/Joyce* 232). Is the grammatically erroneous apostrophe in *un'inferno* Joyce's way of mocking Pound's scant Italian? (Indeed, we noticed above an Italian accent missing in the folk tale of canto 22.) Or is it Joyce's own error (unlikely)? Or his editors'? The question will not keep us awake at night but is nevertheless entertaining.

Getting Into the Cantos

The canto 22 synagogue episode is followed by a conversation in which Pound the traveller praises Yusef (whom he calls Yusuf) to a Muslim acquaintance, Mustafa, only to be told, "Yais, he ees a goot fello, / But after all a chew / ees a chew"—i.e., "a Jew is a Jew", again an ambiguous statement, to say the least. In his naiveté Pound did not see anything offensive in these vignettes, in fact he remained fond of Yusef, and wrote on one occasion that he had saved his life (apparently by helping him lend on interest the little cash he had on him): "1908 landed in Gibraltar with 80 dollars and lived on the interest for some time... Life saved by Yusuf Benamore" (quoted in Stock 57). When canto 22 was published in a limited large-format volume (*Cantos* 17-27, 1928) he would have liked Yusef to see the pages about him. "Ask for my friend Yusuf Benamore in Gib.", he wrote to his father in April 1929. "Shd like Yusuf to see himself in de luxe Cantos. If not ask for him on the dock. He may be a millionaire by now. on the other hand he may not. Anyhow, you've seen all Gib. except the old synagogue, and may as well spend yr. time hunting Yusuf..." (*Letters* 656). For Pound the greatest honor he could confer on a person, was putting him in *The Cantos*, the poem that he believed would go down in the centuries. It didn't quite matter *how* one was put in them. Something similar occurred ten years later with another Jewish acquaintance, the Italian dilettante philosopher Leone Vivante, who appears just before a regrettable anti-Semitic passage of canto 52: "And Vivante was there in his paradise". This refers to Villa Solaia near Siena, a poets' haven frequented by Eugenio Montale, Camillo Sbarbaro, Pound and their respective muses, of which Leone and Elena Vivante were the generous hosts. The Vivantes luckily emigrated to England at the beginning of the war, and returned when it was over. Old Vivante once told an acquaintance that Pound, being "vanitoso", was convinced he had done him a good service by putting him in the poem. Leone was not impressed. Besides, he did not know that in an early uncollected version of this passage ("Slice of Life"), Pound had referred to him as "the jew" and presented his lack of enthusiasm about Fascist war-mongering as an example of Jewish conservatism—or worse.

In the conversation between Pound and Mustafa about Benamore we find his characteristic use of phonetic spelling suggestive of mispronunciation. This reminds us that *The Cantos* are a very oral poem. Yet this heavy-handed fun is another symptom of

Pound's immaturity—his humor is very close to slapstick. And ethnic stereotyping is hard to take in good part. No insult intended, Pound would argue. We are all good friends here, aren't we? Well, some of his readers are, to say the least, embarrassed by this callow humor (under which we can sense a certain blindness and violence).

This may be all too much to read into Pound's mock-epic account of his adventures and discoveries in canto 22. The Gibraltar episode is to be taken as one of the yarns of Odysseus, a tale of survival in which the new innocent abroad inspects knowingly and warily the world's variety and records phrases that have stuck in his mind. Mustafa's ambiguous comment on Yusef is one of these. While Yusef himself is remembered for his belief that "W'en yeou go to some forain's country / You moss be stuck: w'en they come 'ere I steek them". Pound clearly took the same view of this cheating world, and it would have been fun (of a troubled kind) to hear him *perform* the passage. Incidentally, in commenting on two main themes of the *Cantos*, Hades and Metamorphosis, W. B. Yeats cavalierly drew the following moral: "Hades may become the hell where modern men he most disapproves of suffer damnation, the metamorphosis petty frauds practised by Jews in Gibraltar" (xxiv). The pages devoted to Gibraltar are less simple than that, and to some extent the passage is worth of study for its opaqueness, it has a dream-like quality. One can compare it with Mark Twain's wonderful account of his visit to Gibraltar some forty years earlier in *The Innocents Abroad*, and with Joyce's crystal-clear account of Leopold Bloom's musings in the Dublin church. Incidentally, there is a lot about Gibraltar in Molly Bloom's final soliloquy, for that's where she grew up and had her first affairs. Joyce had never been there but was able to present it in much greater detail than Pound who had spent there several weeks at an important juncture of his life. The symbolic import of Gibraltar is all but buried in canto 22, whereas it is immediately apparent in the opening lines of the Pisan cantos:

You who have passed the pillars and outward from Herakles
when Lucifer fell in N. Carolina

(74/445)

Dante's Ulysses voyaged outward towards Mount Purgatory, created (as Dante explains) by Lucifer's fall. This seems to be the implication of the second line. But it is a grand panorama. On a more intimate scale, a later passage refers directly to Joyce's interest in Gibraltar:

Mr Joyce also preoccupied with Gibraltar
and the Pillars of Hercules
not with my patio and the wistaria and the tennis courts
or the bugs in Mrs Jevons' hotel
or the quality of beer served to sailors

(74/467-68)

Did Joyce milk Pound for information on Gibraltar while writing "Penelope"? The passage seems to be saying that he left out some of the details Pound provided. Which however are exactly of the kind *Ulysses* is full of. In "Penelope" there are many flowers, but no wistaria. However, there are plenty of Gibraltar vermin: "bugs tons of them at night and the mosquito nets I couldnt read a line Lord how long ago it seems centuries of course they never come back" (707). If Joyce didn't make use of Pound's wistaria and tennis courts, neither did he in canto 22. In the more eloquent days of the Pisan cantos he wrote with some of Joyce's eye for clear evocation of detail. Yet the interesting difference remains and should be noted. *The Cantos* are Pound's *actual* stream of consciousness, ergo much more confused and confusing than Mr. and Mrs. Bloom's thoughts, all carefully constructed by the omniscient and detached Joyce watching with affection his wonderful puppets. Unlike these fictional creations, Yusef was still there in 1929 and later to read his part in the phantasmagoria of Pound's poem.

[The Hunting of the Lattizzo](#)

Canto 22 closes with a tale that Pound found in Franco Sacchetti's *Trecentonovelle* (1399), providing yet another illustration of the resourcefulness of Woman:

And the judge says: That veil is too long.
And the girl takes off the veil

That she has stuck onto her hat with a pin,
“Not a veil,” she says, “at’s a scarf.”

Sacchetti’s “Novella 137” is titled “Come le donne fiorentine, senza studiare o apparare leggi, hanno vinto e confuso già con le loro legge, portando le loro fogge, alcuno dottore di legge” (i.e., “How Florentine Women, Without Studying or Learning Law, Have Won and Confounded with Their Own Laws, Wearing Their Dresses, Some Doctors in Law”). It is about the attempt to enforce sumptuary laws that prohibit extravagant dress. The Italian passage on which the above lines are based is as follows:

E’ si truova una donna col becchetto frastagliato avvolto sopra il cappuccio; il notaio mio dice: “Ditemi il nome vostro; però che avete il becchetto intagliato”; la buona donna piglia questo becchetto che è appiccato al cappuccio con uno spillo, e recaselo in mano, e dice ch’egli è una ghirlanda.

Pound gives the woman a cockney accent, having her drop her aitches, and changes the garland into a scarf. Furthermore, as is most often the case in his anecdotes, the reader must learn from other sources what the context is, otherwise he would have trouble getting the point of the confrontation. While Sacchetti has various women bamboozle the notary, Pound condenses the scene as just one encounter. Inevitably, eternal Eve wins the day:

And the judge says:
Don’t you know you aren’t allowed all those buttons?
And she says: Those ain’t buttons, them’s bobbles.
Can’t you see there ain’t any button-holes?

In the original:

Or va più oltre, truova molti bottoni portare dinanzi; dicesi a quella che è trovata: “Questi bottoni voi non potete portare”; e quella risponde: “Messer sí, posso, ché questi non sono bottoni, ma sono coppelle, e se non mi credete, guardate, e’ non hanno picciuolo, e ancora non c’è niuno occhiello”.

As often in folk tales, there is a third and final exchange, with a climactic punch line:

Va il notaio all’altra che porta gli ermellini, e dice: “Che potrà apporre costei?” “Voi portate gli ermellini”; e la vuole scrivere; la donna dice: “Non iscrivete, no, ché questi non sono ermellini, anzi sono lattizzi”; dice il notaio: “Che cosa è questo lattizzo?” e la donna risponde: “È una bestia”. E ’l notaio mio come bestia...

In a dictionary of 1825 I find that *lattizio* or *lattizzo* is “pelle d’animale da latte”: the skin of an animal that is still a suckling, hence the derivation of *lattizzo* from *latte*. And the same dictionary cites as an example this very passage from Sacchetti. Pound clearly loved the strange word. Chance has it that Eugenio Montale, who saw him in the late twenties, recalled the very moment of discovery (he may have heard the story from Mrs. Pound):

Antiquarian without knowing it, custodian of the museum of his heart, he searched our old chronicles for some exciting episode, some curious word. One night when he found the word “lattizzo” he ran out half-naked through the Rapallo streets yelling: “lattizzo, lattizzo!”, and his wife had a hard time bringing him back home. (449)

This tells us in what spirit we are to read Pound's version of the conclusion of the episode, which is also the conclusion of the canto:

And the Judge says:
Well, anyway, you aren't allowed ermine.
"Ermine?" the girl says. "Notermine, that ain't,
'At's lattittzo."
And the judge says: And just what is lattittzo?
And the girls says:
 "It's an animal."
Signori, *you* go and enforce it.

Actually, the conclusion is rather understated, though Pound's expressive spelling "lattittzo" suggests some oral emphasis. The last line is obscure unless the reader knows the premise of the entire vignette, the attempt to enforce a law. But, and this seems to be the point, it is impossible for Law (a word missing and replaced by "it" in the last line) to account for and contain the real, of which Woman is the prime symbol in her mocking challenge of law, judge and writer. That's the fun of writing and describing the world in its "infinite variety". It is impossible. "Signori, *you* try to write *The Cantos*!" Pound's humor here works well, and he is at home in telling and not telling the story, teasing us to go after his source, to trap his *lattittzo*. How does one translate the fun? In 1961 Mary de Rachewiltz retranslated Pound's translation, which is a defensible strategy, and even preserved his expressive misspelling:

E il giudice: Non sapete
Che tutti quei bottoni non son permessi?
E lei: "Non son bottoni ma biglie.
Non vedete che non ci ho asole?"
E in ogni caso non è permesso l'ermellino.
"Ermellino" fa la ragazza, "Ermellino questo?
"E' lattittzo!" (229)

Happily revising her translation in 1985, for the Meridiani Mondadori edition of *I Cantos*, de Rachewiltz turned to Sacchetti's original:

E il giudice: Non sapete
Che questi bottoni voi non potete portare?
E lei: "Non son bottoni, ma sono coppelle.
Non c'è niuno occhiello."
Comunque non puoi portare ermellino.
"Ermellino" fa la ragazza, "Ermellino questo?
"E' lattizzo!"
E il giudice: E che è
Lattizzo? Fa la ragazza:
 "E' una bestia".
Signori, provateci voi. (205-207)

This I believe the more rewarding strategy, which I have followed throughout my new translation of 2012:

E il giudice dice: "Quel velo è troppo lungo".
E la ragazza si toglie il velo
Che è appiccato al cappuccio con uno spillo,
E dice ch'egli è una ghirlanda.
E il giudice:
 "Questi bottoni voi non potete portare".

E quella: "Messer sì, posso, ché questi non sono bottoni,
ma sono coppelle.
Guardate, ancora non c'è niuno occhiello".
E il giudice: "Voi portate gli ermellini".
"Questi non sono ermellini, anzi sono lattizzi".
E il giudice: "Che cosa è questo lattizzo?".
E lei risponde:
"E' una bestia".
Signori, provateci un po' voi a farla rispettare.

For the record, 1985 is concerned with not exceeding the number of lines of the original, and so sacrifices some of its raciness. In 2012 more of the original language is preserved. However, the compact last line of 1985 (which is Pound's telling addition to the story) seems preferable to the expansion in 2012, which doesn't really clarify the meaning while making the conclusion less effective and incisive. Which is after all what Pound is always attempting. To create the impression of successful communication, never mind if it has really occurred. His is an oral performance, where both *oral* and *performance* count. The conclusion is that one should go for it with humor, knowing beforehand that it is impossible to make meaning and stability out of chaos. However, one can enjoy the fun, the infinite variety of experience. Which is one of the lessons of *The Cantos* that we can take to heart. When we discover the unusual word, the unusual story and music, our day is made, and we may as well celebrate. (Though perhaps not actually taking to the streets in undress.) The conclusion of canto 22 is a memorable challenge. Pound is aware of his audience and keeps egging it and teasing it. He was to do this again, for example, in 1959, referring to the grand opening of *Paradiso 2*: "You in the dinghy (piccioletta) astern there!" (109/794).

Concluding Remarks

To return to the Law, of course Pound admires the resourceful lady who bamboozles the judge. She is an incarnation of untamable nature, that mocks man's attempts to control her. She is the erotic principle, often celebrated and venerated in *The Cantos*. More generally, human bonds of affection come before the written statute. In an early canto we find that Confucius, asked whether a father should protect a son who is wanted for murder, answered: "He should hide him" (13/59). Perhaps the most moving reflection on the Law occurs in the first climactic Pisan canto. Pound is in a U.S. Army prison camp near Pisa. A black G.I. has risked a reprimand or worse by providing him with a makeshift table on which to attempt once again the Hunting of the Lattizzo, which in Pisa Pound was to pursue more successfully, writing under inauspicious circumstances some of his finest poetry. Thinking of this act of kindness, the Protestant Pound is reminded of a celebrated dictum in 1 Corinthians. He writes:

of the Baluba mask: "doan you tell no one
I made you that table"
methenamine eases the urine
and the greatest is charity
to be found among those who have not observed regulations

(74/454)

Note how in this instance the use of phonetic writing (*doan* reproduces Black English) is extraordinarily effective, not heavy-handed. And how Pound dares to write his elegant little footnote to a crucial text of Christianity—and brings it off. The line has also an implicit reflective import, being written (spoken) by one who is confined because he has "not observed regulations". The strategy is quite subtle and masterful: Making a general statement and expecting the reader to see the application. Besides, it is a good line of poetry, with its tripping and assured anapestic cadence.

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Pour citer cet article :

Massimo BACIGALUPO, *The Law and How to Break It: Reading and Translating Ezra Pound's Canto 22*, *Lingua e Diritto. La Lingua della Legge, la Legge nella Lingua*, *Publiforum*, n. 18, pubblicato il 2013, consultato il 02/05/2024, url: http://www.farum.it/publiforum/ezine_pdf.php?id=265