

# To Break the Hexameter: Classical Prosody in Ezra Pound's Early Cantos

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## THE RETURN OF "QUANTITATIVE METER"

Through the bewildering array of aesthetic theories and literary movements that Ezra Pound would adopt and discard over the course of his life, he maintained a steadfast belief that English verse could be reborn in the twentieth century by incorporating the meters of ancient Greek and Latin. In "A Retrospect" of 1917, Pound declared that "the desire for vers libre is due to the sense of quantity reasserting itself after years of starvation."<sup>1</sup> Because Pound never cared to define what "quantity" might mean in English verse, these statements are vague; but Pound took them seriously, bristling against criticism that his verse might not be metrical. In 1922, when Felix E. Schelling described Pound as a "confirmed devotee of vers libre" in a complimentary review of *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, Pound wrote a letter to Schelling in response, explaining where the reviewer was in error.<sup>2</sup> Pound argued that Schelling had fundamentally misunderstood his poetic forms, which were a "search for the quantitative element in English, for liberty of the musician."<sup>3</sup> As the decades passed, Pound became more insistent on the primacy of meter in poetic technique. In 1938, he

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1. Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," in *Literary Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 12. "Years of starvation" is misleading because the seventy or so years preceding Pound's statement saw a resurgence of the attempt to approximate classical meters in English by poets, including Tennyson, Browning and Swinburne, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, Robert Bridges, Lionel Johnson, Richard Le Gallienne, and H.D. This resurgence was comparable in scope to the experiments of Elizabethan poets outlined in Derek Attridge's *Well-Weighed Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres* (Cambridge University Press, 1974).

2. Ezra Pound to Felix E. Schelling, July 8, 1922, in *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 181.

3. *Ibid.*

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included the following in a “Brace of Axioms” about poetry: “WHEN the metre is bad, the language is apt to be poor. WHEN the metre is good enough, it will almost drive out all other defects of language.”<sup>4</sup> Toward the end of his life, Pound reiterated the statements he had made on quantitative meter in 1917. In a 1962 interview with the *Paris Review*, Pound reflects on T. S. Eliot’s statement that “No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job.”<sup>5</sup> “I like Eliot’s sentence,” says Pound: “the best free verse comes from an attempt to get back to quantitative meter.”<sup>6</sup> For Pound, “meter” is not an option for good verse in the twentieth century: it is essential, and perhaps even unavoidable. Exactly what Pound means by “a return to quantitative meter” has hitherto remained a mystery, but nonetheless a crucial problem to solve if we wish to understand the foundations of Pound’s poetics.

The early cantos are a microcosm of Pound’s achievements in the creation of new poetic forms. From the *Ur-Cantos* to *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, Pound’s thinking about the nature and function of verse went through its most dramatic evolution.<sup>7</sup> The *Cantos* as a whole constitutes—for better or worse—the blueprint of the free-verse epic in English; without the *Cantos*, we would not have Louis Zukofsky’s “A” (1940–78), Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems* (1953–74), or Edward Dorn’s *Gunslinger* (1968).<sup>8</sup> But in spite of the *Cantos*’ enormous influence there has been surprisingly little scholarship on the particulars of the *Cantos*’ verse technique. Albert Cook, D. S. Carne-Ross, Donald Davie, James Powell, Sally Gall, and Stephen Adams have all recognized meter’s presence in the *Cantos*.<sup>9</sup> But specify-

4. Ezra Pound, “A Brace of Axioms,” *Townsman*, July 1938, quoted in James A. Powell, “The Light of Vers Libre,” *Paideuma* 8 (1979): 7.

5. Ezra Pound, interview by Donald Hall, *Paris Review* 28 (1962), <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4598/the-art-of-poetry-no-5-ezra-pound>.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Ronald L. Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound’s “Cantos”* (Princeton University Press, 1977), 3–20. For an account dealing more broadly with cultural production, reception, and transmission in the *Cantos*, see Lawrence S. Rainey, *Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture: Text, History, and the Malatesta Cantos* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

8. Rainey, *Pound and the Monument of Culture*, 4; Daniel Gabriel, *Hart Crane and the Modernist Epic: Canon and Genre Formation in Crane, Pound, Eliot, and Williams* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Christopher Beach, *ABC of Influence: Ezra Pound and the Remaking of American Poetic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Anne Day Dewey, *Beyond Maximus: The Construction of Public Voice in Black Mountain Poetry* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 17–43.

9. The extant studies of the *Cantos*’ metrics are William McNaughton, “Ezra Pound’s Meters and Rhythms,” *PMLA* 78 (1963): 136–46; Albert Cook, “Rhythm and Person in *The Cantos*,” in *New Approaches to Ezra Pound*, ed. Eva Hesse (University of California Press, 1969), 349–64; D. S. Carne-Ross, “New Meters for Old: A Note on Pound’s Metric,” *Arion* 6 (1967): 216–32; Donald Davie, “Rhythm in the *Cantos*,” in *Pound* (London: Fontana, 1975); Powell, “Light of Vers Libre,” 3–34; Sally M. Gall, “Pound and the Modern Melic Tradition:

ing what these meters are and how they work has proven more of a challenge, attracting a range of scansion methods and theoretical arguments. Adams's "The Metrical Contract of 'The Cantos'" reads prosody in the context of genre, arguing—quite rightly—that Pound uses a variety of Greek metrical feet to situate the poem within classical epic.<sup>10</sup> The *Cantos* is a classical epic, broadly defined: "a long narrative poem of heroic action" that situates itself through form, content, or both in the tradition of Homer and Virgil.<sup>11</sup> However, explaining how meters of classical epic function in the *Cantos* proves a problem for Adams, as it does for most other scholars of Pound's prosody. This is to a large degree because scholars have consistently approached Pound's prosody using foot scansion, a technique that cannot fully—or even adequately—account for the phenomenology of English prosody.<sup>12</sup> As Adams notes, "Greek feet are so infinitely various that it is possible to cut up virtually any piece of prose into metrical segments."<sup>13</sup> Dividing the verse into Greek feet does not help us with our primary task: to "ascertain what is distinctive in Pound's rhythms."<sup>14</sup>

Adams considers options beyond foot scansion, focusing on Pound's promotion of the idea of "quantity" in English. Scholars describe the meters of Greek and Latin as "quantitative" because they are based on the duration of syllables (rather than stress, syllable count, or alliteration). Pound's usage of "quantitative meter," like many other terms in his poetics, is muddled. On one hand, Pound uses "quantitative meter" to mean meters drawn from Greek and Latin poetry; on the other hand, he uses the term as a principle of duration analogous to musical time signatures, a concept Gall explores in her efforts to demystify Pound's related term, "absolute rhythm."<sup>15</sup> Unlike our textbooks that contrast "quantitative" and "accentual" meters, Pound does not contrast quantity with stress. This is in keeping with recent studies of the phenomenology of English verse that suggest that quantity is not distinct from stress, but rather an aspect of it.<sup>16</sup> Cognitive poetics informs us that a range of sonic phenomena come together to create our experience of "stress," including the duration of the

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Towards a Demystification of 'Absolute Rhythm,'" *Paideuma* 8 (1979): 35–47; Stephen Adams, "The Metrical Contract of 'The Cantos,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 15 (1988): 55–72.

10. Adams, "Metrical Contract," 55–58.

11. Tobias Gregory, J. K. Newman, and Talya Meyers, "Epic," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., ed. Roland Greene et al. (Princeton University Press, 2012), 439.

12. Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (New York: Longman, 1982), 4–18.

13. Adams, "Metrical Contract," 61.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Gall, "Pound and the Modern Melic Tradition," 35–37.

16. Reuven Tsur, *Poetic Rhythm: Structure and Performance: An Empirical Study in Cognitive Poetics* (Brighton: Sussex Academic, 2012), 60–112.

syllable, its pitch, volume, and intonation.<sup>17</sup> These phenomena are bound together so closely, and vary so widely according to the person voicing the stress, that it is not meaningful to speak of an English meter based specifically on the duration of syllables (or, for that matter, pitch or volume). Whether or not Pound believed his poems in “quantitative meters” were based on syllable duration, in practice his poetry in classical meters used patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables to imitate the long and short syllables of Greek and Latin. James Powell articulates this most clearly: Pound “adapts rhythmic shapes generated by Greek quantitative verse to the capability of English accentual techniques.”<sup>18</sup>

Among Pound’s critics, Powell has the best ear for the classical meters that inspired Pound’s verse. Powell demonstrates how Pound’s poetry draws most heavily from the Aeolic meters of Greek and Latin, an array of metrical phrases (or “cola”) with the choriamb (- - -) at their heart.<sup>19</sup> For Powell, Pound’s prosody is difficult to grasp due to the contrapuntal relationship between his rhythms and meters. “What counterpoint Pound’s rhythms achieve,” Powell argues, “they will play not against the reader’s expectation, against the metre . . . but rather, against their own echo in auditory memory.”<sup>20</sup> This “echo in auditory memory” is in fact one of meter’s key functions. As Powell goes on to demonstrate, Pound establishes recurring accentual-syllabic patterns in his verse resembling Aeolic meters and the classical hexameter. While his verse does not strictly follow these meters in every syllable, the meters appear and reappear as key points of reference against which the rhythms of Pound’s individual lines define themselves.

English poetic rhythm is the measured flow of words or phrases in verse, forming various patterns of sound as determined by the relation of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line. “Meter” is a formalizable pattern of non-optional restraints on the rhythm of verse.<sup>21</sup> “Nonoptional” does not mean “unbreakable”; indeed, prosody’s most interesting effects often occur when rhythm and meter conflict with one another.<sup>22</sup> In other words, meter creates the set of expectations which rhythm goes on to deviate from or fulfill.

While Powell draws his method of scansion from the “useful fiction” of classical feet, D. S. Carne-Ross has another approach: he scans the forms of

17. *Ibid.*; see also Reuven Tsur, *Towards a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* (Brighton: Sussex Academic, 2008).

18. Powell, “Light of Vers Libre,” 12n.

19. *Ibid.*, 14–17.

20. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

21. Rosemary Winslow, “Meter,” in Greene et al., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 872, 875–76.

22. See Marina Tarlinskaja’s statistical analysis of metrical regularity in the work of canonical English poets in *English Verse: Theory and History* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).

the *Cantos* using classical cola.<sup>23</sup> The colon, meaning “limb,” is a metrical unit longer than a foot, “capable of functioning alongside cola of a similar or different character as a means of articulating rhythmical sequences that resist division into feet.”<sup>24</sup> Scanning using cola helps us understand long and complex rhythmical passages as coherent metrical units in their own right, without recourse to minute divisions that carry us further from the texture of the verse. For Carne-Ross, the *Cantos* marks the realization of Shelley and Swinburne’s ambition to renew English poetry through the formal resources of classical languages.<sup>25</sup> However, if this is so, why does Pound make these metrical patterns so difficult to discern and systematize?

Dudley Fitts’s 1931 review of *A Draft of XXX Cantos* considers this problem more deeply. Fitts seeks to defend the *Cantos* from the charge that “the poem is incomprehensible, a perverse mystification, . . . structurally and melodically amorphous, not a poem but a macaronic chaos.”<sup>26</sup> Fitts argues the rhythms of the *Cantos* appear amorphous only because their organization is so intricate, a complex “echo-counterpoint” of sound and image.<sup>27</sup> Pound repeats various rhythmic patterns throughout a given passage, then unworks them through his use of the pause: “the breaking and refashioning of rhythm, indicated with a musician’s exactness by the broken lines, the indentations, and the spacing.”<sup>28</sup>

Fitts’s account approaches the foundation of Pound’s metrics: the rhythms of the *Cantos* exist in a state of metamorphosis from one metrical paradigm to another. We can detect this phenomenon most clearly in those moments when the verse establishes a metrical pattern, and then unworks it. As Powell writes, “Few of us will fail to hear and respond to the intense rhythmic articulation which charges these . . . lines”:<sup>29</sup>

no cloud, but the crystal body  
                   the tangent formed in the hand’s cup  
 as live wind in the beech grove  
                   as strong air amid cypress.<sup>30</sup>

23. James A. Powell, quoted in Adams, “Metrical Contract,” 61; Carne-Ross, “New Meters for Old,” 216.

24. A. T. Cole, “Colon,” in Greene et al., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 277.

25. Carne-Ross, “New Meters for Old,” 217–19.

26. Dudley Fitts, “Music Fit for the Odes,” in *Ezra Pound: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Eric Homberger (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 246–47.

27. *Ibid.*, 247.

28. *Ibid.*, 248.

29. Powell, “Light of Vers Libre,” 3.

30. Ezra Pound, Canto 76, in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 477. All further references to Pound’s cantos are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page number.

There is a clearly audible pattern here of three beats per line; there is always a beat on the second and penultimate syllable. I follow Derek Attridge's usage of the word "beat": "the recurring pulse in a regular rhythm," which in scansion refers to "the salient elements of a poetic meter as experienced by the reader or listener."<sup>31</sup> "When beats and offbeats are organized into the patterns enshrined in verse tradition," Attridge writes, "the rhythm created is particularly strong; and once sequences of beats are perceived, the expectation is that they will continue."<sup>32</sup> The beats of a line are distinct from its stress pattern in that the beats are the positions in the line where a formalizable pattern leads us to expect a stress. The line "the tangent formed in the hand's cup" illustrates this distinction between stress and beat: there are three beats in the line, on "tangent," "formed," and "hand's," but four stresses in the line, on the aforementioned words and also on "cup." There are several moments in which the passage appears to fall into a steady triple meter, which is the recurring pattern of a beat alternating with a double offbeat.<sup>33</sup> But just as soon as this triple meter is established, the verse springs loose: the clear double offbeats in "cloud but the crystal," "formed in the hand's cup," and "wind in the beech grove" give way to the stress-rich line "as strong air amid cypress," which can entice the reader to pronounce "amid" itself as a double offbeat in order to maintain the rhythm.

The passage above, from Canto 76, shares its metrical structure with a form Pound first developed in the *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, and emphasized with self-conscious pride: "What foot beat out your time-bar, / what water has mellowed your whistles?" As in the *Cantos*, there are many moments in the *Homage* when the verse approaches metrical regularity. The rhythm of the following lines recurs regularly in the poem: "The moon will carry his candle, / the stars will point out the stumbles."<sup>34</sup>

Considering these two lines together, this form consists of six beats, a triple rhythm, and a medial caesura. This form is not Pound's invention, but rather draws on nineteenth-century efforts to render the Greek dactylic hexameter, the meter of Homeric epic, in English.<sup>35</sup> Pound's innovation is to split the meter across two lines, with the line break functioning as the medial caesura. I refer to these pairs of lines as "cleaved hexameters" in both senses of the word "cleave," of joining together and splitting apart.

31. Derek Attridge, "Beat," in Greene et al., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 129–30.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Attridge, *Rhythms of English Poetry*, 99–100.

34. Pound, *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, in *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (1926; London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 205, 209.

35. See Joseph Phelan, *The Music of Verse: Metrical Experiment in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 45–87.

With this rhythm ringing in our ears we can begin to hear the metrics of the early cantos: not quite “macaronic chaos,” but rather a complex network of echo and allusion to the rhythms of Pound’s own past texts, the English poetic tradition, and the classical genres of lyric and epic. Pound builds the rhythms of the *Cantos* by continually combining, dissecting, reconstituting, and eliding metrical verse. From Cantos 1 to 108, the cleaved hexameter creates rhythmic unity.<sup>36</sup> Exactly why Pound chooses to dissimulate this remarkable form is another question, and one I hope to uncover over the course of this essay.

### THE CLEAVED HEXAMETER

One of the most obvious reasons for the difficulty students of Pound encounter when trying to make sense of his metrics is the fact that teaching classical scansion has declined dramatically over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first century.<sup>37</sup> Although Pound was no professional classicist, he studied Latin from age twelve, as was common for middle-class American boys of his time, and continued formal studies in Latin to the master’s level.<sup>38</sup> Unlike Latin textbooks today, the ones used most widely in turn-of-the-century America and Britain heavily emphasized prosody and metrics.<sup>39</sup> The dactylic hexameter was usually the first meter taught.<sup>40</sup> Since Latin meter models itself closely on Greek, Pound would not have needed his oft-maligned Greek language skills to have had an in-depth understanding of epic and lyric meters as they survive today. However, as evidenced by his respectable knowledge of Greek literature and occasionally brilliant translations, Pound’s grasp of Greek was also stronger than is popularly held.<sup>41</sup>

In Greek and Latin the hexameter consists of six dactylic feet, which themselves consist of one long syllable followed by two shorts: dum diddy (- - -). The two short syllables in each dactyl (with the exception of the penultimate foot) can be replaced by one long syllable in a process called

36. The final page of the New Directions *Cantos* contains the cleaved hexameters “Clear deep off Taormina / high cliff and azure beneath it”; “Oak boughs alone over Selloi / This wing, colour of feldspar” (*Cantos*, 794).

37. Mary Ann T. Burns and Joseph F. O’Connor, *The Classics in American Schools: Teaching the Ancient World* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987).

38. David A. Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet; A Portrait of a Man and His Work*, 3 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2007–9), 1:8, 15, 28; Charles E. Bennett and George Prentice Bristol, *The Teaching of Latin and Greek in the Secondary School* (New York: Longman, 1901), 175–82.

39. See Bennett and Bristol, *Teaching of Latin and Greek*; Benjamin H. Kennedy, *The Revised Latin Primer* (New York: Longman, 1906).

40. Kennedy, *Revised Latin Primer*, 200–206.

41. Peter Liebrechts, “Greek Literature” and “Greek Translation,” in *The Ezra Pound Encyclopedia*, ed. Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Stephen Adams (London: Greenwood, 2005), 136–38.



cursor is William Morris's hexameter translation of the *Odyssey*, which combines Swinburne's rising triple rhythms with a Germanic alliterative technique: "But to men of alien speech I sail o'er the wine-dark sea / To Temesa seeking for brass, and bright iron I bear with me."<sup>46</sup> Although Morris's alliterations do not fall into a strict pattern, they make the six-beat meter unmistakable. Across these examples, we can say in general that the English hexameter is characterized by six beats, a tendency toward triple rhythm, and at least one prominent caesura.

We can hear the hexameter clearly when Canto 7 explores a series of chambers and corridors haunted by voices of past poets (stresses marked with an accent): "Knócking at émpy róoms, séeking for búried béauty" (25). The triple rhythm is self-evident, as are the six beats (on "Knocking," "empty," "rooms," "seeking," "buried," "beauty") and the caesura marked by the comma. This hexameter pattern recurs throughout Canto 7, forging semantic links between disparate moments of the poem. These moments in Canto 7 include:

Ear, ear for the sea-surge;  
rattle of old men's voices.  
(24)

And the old voice lifts itself  
weaving an endless sentence.  
(24)

The sea runs in the beach-groove, shaking the floated pebbles,  
Eleanor!  
The scarlet curtain throws a less scarlet shadow  
(25)

Thin husks I had known as men,  
Dry casques of departed locusts  
speaking a shell of speech . . .  
(26)

But Eros drowned, drowned, heavy-half dead with tears  
(27)

Life to make mock of motion:  
For the husks, before me, move.  
(27)

These moments share a curious anxiety: that language is composed of material stuff and, like any other material thing, is capable of dying. Alexander Pope's *Dunciad Variorum* also explored this fantasy: the abuse of language by the poets of the age makes "the Muses, on their racks / Scream,

46. William Morris, *The Odyssey of Homer* (London, 1887), 3.

like the winding of ten thousand Jacks.”<sup>47</sup> Canto 7’s poet searches for his muse, Eleanor of Aquitaine and Helen of Troy, through a series of endless partitions (25); but all he encounters are “old men’s voices,” Homer, Ovid, Dante, Liu Ch’e, “weaving an endless sentence” (24–25). “Shells” recur through the canto, in two senses: empty “casques” that once encased a body, and the shells we hold up to our ears to hear the echo of the sea.

The word “shell” is a potent symbol of poetic form. Before the advent of sound recording, the formal features of a poem were all that remained of a poet’s voice after death. But the twentieth century broke this life cycle of the voice.<sup>48</sup> Now, in Canto 7, language enters a zombie-like state: “Words like the locust-shells, moved by no inner being” (30). In this line, shells are empty forms with no substance, filled only with echoes, and encased by their six beats and triple rhythm in another shell—the hexameter. The poet of Canto 7 is caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, his own poetry will fade away unless encased in a formal pattern, just as echoes only survive in a partially sealed chamber.<sup>49</sup> “An artist’s technique,” Pound once declared, “is test of his personal validity.”<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, the poet’s historical context in the twentieth century leaves him severed from the time when men could experience poetic meter as a part of nature. Homer has an “Ear, ear for the sea-surge” (24), but Canto 7’s poet is severed from the direct experience of meter in nature, and can only hear it through the voices of old men. Where, then, is beauty to be found? Pope’s Martinus Scriblerus once worried that abuse of language might turn a poet into a formless phantom, “In a dun night-gown of his own loose skin.”<sup>51</sup> Canto 7 realizes this fear: the “husks I had known as men” begin to move, and “words rattle: shells given out by shells” (27).

Throughout the early cantos, the poet’s search for his muse brings an erotic charge to these anxieties about poetic form. Many of the longest hexameter passages of the early cantos occur around the composite figure of Helen/Eleanor, as in this passage of Canto 2:

Let her go back to the ships,  
Back among Grecian faces, lest evil come on our own,

47. Alexander Pope, “*The Dunciad*” (1728) and “*The Dunciad Variorum*” (1729), ed. Valerie Rumbold (London: Routledge, 2007), 280.

48. Michael Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science: Pound, Yeats, Williams and Modern Sciences of Rhythm* (Columbia University Press, 2008), 1–54.

49. The blithest moments of the early cantos come when the poetic voice rejoices in his own containment in form: “Choros nympharum, goat-foot, with the pale foot alternate” (13); “Saffron sandal so petals the narrow foot: Hymenæus Io!” (15); “Go with your lutes, awaken / The summer within her mind” (30).

50. Ezra Pound, *Polite Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), 193, quoted in Powell, “Light of Vers Libre,” 7.

51. Pope, “*The Dunciad*” (1728) and “*The Dunciad Variorum*” (1729), 46.

Evil and further evil, and a curse cursed on our children,  
 Moves, yes she moves like a goddess  
 And has the face of a god  
     And the voice of Schoeney's daughters,  
 And doom goes with her in walking,  
 Let her go back to the ships,  
     back among Grecian voices.

(6)

This passage illustrates the varying effects of Pound's cleaved and whole hexameters. The cleaved hexameters, considered by themselves and not in the context of the whole hexameters that precede them, contain the echo of yet another meter: the English four-beat line. The four-beat and five-beat lines are the two fundamental meters of post-Conquest English verse.<sup>52</sup> While the five-beat line generally signifies speech, the four-beat line is most closely associated with song, and forms the metrical backbone of most English poetry classified as "lyric."<sup>53</sup> The precedent set by the caesura in the single hexameter lines, the pause in "faces, lest evil" and "further evil, and a curse," leads us to expect a pause at the end of the cleaved hexameter lines. The cleaved hexameter lines above therefore contain three beats with an unrealized fourth beat at the end of the line, which we hear and perform as a brief pause.<sup>54</sup> We can hear another example of four-beat lines with an unrealized final beat in the following passage from a chorus of Swinburne's imitation Greek tragedy, *Atalanta in Calydon*:

Before the beginning of years  
     There came to the making of man  
 Time, with a gift of tears;  
     Grief, with a glass that ran.<sup>55</sup>

However, unlike Swinburne's lines, Pound's verse above is what Attridge calls "dipodic": we can scan it as two different meters layered on top of one another.<sup>56</sup> While the single hexameter lines clearly evoke Homeric epic, the cleaved hexameters superimpose epic narrative over song. The combination of the four-beat line with the subject matter—the departure of an object of longing, Helen—brings the lines into a new genre, the song lamenting a loved one's parting. Given the "wine-red glow in the shallows" (7), this passage could even be an aubade, a song of lovers parting at dawn, par-

52. Attridge, *Rhythms of English Poetry*, 76–142.

53. *Ibid.*, 76–79.

54. *Ibid.*, 84–95.

55. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Atalanta in Calydon*, in *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, ed. Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 13.

56. Attridge, *Rhythms of English Poetry*, 114.

ticularly associated with medieval lyric.<sup>57</sup> The single hexameter lines cast Helen away; the cleaved hexameter lines mourn her departure. In this fashion, Pound's metrical technique evokes an emotional response typical of Helen's post-Homeric reception, a combination of longing for an unattainable object of desire and needing to be rid of her.<sup>58</sup> This correlates with the second clause of Pound's most famous statement on rhythm: "I believe in 'absolute rhythm', a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed."<sup>59</sup> The paraphrasable meaning of the passage above dissimulates desire, sending Helen away; the rhythmical movement of the passage reveals the hidden longing for her return.

Greek and Latin prosody has a precedent for conceiving the hexameter as composed of two prosodic units. In the classical hexameter, the half line on either side of the caesura is known as the "hemiepes": literally, half an epic line.<sup>60</sup> Pound's cleaved hexameters are particularly striking after the strange, almost prosaic passage that concludes Canto 1: "Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus, / In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer" (5). In traditional metrical verse we may be shocked or surprised or shaken from slumber when the poem deviates from its established metrical pattern; but in the *Cantos*, where there is no central established meter, our surprise comes not when we depart from meter, but when the verse lures us back into the bonds of formal prosody.

James Porter traces how, from the present day to fifth-century BCE Athens, scholars and artists have referred to the idea of "the classical" not as something that exists in their own time, but rather something that exists in a more distant past, a time more revered than the present.<sup>61</sup> "The classical," Porter argues, exists only as an unattainable object of desire: it "*never is but always only once was.*"<sup>62</sup> The cleaved hexameters of the early cantos conjure a fantasy of traveling back in time to capture an object of desire, the essence of "the classical"—or, as Pound would say in "A Retrospect" and again in his preface to his verse anthology *Profile*, "to find out what has been done, once for all, better than it can ever be done again."<sup>63</sup> But the poem realizes, to some extent, that capturing the object of desire is impos-

57. *OED*, s.v. "aubade," <http://www.oed.com/>.

58. See Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas, eds., *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (London: Blackwell, 2006), 192–203.

59. Pound, "Retrospect," 9.

60. West, *Greek Meter*, 196.

61. James I. Porter, "Feeling Classical," in *Classical Pasts: The Classical Traditions of Greece and Rome*, ed. James I. Porter (Princeton University Press, 2006), 301–52.

62. James I. Porter, "What Is 'Classical' about Classical Antiquity?," *ibid.*, 11.

63. Ezra Pound, preface to *Profile: An Anthology Collected in MCMXXXI*, ed. Pound (Milan: Scheiwiller, 1932), ii.

sible. We find, in the hexameters of Canto 7, “But Eros drowned, drowned, heavy-half dead with tears” (27), a sign that desire has been frustrated over the course of the poem to such an extent that Eros has lost his will to live: he is useful only as a hexameter, part of a larger aesthetic spectacle.

#### BROWNING’S RAG-BAG OF FORM

Pound discovered this mode of prosodic time travel through a long process of development and experimentation. Between the *Three Cantos* of 1917 (known in criticism as the *Ur-Cantos*) and *A Draft of XVI Cantos* of 1924–25, Pound’s epic evolved dramatically in form and subject. The central metrical pattern of the poem shifts from the heroic line to the classical hexameter, from the formal techniques of Browning to Homer and—above all—to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Pound’s narrative technique from *A Draft of XVI Cantos* onward is also unmistakably Ovidian: one story recalls another, and another, crossing the boundaries of history, geography, and language to create a greater narrative that might summarize all stories worth remembering. In contrast, the *Three Cantos* of 1917 dwell more centrally on one source text and function in part as an extended piece of literary criticism on Robert Browning’s *Sordello*.

Ur-Canto 1 begins with that self-conscious moment crucial to every English epic after Milton: considering what subject to write on, and positioning one’s own epic ambitions within poetic history. The *Ur-Cantos* begins with an address to the ghost of Robert Browning:

Hang it all, there can be but one *Sordello!*  
 But say I want to, say I take your whole bag of tricks,  
 Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the thing’s an art-form,  
 Your *Sordello*, and that the modern world  
 Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in;  
 Say that I dump my catch, shiny and silvery  
 As fresh sardines flapping and slipping on the marginal cobbles.  
 (I stand before the booth, the speech; but the truth  
 is inside this discourse—this booth is full of the marrow of wisdom.)  
 Give up th’intaglio method.<sup>64</sup>

Duple rhythms dominate this passage, gesturing toward the heroic couplet technique of *Sordello*. The stress on the very first syllable of the first line, “Hang it all,” swings forward into the rising rhythm of “there can be but one *Sordello!* / But say I want to, say I take your whole bag of tricks.” The opening establishes the poem’s central metrical feature: a kind of hiccupping heroic line. The basic rhythm is a heroic line with an extra syl-

64. Pound, *Personæ: Collected Shorter Poems*, 229.

lable, either the feminine endings of “Hang it all, there can be but one *Sordello!*” and “Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in” or the extra ambiguously stressed syllable “but” in the line “I stand before the booth, the speech; but the truth.” This additional syllable causes the pseudo-iambic rhythm of the line to trip over itself in those last three syllables, almost demanding “but the” to be pronounced over the same duration of time as “truth” to fulfill compulsive desire for isochronous intervals in meter.

The tripping, hesitant, stop-and-start rhythm of Ur-Canto 1 echoes the rhythms of *Sordello*, a poem famously lambasted in early reviews for obscuring the paraphrasable meaning of the lines, a “hurried, exclamatory, and obscure utterance of things that would, probably, be very fine if we could get them in their full meaning, but which, in this bubbling and tumult of the verse, are hardly intelligible.”<sup>65</sup> We can observe Browning’s unusual syntax and punctuation in the passage below:

—Mantuans, the main of them, admiring still  
 How a mere singer, ugly, stunted, weak,  
 Had Montfort at completely (so to speak)  
 His fingers’ ends; while past the praise-tide swept  
 To Montfort, either’s share distinctly kept.<sup>66</sup>

While the paraphrasable content of Ur-Canto 1 chastizes Browning for poetic unoriginality, Pound closely emulates the rhythms of *Sordello*, right down to the stop-and-start effect of Browning’s heavy use of brackets, commas, and question marks:

I walk Verona. (I am here in England.)  
 I see Can Grande. (Can see whom you will.)  
 You had one whole man?  
 And I have many fragments, less worth? Less worth?<sup>67</sup>

The first two lines of the passage above are, like *Sordello*, in rising decasyllabic meter. Pound’s periods and brackets split the lines into two segments of five to six syllables each. In the first half of each line, the poet imagines himself in *Sordello*’s thirteenth-century Italy (“I walk Verona”); in the second half, the poet tells a deflationary joke that emphasizes his distance from this imagined past (“I am here in England”). *Sordello*’s heroic lines are full of small caesurae, hairline fractures marked by commas and dashes, as in “—Mantuans, the main of them, admiring still / How a mere singer, ugly, stunted, weak.” Pound’s heroic lines, in comparison, are frequently

65. Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley, eds., *Browning: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970), 61.

66. Robert Browning, *Sordello*, 2.628–32, in *The Poetical Works*, vol. 2, ed. Ian Jack and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

67. Pound, *Personæ: Collected Shorter Poems*, 230.

rent apart by what Simon Jarvis has recently described as a “crevasse”: a single medial caesura so pronounced that it becomes a hallmark of bimetricity, the state of two distinct metrical paradigms (or “sets”) competing for dominance in the same poem.<sup>68</sup> In the case of “I see Can Grande. (Can see whom you will.),” the crevasse created by the period, parentheses, and syntactical break forces two metrical sets to coexist: the heroic line and the more loosely defined fragmentary unit of five to six syllables in duple rhythm, exemplified by the line “You had one whole man?”

In *Beginnings* (1975), Edward Said remarks that the “modern writer” often lacks “either faith in or capacity for limited (discrete) but wholly integrated work.” As a result, “the modern writer often feels the urge instead to create new totalities, to cultivate random appetites, to deny forward movement altogether.” As his earliest example of this phenomenon, Said examines the conflict between Nietzsche and his fellow classical philologist Wilamowitz surrounding the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872):

At bottom, their conflict centered around the idea of a “classical text”: Was it one in a series to be revered, cultivated, emended, and described in the best scholarly tradition? Or was it rather, as Nietzsche believed (though not at all so simply as stated here), a text upon which, as upon a writing tablet, was inscribed a constellation of forces (instincts, urges, desires, wills) still present in the modern era and still as unseemly in their power to engage and intoxicate? In short, for Wilamowitz a text was a system of boundaries and inner constraints held intact by successive generations (a heritage passed on in time); while for Nietzsche it was an invitation to unforeseen estrangements from the habitual.<sup>69</sup>

Pound’s development of Browning’s caesuras effected a similar estrangement from the habitual through the bimmetrical tension between the heroic line and the smaller five-to-six-syllable unit. By refusing to settle on a single metrical set, Pound defamiliarizes us from his stock of what would otherwise be rather routine English meters and rhythms, rendering them as strange as they were to the early readers of Browning’s *Sordello*. “There can be but one *Sordello*”—Pound cannot simply rewrite *Sordello*. But he takes on Browning’s “whole bag of tricks” anyway, his “quirks and tweeks” and art form of the heroic line, which Pound describes so evocatively as “a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in.” Pound would develop his defamiliarizing prosodic techniques further in his renditions of the classical hexameter in *A Draft of XVI Cantos*.

68. Simon Jarvis, “Superservice Poetics: Browning’s *Fifine at the Fair*,” *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 77 (2016): 132.

69. Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 9.

Pound's shift in *A Draft of XVI Cantos* from the heroic line to the classical hexameter belies his increasingly fragmented approach to poetic history: a shift away from this intergenerational dialogue with Browning to a form that might incorporate not one but all the fragments of past literature that this individual poet deems worth preserving.<sup>70</sup> Pound's developments of Browning's rhythms in the *Ur-Cantos* reflect what Kathryn V. Lindberg has called the "Nietzschean traces" in Pound's methods of reading and interpretation. For Lindberg, Nietzsche and Pound share the assumption that "style . . . is virtually inseparable from wider questions of language and interpretation," a position which in practice forces us "to examine the form and assumptions of artistic production and philosophical argument."<sup>71</sup> As Lindberg notes, the 1920s and 1930s saw Pound increasingly "writing (in) a heterogeneous counter-tradition" to T. S. Eliot's own version of the literary canon. Pound's countertradition "at once challenged the conventional separation of poetry from criticism and the priority of the one over another,"<sup>72</sup> using the fragment as the primary vehicle for examining the assumptions of both poetic creation and literary argument.

In Canto 2, Pound's increased emphasis on the fragment leads his prosody to evolve beyond the crevasse and break Browning's heroic line into two:

Hang it all, Robert Browning,  
There can be but the one "Sordello."  
But Sordello, and my Sordello?  
Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana.  
So-shu churned in the sea.

(6)

The first two lines establish the cleaved hexameter pattern. This opening confirms *Sordello* is no longer the central text to come to terms with and succeed, but one of the tapestry of texts among which Pound wishes to take his place, each united by their place in the burden of poetic history. Pound has thrown Robert Browning into his own "rag-bag," a fragmentary form that nonetheless manages to contain and unify the poetic traditions of three different languages over five lines. "There can be but the one 'Sordello'"—but the individual poet now matters less than his place in the tapestry of literary history. Over the course of Pound's apprenticeship with Browning, he developed a new goal for the form of the *Cantos*: it should be a mechanism for readers to move backward and forward across poetic

70. See Kathryn V. Lindberg, *Reading Pound Reading: Modernism after Nietzsche* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 76–125.

71. *Ibid.*, 17.

72. *Ibid.*, 77.

traditions, to reexperience those moments in literary history worth saving, and then recreate them for the present.

#### WHAT POUND LEARNED FROM DIVUS

Pound's homage to another poet-translator, Andreas Divus, would eventually take Browning's place at the opening of the *Cantos*. Like Pound, Divus was a charlatan. The grammarian Gilles Ménage described Divus's Latin translations of Homer and Aristophanes as "pleine d'ignorance et pour le Grec, et pour le Latin"; the renderings were, nonetheless, extraordinarily popular, with some of his translations of Aristophanes remaining the standard for 170 years.<sup>73</sup> In his translation of the *Odyssey*, Divus often replaces each individual word in Greek with its literal translation in Latin, preserving the tense, mood, case, and syntax. The effect on the language is like viewing one's body through a carnival mirror: the constituent parts are there, but misshapen, distorted, and out of place. Nonetheless Divus's mistranslations, carried over into English, inspired some of the most striking rhythmic effects of Canto 1. Pound's prosody built on Divus's work in two important ways; first, Divus's eccentric prosody provided a source that Pound could use to explore the tensions between metrical verse and vers libre; and, second, Divus's alliterative technique informed Pound's synthesis of the classical hexameter with Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter. Divus was a precursor who simultaneously harkened back to the classical Homeric tradition and provided license to selectively depart from its canonical metrical forms.

Andreas Divus first appears in Pound's work halfway through Ur-Canto 3, emerging via earlier quotations from Lorenzo Valla as a logical progression of that canto's meditation on translation and reception.<sup>74</sup> But Divus's presence in the opening of *A Draft of XVI Cantos* is more oblique. Folded within the voices of Odysseus and Homer, Divus only emerges in the famous interjection at the end of Canto 1, which banishes him:

And I stepped back,  
 And he strong with the blood, said then: "Odysseus  
 Shalt return through spiteful Neptune, over dark seas,  
 Lose all companions." And then Anticlea came.  
 Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus,  
 In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer.  
 And he sailed, by Sirens and thence outward and away  
 And unto Circe.  
 Venerandam,

73. Gilles Ménage, quoted in Fred Schreiber, "The Etiology of a Misinterpretation: Aristophanes Birds 30," *Classical Philology* 70 (1975): 209.

74. Pound, *Personæ: Collected Shorter Poems*, 242–43.

In the Cretan's phrase, with the golden crown, Aphrodite,  
 Cypri munimenta sortita est, mirthful, orichalchi, with golden  
 Girdles and breast bands, thou with dark eyelids  
 Bearing the golden bough of Argicida. So that:

(4-5)

The interruption of Divus marks one of the rare points in the *Cantos* when Pound himself asserts his presence. "Lie quiet Divus" attributes the entirety of the canto that has just been spoken to Divus. What follows, by implication, is Pound's own voice.

Pound is rarely so specific in citing the particular edition he is working from as he is addressing the Wechel edition of Divus. Pound's extraordinary act of putting a citation in a line of the poem suggests the collapse of the distinction between monumentalizing verse and its own commentary. Here, the canto strives for poetic greatness, setting itself among Homer's epics and the Homeric hymns (5); at the same time, the canto creates its own exegesis ("I mean, that is Andreas Divus, / In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer" [5]), presuming—insistently—that the canto will take its place in the Homeric tradition. The *Ur-Cantos* version of Divus's interruption is more specific in its citations, including the year in Roman numerals and the other poems included in the volume: "with Aldus on the Frogs / And a certain Cretan's / *Hymni Deorum*," from which Pound derives his evocation of golden-crowned Aphrodite, "orichalchi," gleaming like mountain copper.<sup>75</sup>

Close reading of Divus's edition reveals it as a source for the tension between metrical verse and *vers libre* characteristic of Pound's style in the cantos of the early 1920s. Divus first composed a literal translation of the *Odyssey* in prose, appearing in Venice in 1537 and Lyon in 1538.<sup>76</sup> He then followed with his pseudoverse translation in Paris in 1538, clinging all the more closely to the idea of representing the original as perfectly as possible: the line and page numbers remain almost exactly the same across editions. Pound would have been aware, to a certain extent, of the poem's textual history given the accessible Latin preface that begins the Wechel edition, and details this history.<sup>77</sup> We can observe Divus's wavering between metrical and unmetrical verse in the passage at the beginning of book 11, which corresponds to the first fourteen lines of the first canto:

AT poftquàm ad nauem defcendimus, & mare,  
 Nauem quidem primùm deduximus in mare diuum,

75. *Ibid.*, 245.

76. *Odyssea: Andrea Diuo Iustinopolitano interprete, ad verbum translata*, . . . (Venice, 1537), 92; *Odyssea: Andrea Diuo interprete, ad verbum translata*, etc. (Lyon, 1538), 92.

77. Andreas Divus, *Odyssea ad verbum translata: Andrea Diuo Iustinopolitano interprete*, . . . (Paris: in officina Christiani Wecheli, 1538), i–iii.

Et malū posuimus & uela in nauī nigra:  
 Intrò autem oues accipientes ire fecimus, intrò & ip̄i  
 Iuimus dolentes, huberes lachrymas fudentes:  
 Nobis autem à tergo nauis nigræ proræ  
 Proſperum uētum immiſit pendentē uelum bonū amicū  
 Circe bene comate grauis Dea altiloqua.  
 Nos autem arma ſingula expedientes in nauī  
 Sedebamus: hanc autem uentusq̄; gubernatorq̄; dirigebat:  
 Huius at̄ per totū diē extenſa ſunt uela pontūtrāſientis:  
 Occidit tunc Sol, obumbratæ ſunt omnes uiæ:  
 Hæc autem in fines peruenit profundi Oceani:  
 Illic autem Cimmeriorū uirorum populusq̄; ciuitasq̄;  
 Caligine & nebula cooperti.<sup>78</sup>

[But when we had gone down to the ship, and sea,  
 We first of all drew the ship down to the godly sea,  
 and set the mast and sail in the black ship:  
 and took the sheep and brought them aboard, and ourselves  
 aboard,  
 Embarking sorrowfully, shedding many tears:  
 And in the wake of our dark-prowed ship  
 A fair and friendly wind that filled our sails  
 Was sent by Circe of the long and beautiful hair, grave  
 eloquent goddess.  
 So when we had set up all the tackling throughout the ship  
 We sat down, and the wind and the helmsman steered her.  
 All day long her sail was stretched as she swept over the sea:  
 Then the sun set and all the ways were darkened.  
 And then she came to the boundaries of deep Oceanus,  
 The Cimmerians' nation and city,  
 Enshrouded in fog and cloud.]

Divus's attempt to retain the semantic verisimilitude of his prose translation while molding it into the precise cadences of Homeric meter results in some bizarre moments when, to preserve the sense of the prose, the verse must discard the rules of Latin scansion and slip out of meter altogether. Indeed, Divus's metrical irregularities are so widespread and striking—and typical of early modern Latin composition—that Pound would most likely have been able to hear their destabilizing effect.<sup>79</sup> Divus's placement of the phrases “lachrymas fudentes,” “omnes uiæ” (all ways), and “nigræ proræ” (black ship) breaks one of the main conventions of the classical hexameter: that the line concludes with an adonean colon (- - - - -).<sup>80</sup>

78. *Ibid.*, 92. Translation mine.

79. Through his well-documented Quaker education Pound would undoubtedly have endured years of scanning Ovid and Virgil.

80. West, *Greek Meter*, 35–36.

Divus's departure transforms the epic rhythm: instead of the resounding flourish we expect at the end of every line of Homer, Divus gives us the rhythmic equivalent of a languorous moan, spilling over into the long syllable that begins the subsequent line, and overturning the expectation of a satisfying resolution to the epic line.

In contrast to Divus's, Pound's corresponding lines are among the most metrically suggestive in Canto 1: "We set up mast and sail on that swart ship" is a perfect heroic line, and "Sun to his slumber, shadows o'er all the ocean" an elegant classical pentameter (3). The Greek and Latin pentameter, as opposed to the English "iambic pentameter," can be most clearly described as a dactylic hexameter missing a foot; in English it is a five-beat line with dominant triple rhythm and a caesura toward the middle of the line.<sup>81</sup> As if mocking Divus, Pound's translation of "lachrymas fudentes"—"Heavy with weeping"—is itself a perfect English adonean. However, Pound's alliterative patterns often closely follow those of Divus, as we can observe in the opening passage of Canto 1:

And then went down to the ship,  
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and  
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,  
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also  
Heavy with weeping, so winds from sternward  
Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,  
Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess.

(3)

The "s" sounds of "Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and / We set up mast and sail on that swart ship" follow the alliterative "n" of Divus's "Nauem quidem primūm deduximus in mare diuum, / Et malū pofuimus & uela in nauī nigra" and find a parallel in Pound's "swart ship" for "nauī nigra" (literally, "black ship"). Critics have traditionally read the prosody of Canto 1 as a loose interpretation of the Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter used by Pound in "The Seafarer": four alliterative beats per line, and within each line three matched alliterative syllables and one mismatched, which will establish the matching alliterative syllables of the next line. This broadly

81. *Ibid.*, 35, 44. As West notes, the traditional conception of the hexameter as composed of six feet is useful as description, but structurally the meter is better understood as two cola (one each of the the hemiepes, - - - - - , and the paroemiac, ∞ - - - - - ) divided by a caesura. The pentameter consists of two units of the hemiepes. For further examples of English pentameters after the classical model, see line 2 and every subsequent alternating line of Charles Kingsley, "Elegiacs," in *Poems*, 2 vols. (London, 1884), 2:106–7, as in "Wearily onward I ride, watching the water alone"; and also the second line of Coleridge's famous mnemonic, a translation of one by Schiller: "In the hexameter rises the fountain's silvery column, / In the pentameter aye falling in melody back" (*The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works*, vol. 1, ed. J. C. C. Mays [Princeton University Press, 2001], 532).

works as a framework for scanning Canto 1. However Pound's only surviving recitation of Canto 1, recorded in Washington, DC, in 1958, strongly suggests a different but related metrical system.<sup>82</sup> A performance rich in poetic artifice, Pound's own reading articulates a far greater number of stresses per line than we might expect. In lines such as "Then prayed I many a prayer to the sickly death's-head" we might expect four stresses, on "prayed," prayer," "sickly" and "death's," and perhaps also "many;" but Pound puts a strong artificial stress on "many" and "head," overturning the expectation we might hold in English that the second syllable of a hyphenated word will have a lesser stress. The "Then" of "Then sat we amidships" and "Then prayed I many a prayer" becomes in Pound's reading a sustained long note through a decision to emphasize the anaphora—even though that anaphora occurs between two words sixteen lines apart, which could just as easily be unstressed. Through Pound's performance, an English hexameter pattern clearly emerges, colored by the interwoven alliterations of Anglo-Saxon meter. The metrical schemes of Pound's "Seafarer" and Canto I draw on an old tendency in English hexameters to fuse the Greek and Latin triple-rhythm and six-beat model of the hexameter with Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter. The most prominent examples of this from the previous century, and the one that Pound would likely have had in mind, are William Morris's translations of Homer:

So when adown we were gotten to the ship's side and the  
 shore,  
 Then into the holy salt-sea we thrust her down once more,  
 And in the black ship hoisted the sail upon the mast.  
 And the sheep we gat aboard her, and aboard we also passed  
 Sore sorrowing, pouring the tear-drops swift-following each  
 on each.<sup>83</sup>

In Pound's view, Anglo-Saxon and Homeric meter share an elevated and cultivated character. For Pound, the lines of *The Seafarer* are (as he writes) "alone in the works of our forebears . . . fit to compare with Homer" because the Anglo-Saxon poem's rhythm sublimates the experience of "a rude war-faring people" into a meter that marks one of the high points of the literary craft.<sup>84</sup> For all Pound's disparagement of the English poetic tradition in his criticism, Pound embraces the special capacity of English to absorb the vocabulary and rhythms of other languages, knowingly adopting the technique of generations of English poets before him.

82. Pound, "Canto I" (Washington, DC, 1958), sound recording, from "Ezra Pound," PennSound, <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Pound.php>.

83. Morris, *Odyssey of Homer*, 200.

84. Pound, "The Constant Preaching to the Mob" (1916), in *Literary Essays*, 64.



As Pound's passage of translation dies away, we encounter one of the more mysterious narratives of the early cantos. Canto 2's lines "Fish-scales over groin muscles, / lynx-purr amid sea . . ." (9) signify with the ellipsis Ovid fading away, and with him the story of the pirates' transformation. The poem shifts into another, clearly thematically related but much more oblique narrative, of unclear source but probably springing from Pound's classically saturated imagination:

And of a later year,  
     pale in the wine-red algæ,  
 If you will lean over the rock,  
     the coral face under wave-tinge,  
 Rose-paleness under water-shift,  
     Ileuthyria, fair Dafne of sea-bords,  
 The swimmer's arms turned to branches,  
 Who will say in what year,  
     fleeing what band of tritons,  
 The smooth brows, seen, and half seen,  
     now ivory stillness.

(9)

The mysterious word "Ileuthyria" gives us a central insight into the relationship between these passages and the metrical structure of *A Draft of XVI Cantos* as a whole. There have been several wildly divergent interpretations on what this word means: Carroll Terrell claims it was coined by Pound as a combination of "Eileithyia," a goddess of childbirth, with a genus of jellyfish; John Hamilton Edwards and William Vasse interpret it as simply a fanciful sea-nymph name invented by Pound; and William Cookson states that Pound coined this word intending it to be related to the Greek word for freedom, ἐλευθερία.<sup>87</sup> Cookson's reading seems closest to the mark. Ileuthyria is clearly something of an imaginary Greek mythological figure, dreamed up by Pound himself. It is a proper noun because unlike the other indented lines that form the second half of a cleaved hexameter, "Ileuthyria" is capitalized. It seems to be an alternate name for the "fair Dafne of sea-bords." This character is, first, a marine version of Apollo's Daphne, the nymph whom the god transformed into a laurel tree; second, a sea spirit akin to the "tritons" mentioned in a few lines; and third, an aspect of the god Dionysus, who as we have seen is (along with Browning and Ovid) the central figure of Canto 2.

87. Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 7; John Hamilton Edwards and William Vasse, *Annotated Index to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (University of California Press, 1959), 98; William Cookson, *A Guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, rev. ed. (New York: Persea, 2002), 8.

“Eleuthereus” is a prominent epithet of Dionysus meaning “of liberty,” used, for example, in the name of the theater of Dionysus at the Athenian Acropolis.<sup>88</sup> This word was referenced in turn-of-the-century encyclopedias of classical culture, literary commentaries, and travel accounts of Greece.<sup>89</sup> Pound may have encountered this epithet in Pausanias’s *Description of Greece* as translated in 1898 by James Frazer, who renders the epithet as “Eleutherian.”<sup>90</sup> Frazer’s *Golden Bough* is referenced obliquely in several early cantos, and the anthropologist exerted a great influence on both Pound and Eliot in the 1920s.<sup>91</sup> “Ileuthyeria” sounds very close to this epithet transformed into a feminine noun, which would simply be “Eleutheria”—“Liberty.” Given Pound’s tendency to misspell Greek words and then stubbornly refuse his classicist friend’s corrections to the other cantos, it would not be surprising if Pound simply meant this name to be his own fanciful spelling of “Eleutheria.”

Pound embraced serendipity in his use of Divus’s mistranslations, so it would be no surprise if Pound opened his poetry to accidental effects and significances here. “Ileuthyeria’s” excess of syllables means this line spills out of the regular cleaved hexameter pattern. Whether or not Pound recognized the connection between “Ileuthyeria,” freedom, and Dionysus, the word’s position in the metrics of the passage enacts the liberation the word’s Greek origins might imply. This act and sign of “Freedom” draws us back into the controversy surrounding *vers libre*, and the question of meter as jailkeeper or liberator of the English language. The Greek word “Eleutheria” brought forth the Latin word “Liber,” meaning freedom and also a name of Dionysus; in turn, of course, “liber” eventually brought us the term “*vers libre*.” In spite of the emancipatory connotations this moment might hold for Pound’s verse, we can only attune ourselves to this subtle network of significances by engaging with the classical tradition and familiarizing ourselves with its metrical subtleties. The brief moment of rhythmic insurgency is itself dependent on the survival of the metrical tradition. Dionysus, whom historian of Greek religion Károly Kerényi characterizes as the “archetypal image of indestructible life,” becomes in Canto 2 a symbol of the eternal vitality of the past.<sup>92</sup> The dualistic nature of Dionysus—as

88. See J. C. Moretti, “The Theater of the Sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus in Late Fifth-Century Athens,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 24/25 (1999–2000): 377–398.

89. Richard C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments, with critical notes, commentary, and translation in English prose*, vol. 6 (Cambridge, 1894), note to xl; *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. William Smith et al. (London, 1890), s.v. “Dionysia.”

90. James I. Frazer, ed. and trans., *Pausanias’ description of Greece*, vol. 1 (London, 1898), 28.

91. Terrell, *Companion to the Cantos*, 1, 11, 68, 157, 184.

92. Károly Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

a being of unimaginable power, who subjugates men to his will, and as the liberator of humankind—implies that constraint and liberation are not the opposing forces they appear to be.

#### CONCLUSION: TUNING OUR EARS

The source of the evocative line “Thin husks I had known as men” is in an article Pound wrote in 1914: “Remy de Gourmont . . . says most men think only the husks and shells of the thoughts that have already been lived over by others.”<sup>93</sup> Pound’s cleaved hexameters are an embodiment of this statement. Like the “rag-bag” of *Sordello*’s heroic line, Pound’s hexameters hold a dual function, to constrain language within a set of metrical rules and then to liberate language through rhythmic insurrection, a freedom that would be meaningless without the rules to rebel against. “And all that day, another day,” would not have its character of weary frustration without its four stresses and duple rhythm, slipping out of the cleaved hexameter form surrounding the line. “Words like the locust-shells, moved by no inner being” would not be such a troubling line if it did not counteract its paraphrasable meaning. The line appears to state that words have begun to exist on their own as individual sense units, incapable of connecting to other words and building a statement; but the form of the line, a whole classical hexameter, demonstrates the ability of rhythmical fragments to come together to form their own complete line of meter, even in a time of verse history given over—as Pound would never cease reminding us—to ruins and confusion.<sup>94</sup>

Rhythmic insurrection—establishing a meter and then rebelling against it—has been fundamental to prosodic technique since Homer. Pound’s development of the cleaved hexameter through the early cantos demonstrates that poetic innovation often requires submission—however temporary—to the oldest techniques in verse composition. To hear these moments we must learn, once again, to tune our ears to meter.

93. Pound, “Mr. Hueffer and the Prose Tradition in Verse,” in *Literary Essays*, 371.

94. See Pound, “Retrospect,” 12, and “Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch,” in *Literary Essays*, 437.