# **Ideology in Poetry:**

# A Study of Ezra Pound's Usura Canto XIV

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## Abstract:

Ideologies identify individuals, for they portray their thoughts and beliefs. Ezra Pound (1885–1972), the controversial yet significant modern writer of the twentieth century, implemented many of his own ideologies within his largest work The Cantos. One of his important theories is concerned with economics and in particular usury. Therefore, this paper gives an introduction to the Usura–Cantos, followed by a poetic analysis focusing on Pound's ideologies within Usura–Canto XIV.

Key words: Ideology, economics, usura, monopoly, obstructers of distribution.

#### المستخلص

ان الايديولوجيات تجسد الافراد كونها تصور افكارهم ومعتقداتهم. يعتبر عزرا باوند (1972–1885) من اهم واكثر الكتاب جدلا للقرن العشرين، والذي قد ادخل عددا كبيرا من ايديولوجاته ضمن عمله الكبير "الكانتوس". تتعلق اهم نظرياته بعلم الاقتصاد وبالأخص فيما يتعلق بالربا. تبدأ هذه المقالة اولا وقبل كل شئ بإعطاء مقدمة حول "كانتو الربا"، يليها مبحثا نسلط فيها الضوء على تحليل شعري حول ايديولوجيات باوند من ضمن "كانتو الربا الرابع عشر".

#### Introduction

It was in 1917 that Pound met C.H. Douglas who inspired him to convert to his program of Social Credit. This helped Pound also to find out the cause behind the war, which eventually turned out to be mainly economic factors. Due to the Social Credit theory, Pound believed in «political economy», referring to the idea that politics is part of the underlying economic system. They are both interrelated, and so if one is corrupt, it would affect the other one as well resulting eventually in war, starvation and

ruin. Thus, World War I is only the outcome of a fraudulent economic system.<sup>(1)</sup>

When it comes to The Cantos Pound did not at first consider them to be an epic, but by the year 1934 he believed that two themes are of importance for this genre. which are history and economics. Both are intertwined within The Cantos, whereby usury is an aspect of much significance as to the theory of economics. (2) It was Pound himself who coined the term 'usura', inspired largely by Douglas, whereby the latter also believed that the world's finance structure is controlled by Jewish bankers and Freemasons.(3)

Although Pound saw usury as the reason behind the economic and political decline, he was reluctant to name the Jews and link them with usury. Usury is an abstract economic issue that can be blamed for the many failures in society, yet Pound remained vague when it comes to its Jewish influence. He did coin terms as 'Jewsury', relating the Jews directly

with usury, (4) but when he realized he was being seen as an anti-Semite, he not only denied it, but also defended them saying that the Jews, ever since the time of Moses, have always had rules against usury. Moreover, when different writers, in particular in the New English Weekly, blamed the Jews for all problems related to money. including the Depression. Pound reacted in Selected Prose, 1909-1965 and stated: "Usurers have no race. How long the whole Jewish people is to be sacrificial goat for the usurer. I know not." Still. Pound is considered to be anti-Semitic, if only on an emotional level at certain times. (5) Pound's reservation against the Jews is not motivated by any racial bias, but because of their greedy nature.

In order to read The Cantos. it is of much importance to understand the term (usury). The writer and historian Jacques Le Goff defined it as the following:

Usury means that a lender receives interest through transactions that should not produce interest.

And so, usury is not the levying of all interest. Usury and interest are not synonymous, nor are usury and profit. Usury is involved where there is no production or physical transformation of tangible goods<sup>(6)</sup>.

Thus, usury is not the taking of interests, but the manipulation of currency, which refers to either the insufficiency of the circulating currency for the productive capacity of a nation, or the overflow of an artificial currency that the real economics has become nearly forgotten, which in both cases there is the issue of corruption and manipulation<sup>(7)</sup>.

Ezra Pound, who broadened his interest in economics ever since he met Douglas, believed that 'modern monetary evil' goes back to the very foundation of the Bank of England in the year 1694. The Hamilton's bank in America took over the same financial, and usurious, principles. He finds that the way such banks have originated and developed are corrupt and perverse. While banks should be handing out money for the people.

they instead make it their business of generating debts, which is contra naturam (contrary to nature).

(8) Just as Aristotle had claimed, "money could only be spent, money could not breed money", Pound insisted that credit should be owned by the people and not by the banks. He condemned usury so strongly, that he considered it to be a disease. (9) In his book Selected Prose he stated that "USURY is the cancer of the world, which only the surgeon's knife of Fascism can cut out of the life of nations., (10)

Professor Maud Ellmann argued that usury, according to Pound, has removed the 'blank of truth' (which is history) and replaced it by the 'blank of usury'. After all, usury itself has no history. For centuries, this 'usurocracy' has been removing the true knowledge and facts of the past. It supplants "the living image with inert ideas, and entrammels history with theory". In order to beat usura, Pound used The Cantos to "blank the blank, erase erasure", as it is, still and all, "a poem includ-

ing history». (11)

Usura has a «central position in the vision of history that the poem is to present», and it cannot thus be ignored. (12) The selected cantos, the "Hell Cantos" (canto 14 and 15), the "Usura Canto" (Canto 45), and Canto XLVI, are of the ones in which Pound mostly extends his views with regards to usura and his economic theories.

The "Hell Cantos" depict a Dantesque hell, whereby the people are punished for their sins, but here, most of the sins are related to money. Amongst these sinners are the usurious profiteers and financiers. (13) The unnatural way in which they have created money. caused the usurers to be punished in hell. (14) Pound continued his theory of usury in his «Usura Canto». whereby he portrayed all destruction that he associates with this evil, but he also depicts his own ideas with regards to good and evil, and what he stands for. According to the writer and professor Noel Stock, canto 45, in specific, shows «the idealism at the root of his righteousness.» It depicts oppositions that give the contrast of what is natural and unnatural, abundance, natural increase and artificial scarcity. (15)

# **The Hell Canto**

#### - Canto XIV

Io venni in luogo d'ogni luce muto; (I came to a place mute of all light) Canto XIV. Ezra Pound

The "Hell Cantos" portray contemporary England, and more specifically London, where the inhabitants are the corrupt financiers, politicians, as well as those who provide munitions, all those who influenced the World War I and encouraged it. It is from here on that Pound turned towards economics in order to understand and explain how such a horrifying war could have taken place. (16) Unlike in Dante's Inferno, the inhabitants of Pound's hell do not seem to be conscious of where they find themselves, and are not suffering as such. The long period of time they have been there, has made it quite natural to them. (17) Despite the damage these usurers have inflicted, they are not being punished in hell. The place they are in, is the hell they have created themselves on this earth. (18)

The Dantean influence in the "Hell Cantos" is clear from the very first line lo venni in luogo d'ogni luce muto; which literally means 'I came to a place mute of all light'. This line is taken from the fifth canto of Dante's Inferno. It links darkness to language with the term 'mute', but it also gives off the same sphere of punishment and sins that Dante used. Although it is a similar hell that Dante used in Inferno, only here, Pound uses hell in order to criticize and condemn contemporary society. (19) In one of the letters directed to Wyndham Lewis, Pound stated that: "You will readily see that the "hell" is a portrait of contemporary England, or at least Eng. as she was when I left her., (20)

In Dante's Inferno, the usurers are put into hell in canto 17, whereas in canto 15 he indicts cer-

tain well-known literati of homosexuality and blasphemy, such as Brunetto Latini and grammarian Priscian. On a parallel level, since Pound's hell cantos are 14 and 15. it seems Pound aims to link blasphemy, usury and sodomy and condemn them into hell, all given the adjective 'perverse'. His idea is that "perversion of language and of money attacks the root or fount of all things."(21) In the end. Pound placed in this hell first of all the bankers (in particular the Jews) whom he charged of usury and creating money out of money. secondly the journalists who used language for profit, and thirdly the homosexuals whom he found to be guilty of disturbing the creation of life. Finally, art, according to him, should not be affected by any markets, commercial language, or the fruitless pleasures of a democracy. (22)

The stench of wet coal, politicians
.....e and .....n, their wrists bound to
their ankles.

Standing bare bum.

Faces smeared on their rumps.

wide eye on flat buttock.

Bush hanging for beard.

Addressing crowds through their arse-holes

Addressing the multitudes in the ooze.

Words that are manipulated by the "betrayers of language". and "perverters of language" transform into something poisonous. Pound wanted to help spread knowledge, that according to the Neo-Platonic thought that he believed in, is accompanied with light. For this to come true, purity and accurate language are necessary. This however, cannot be with the presence of lying politicians and usurers. Without knowledge. light, or anything new or modern. the world would be «mute of all light.»(23)

In the third line of the poem, one may count ten dots followed by 'e', and then five dots, followed by 'n'. These dots, in fact, represent the names of two politicians: David Lloyd George (1863–1945),

and Woodrow Wilson (1856– 1924). (24) In one of Pound's letters directed to John Lackay Brown, he stated: "Even XIV-XV has individuals in it, but not worth recording as such....My 'point' being that not even the first but only last letters of their names had resisted corruption."(25) These people should not be remembered, as even their names have rotten away. Pound believed it was not important for a reader to know the person according to the numbers of dots, as he once told the printer of the first sixteen cantos William Bird, who tried to figure out the missing letters. (26)

The politicians in the poem also have "their wrists bound to their ankles", while their dung is "smeared on their rumps", speaking in a humiliating manner to the people. Pound's ideological enemies have become so fragile. (27) But, just as the banking system has reversed the natural circle of money, in this canto, there is a reversal of natural human circulation. The usurers, that include the politi-

cians and the profiteers, instead of speaking through their mouth, are forced to speak from their behinds. The writer Alec Marsh explicates this phenomenon by stating that "(i)n the usury/buggery world. things go in where they should come out and the natural circulation that sustains nature and life is reversed."(28) Pound's punishments not only reflect the sins. but they also allude to Dante's Inferno. In the cantos of both Dante and Pound, the sinners suffer in a way that exaggerates the sins they committed.(29)

Profiteers drinking blood sweetened with sh-t.

And behind them ......f and the financiers

lashing them with steel wires.

While with 'politicians' he used Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson as two examples, here the dots of 'profiteers' refers to Metevski, of which his real name is Zaharoff. (30) Zaharoff sold munitions, and was once even knighted for his excellent work. Pound often

calls him Metevsky, as he does not believe he deserves to be called by his name, for he was the reason behind the death of millions. (31) Furthermore, the supposed Zaharoff, along with the financiers, lash the profiteers with steel wires. This is an allusion to Dante's Circle VIII, whereby the first devils wearing horns, whip the condemned. (32) It is as though Pound is saying that Zaharoff and these financiers are the devils themselves.

And the betrayers 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;

Different kinds of sinners, according to Pound, are the 'betrayers of language'. Again, this idea has been taken over from Dante's Inferno, in Bolgia 10, whereby Dante condemns impersonators and liars. However, Pound adds the idea of using words not only carelessly, but also maliciously. This is believed to be amongst the

worst of sins. (33) To use language in order to bring evil to the world. these are the perverters and betrayers of language, referring in this case more specifically to the press. Pound abhorred these 'perverters of language' that impede knowledge, overrun culture and are controlled by their 'moneylust' instead of their senses. With the coming of the financial capital. mass media and commerce, this changed in one way or another into capitalism, inequality, and exploitation, and this is what Pound against.(34) argues He attacks hereby society, but ironically, he attacks his own mind as well, for he himself has abused language on many occasions, as he, for instance, lashed out against many personalities within The Cantos. (35)

plunging jewels in mud.

and howling to find them unstained;

Pound uses these lines clarifying the reason behind his alienation from the world. According to Stephen Sicari, they refer to the idea that beauty cannot be wiped out, but it can only be buried. As this culture is consumed by mass production, and all material is without any critical thinking, taken over, the real beauty is like a jewel plunged in mud. The true values have been perverted, and the effects and beauty of the economic system are still deeply hidden. Pound, in his quest for ideological theories, is searching for this hidden beauty. (36)

The poet and critic Bob Perelman, on the other hand, had a different view on these lines. According to him, Pound uses these contrasted terms (jewel and mud) to refer to different contradictions. It may either refer to Mussolini/Jews, the exceptional individual/the masses, or the genius and the diluting poets. (37) As in many parts of The Cantos, Pound leaves the interpretation of these lines up to the reader himself.

And in the ooze under them.

reversed. foot-palm to foot-palm.

hand-palm to hand-palm, the

agents provocateurs

The murderers of Pearse and Mac-Donagh.

Captain H. the chief torturer;

The petrified turd that was Verres.

These lines that start off on a political sphere, whereby he identifies certain names of individuals found in hell. Firstly, he mentions the 'murderers of Pearse and Mac-Donagh'. Pearse is an author and a leader of the Irish political party Sinn Fein. Also, he was the commander in chief of the Irish forces during the Eastern rebellion of 1916. MacDonagh also participated in this rebellion, as he was an Irish patriot. Both were executed. Pound blames Captain J. Bowen-Culthurst, who was the British army officer during the year 1916. responsible for the killings of many political prisoners. From politics, Pound shifts more to economics. referring to Verres, a Roman administrator. He is well-known for his immense corruption whereby he robbed from provinces, bribed and sold art, and used his own power and wealth to stay away from being arrested. While Captain H. robbed the lives of people. Verres robbed from people and lived off his life plundering and avoiding justice. Both, according to Pound, are destined to be in the same hell. Politics and economics are intermingled and corruption is present in all its forms. So long corruption exists, this hell will remain on earth.

Above the hell-rot
the great arse-hole,
broken with piles,
hanging stalactites,
greasy as sky over Westminster,
the invisible, many English,
the place lacking in interest,
last squalor, utter decrepitude,
the vice-crusaders, fahrting
through silk,

waving the Christian symbols, frigging a tin penny whistle,

Flies carrying news, harpies dripping sh-t through the air.

Here. Pound is personifying himself in the role of a poet-

prophet who is looking down on all the sinners from the mountaintop, that include the usurers and 'betrayers of language'. While condemning them and criticizing religion, he is also describing the horrible view he is seeing. (39) With the descriptions that he is given. it seems that, more than Dante, Pound may have been strongly inspired by the Early Netherlandish painter Hieronimus Bosch in the way hell has been portrayed with similar images. (40) Also، Pound emphasizes the location of this hell. being at the center of government called Westminster in London. (41)

Earlier in the book ABC of Economics. Pound mentions that it is better for all to have a little money. than to live in a 'constipated state' in which many people have nothing. (42) He continues this idea in these poetic lines. The writer Charles Ferrall stated the meaning behind these lines that depict illness and constipation: "In a sense the unhealthy body politic produces too much language and too little money. An unhealthy body

politic suffers from both linguistic diarrhea and economic constipation." Thus, in order to convey the issue of money, and the problems related to it, he uses ailments due to ill health that a person may experience.

The slough of unamiable liars,
bog of stupidities,
malevolent stupidities, and stupidities,
the soil living pus, full of vermin,
dead maggots begetting live maggots,
slum owners,

usurers squeezing crab-lice, pandars to authori

pets-de-loup, sitting on piles of stone books,

obscuring the 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.

And Invidia , the corruptio, fretor , fungus , liquid animals, melted ossifications , slow rot, fretid combustion , chewed cigar-butts, without dignity, without tragedy . . . . .m Episcopus، waving a condom full of black-beetles،

monopolists, obstructors of knowledge.

obstructors of distribution.

In the last part of this canto. Pound mentions several causes and persons whom he blames for the WWI. First of all, as earlier in this canto XIV, he finds that in case the military, finance and journalism are combined, this could be so catastrophic, that they in fact lead to the death of many innocents. Moreover, Pound goes even further by associating usury, monopoly, as well as philology with this same danger. (44) The 'pets-deloup' referring to the university people or scholars 45 only obstruct knowledge. Whatever knowledge these scholars do have, they are "hiding them under their persons"(46) They speak, but with 'invidia' (envy), and are corrupted. (47) In the book Selected Prose. 1909–1965. Pound gave his view on the true scholar stating that "...the scholar's ultimate end is to put the greatest amount of the best literature (i.e., if that is his subject) within the easiest reach of the public...."(48) Literature and art belong to the cultural heritage, and should therefore be public to all.(49)

According to Social Credit and the political ideas that Pound follows, there is the assumption that if the world took the natural road. all would have enough that would ward off any war from happening. The problem only starts when one claims the monopoly over a certain commodity and obstructs the natural flow of distribution of products or materials, which causes a scarcity. Monopoly, after all, artificially controls the availability of a commodity and has then, the control over the price as well. This kind of hoarding is exactly what Pound denounces. The last lines of Canto XIV «monopolists, obstructors of knowledge/obstructors of distribution, refer to the idea that those who obstruct knowledge. abuse language, and artificially control the information, are also the main cause behind the artificial and malicious control of goods. (50) All the various professions Pound had mentioned within this cantos relate then, to the obstruction of distributions. Such professions include the politicians, journalists, businessmen, and scholars. Pound noted specific names, whereby some have been mentioned with only one letter, not worthy of identifying the person. (51)

If all worked according to the laws of nature, the world would have become a place where everyone has sufficient commodity in order to live a comfortable live, and where no wars would occur. The issue starts when politicians and other rhetoricians use language in order to influence the economics. where politics and banks (work together in order to create money out of money, and where the monopoly over commodities starts to occur and the distribution of these goods becomes obstructed. Usury becomes the norm, instead of the crime, and the world becomes enwrapped in a dangerous sphere. where even those of knowledge

are « hiding them under their persons». It is this world that Pound warns from, and it is this hell that he created in this canto – a hell that is closer to us than one might realize at first.

#### **Conclusion**

Ideological poetry is a recent poetical phenomenon that has become of more importance with the changing of society. Ezra Pound implemented many of his own thoughts with regards the past events like the world wars, as well as the economic corruption. As a reaction and a critique to all that was happening. Pound depicted many of his ideologies indirectly through the usage of classical mythology and via the ideas of C.H. Douglas, who was of great influence to him.

## Notes

- 1 Alec Marsh , Ezra Pound (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 118.
- 2 Line Henriksen, Ambition and Anxiety: Ezra Pound's Cantos

- and Derek Walcott's Omeros as Twentieth–Century Epics (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 111.
- 3 Arnold P. Abbott, When in Doubt...Blame a Jews: A Personal and People's Memoir of Anti–Semitism (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2004), 216.
- 4 Charles Ferrall, Modernist Writing and Reactionary Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 64.
- 5 Carroll F. Terrell, A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 2:724.
- 6 Jacques Le Goff, Your Money or Your Life: Economy and Religion in the Middle Ages, trans. Patricia Ranum (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 18.
- 7 Tim Redman, "Dante and Early Italian Poetry," in Ezra Pound in Context, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 199.
- 8 Alec Marsh, Money and Modernity: Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson (Tuscaloo-

- sa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998), 122–123.
- 9 Christine Brooke-Rose, AZBC of Ezra Pound (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 225–226.
- 10 Henriksen, 111.
- 11 Maud Ellmann, "Ezra Pound: the erasure of history," in Post-structuralism and the Question of History, ed. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 244,247–248.
- 12 Henriksen، 111.
- 13 George Kearns, Ezra Pound: The Cantos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 92.
- 14 Marsh, Money and Modernity, 124.
- 15 Noel Stock, Reading the Cantos: A Study of Meaning in Ezra Pound (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1967), 27–28.
- 16 J.J. Wilhelm, Ezra Pound: The Tragic Years 1925–1972

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- 17 Kearns، 92.
- 18 Brooke-Rose, 221.
- 19 Michael Thurston, The Underworld in Twentieth–Century Poetry: From Pound and Eliot to Heaney and Walcott (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 55–57.
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- 22 Claire Colebrook, "Queer Aesthetics," in Queer Times, Queer Becomings, ed. E.L. Mc-Callum and Mikko Tuhkanen (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 35–36.
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- 25 Carroll F. Terrell, A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 65.
- 26 Wilhelm, 49.
- 27 Thurston, 56.
- 28 Marsh. Money and Modernity. 126–127.
- 29 Thurston, 56.
- 30 Terrell, 1980, 65.
- 31 Wilhelm، 54.
- 32 Terrell, 1980, 65.
- 33 Ibid., 65-66.
- 34 Gianluca Rizzo, "'Proviamo ancora col corpo': The Theatrical aspects of Elio Pagliarani's Poetry," in The Politics of Poetics: Poetry and Social Activism in Early–Modern through Contemporary Italy, ed. Fed-

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- 35 Robert Duncan, The H.D. Book (N.p. Frontier Press, 1984), 256.
- 36 Stephen Sicari, Pound's Epic Ambition: Dante and the Modern World (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 37.
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- 40 Steve Ellis, Dante and English Poetry: Shelley to T.S. Eliot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 188.
- 41 Terrell, 1980, 66.
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- 43 Ferrall, 48.
- 44 Paul Stasi, Modernism, Imperialism, and the Historical Sense (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 71.
- 45 Terrell, 1980, 66.
- 46 Stasi, 71.
- 47 Terrell, 1980, 66.
- 48 Margaret Fisher, Ezra Pound's Radio Operas: The BBC Experiments, 1931–1933 (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2002), 114.
- 49 Stasi, 71.
- 50 Thurston, 58.
- 51 Albert Gelpi، A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910–1950 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 204.

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