

ezra agon

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playwright

Ezra Agon

WHOM GOD WOULD EMEND HE FIRST SENDS TO THE BUG HOUSE*

Characters

Ezra Pound, *poet and would-be economist*

Olga Rudge, *his mistress*

Donald Hall, *American poet and interlocutor¹*

Charles Olson, *American poet and chronicler of conversations with Ezra in St. Elizabeths*

Dr. Winfred Overholser, *Superintendent at St. Elizabeths Hospital*

Judge Bolitha J. Law, *Presiding over Pound's Trial and Commitment*

Julian Cornell, *Pound's Attorney*

Chorus

Poets and figures from literature: Walt Whitman, Rainier Maria Rilke, Friedrich Nietzsche, Elizabeth Bishop, Louis Zukofsky, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Ernest Hemingway, William Butler Yeats, Robert Frost, James Laughlin, Allen Ginsberg, Archibald MacLeish, critics and literary correspondents. Pound's literary critics are personified in Donald Hall who incorporates such voices as Hugh Kenner and Wendy Stallard Flory

Figures in Pound's life: A youthful Ezra, Dorothy Shakespear (his wife), Mary de Rachewiltz (his daughter by Olga), Walter de Rachewiltz (Mary's son), Kirby (Donald Hall's wife), Luigi Villari, Katherine Heyman, Giuseppe Bacigalupo, Dudley Fitts

Figures from history: Pierre Laval, Representative Burdick, J. Edgar Hoover

Inmates, physicians and psychiatrists from St. Elizabeths hospital: Dr. E. Fuller Torrey (Ezra's Psychiatrist), Dr. Muncie, Dr. King, an Inmate Tribunal, Inmate Prosecutor, Inmate Defender, Warden

Newsmen and photographers, shopkeepers, Prosecuting Attorney, Attorney General, Clerk of Court, Jury Foreman, bureaucrats

* Adapted from comment made by Pound in his broadcast of January 29, 1942

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OVERVIEW – EZRA AGON

Ezra Pound is extradited and arraigned before a kangaroo court advised by psychologists who recommend that he be committed to incarceration at St. Elizabeth's Hospital for the criminally insane, where he will spend the next 12 years of his life. Insanity appears to be more a legal maneuver than a clinical diagnosis, but it affords post-WWII America the relief of a quick judgment that ducks dealing with who and what he is. Lacking proper certification of his insanity, the inmates of the asylum decide that they must try him on the true questions that the government avoided – but they try his soul, not his broadcasts.

Pound's release from St. Elizabeths is obtained through the concerted efforts of a band of literary friends and advocates, led by the selfless Archibald MacLeish and the truculent Robert Frost (who, typically, took credit for it all). Ezra returns to Rome where he is interviewed by the young Donald Hall, and spends an evening out with Hall and his wife.

No longer tried by any authority other than himself, Ezra slowly faces his own virulence and breaks down a second time, tossing again on the seas of memory. Remorse overwhelms the floodwalls, beats down barriers, and in some way cleanses him to be truly released, even redeemed. At last he enters his final silence, perhaps repudiating and atoning for the prolixity, bombast and querulous hate-filled speech that filled his war broadcasts. It may even be a holy silence.

Prologue

Donald Hall, interlocutor for this play, introduces the history, which is reviewed by the Chorus, ending with Ezra, speaking the part of the Sybil, who states that (s)he wants to die.

Act 1: Extradition, Arraignment & Commitment

Scene 1 FROM FOUR UNTIL LATE

Robert Johnson's music again begins the act (From Four Until Late). Olga learns of Ezra's extradition to America. Olga and Ezra communicate their love and she remonstrates on his death wish, using Walt Whitman's metaphor of the mated pair of birds from "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking". Whitman joins the conversation, perhaps the only American poet who could outdo Ezra's expansive garrulity.

Scene 2 ARRAIGNMENT

Ezra and his attorney Julian Cornell appear before Judge Laws to be arraigned. Ezra interrupts the proceedings, alternately obstreperous and despairing. Cornell pleads Ezra innocent and requests psychiatric examination. Judge Laws so orders and entertains motions to appoint examining experts.

Scene 3 LEGAL STRATEGY

Ezra sits waiting in his cell, listening to a news broadcast of Laval's trial for treason in France. He becomes excited at using Laval's bold defense himself, but Cornell quashes the idea. Hoover

reveals that the American government's case is fatally flawed, but public opinion is high and no attorney will touch the case. Cornell dashes into the breach with an ill-considered proposal to plead insanity. The consequences are discussed (with a bit of pompous psychiatry).

Scene 4 EVALUATION

In a mixed madhouse of asylum and courtroom, testimony is attempted over the din. The psychiatrists confer. Although they putatively advise opposing sides (the prosecution and defense), the objective of speaking with one voice is pushed by the senior and dominant figure, Dr. Overholser, who wants custody of Pound as an ornament and diversion in his asylum. Hall dryly comments throughout on the conflicts of interest and probable consequences of this railroad job. Eager witnesses rehearse testimony or appeal to the court on the question of Pound's sanity and ability to stand trial. The psychiatrists discover that they can agree.

Scene 5 HEARING & COMMITMENT

The psychiatrists return and give their report to the court. The authorities demonstrate their interest in a quick disposal of the case, along lines that have been already wired to occur. Ezra continues to fail to grasp the implications and displays his garrulous and obstreperous personality. All agree he is unstable and incapable of standing trial, and he is quickly remanded to St. Elizabeth's Asylum for the Criminally Insane where he will spend the next 12 years of his life, unable to be tried and unable to be released. Hall comments and confronts Cornell; others think it is the best thing for Ezra.

Scene 6 BEAUTY UNDER THE ELMS

Ezra is led away to initial solitary confinement in a cell he came to call "the dungeon", locked away from the beauties of Nature that sustained him in the gorilla cage at Pisa, plunging into despair and the path through the underworld while others justify their parts in the outcome. He works his way back to the light as at last they let him out, to sit on the lawn under the great elms.

Act 2: No Man's Land

Scene 1 CROSS ROAD BLUES

The old bluesman plays the title song, by Robert Johnson.

Scene 2 PROLOGUE TO A TRIAL: THE TWICE CRUCIFIED

It is 12 years later. Inmates confront Ezra over his right to be incarcerated among them when he has never been proven insane. Three of the insane form a tribunal to convene a preliminary examination of Ezra to determine whether he should be tried by them to make up for the trial he did not receive when he was committed. Ezra needs it, to exorcise the demons that he was unable or afraid to confront in a real trial for his life, and to have the trial of his ideas and values that both he and the government had ducked. Nietzsche and Rilke are called to examine Ezra, but conduct an inquiry of his morals and spiritual condition instead. The inmate tribunal finds him sane but guilty, and convenes a trial of his soul.

Scene 3 TRIAL IN ST. ELIZABETHS

The Warden shows in Charles Olson, a younger poet who first met Ezra in St. Elizabeths, whose deeply conflicted impressions of Pound and feelings on what should happen to him frame the mock trial he receives. Olson begins to converse with Pound. Elizabeth Bishop, another famed American Poet of the time, intersperses a reading of her poem "Visits to St. Elizabeths" from the Chorus. The Insane Tribunal decides to adjudicate, and others take on roles to prosecute and defend. Olson prosecutes; Dr. Torrey, who later wrote a book presenting his own somewhat ham-handed interpretation of Pound from the **vantage of his position on the staff of** St. Elizabeths, seizes the opportunity to use the role of Advocate for Defense to impose his leaden theories of Pound's psychiatric disorders. Olson gives a long opening statement, and then Torrey spars with Pound. The Insane Tribunal decides that a poet is needed to speak in Ezra's defense, and Yeats steps forward, giving a statement to offset Olson's. An interlude examines Ezra's anti-Semitism and the proceedings wrap up. The Insane in Chorus find Ezra both insane and guilty. Olson is shown out and Bishop concludes her poem.

Act 3: Release

Scene 1 RELEASE

The old bluesman plays "Preaching Blues" by Robert Johnson. Controversy can no longer be avoided over Pound's continuing incarceration. Consensus forms that he is neither sane enough to be tried nor so insane that there would be any danger in releasing him, and that no further purpose will be served by keeping him incarcerated. Archibald MacLeish organizes a campaign by well-known and respected writers to obtain his release, headlined by a reluctant Robert Frost. The legal game that finds Pound eligible for release is not unlike Noah's sons walking backward to cover his drunken nakedness. Nevertheless, justice is served, his indictment is dismissed, and Pound is released into the custody of his wife, Dorothy.

Scene 2 THE RETURN

Ezra gives interviews as he returns to Italy. Hall comments and the scenes ends with the ironically fitting poem "The Return", written by Ezra as a young man, years before, in London.

Scene 3 INTERVIEW IN ROME WITH DONALD HALL

The year is now 1960 and the young poet Donald Hall finds his way to Pound's door in Rome to carry out an interview for the *Paris Review*. In the course of the discussions Pound displays the debilitating effects of dealing with his still unresolved guilt, often collapsing in inarticulate fatigue. The interview ranges over his writing, his incarceration, his broadcasts, the question of treason, and a fumbling attempt by Pound to acknowledge culpability, at least for "the stupid suburban prejudice" of anti-Semitism. Hall takes Pound out for dinner with his wife, and shows flashes of his old self. He shares his latest Cantos with Hall and grasps eagerly at the straw offered by Hall that it may be possible to set up a reading tour in America.

Scene 4 A VOICE OUT OF SILENCE

We follow Ezra to the end of his journey. More and more of his old friends are passing. He reads a poem by his old friend, Marianne Moore at T.S. Eliot's memorial. Robert Frost, so condescending to Pound, reveals in one of his poems his own conflicted conscience before God.

Ezra speaks his own, at times bitter, self-summation, confronts meaning in life and death, tells a dream, and repeats what prayers he was able to bring himself to make. He hears *Old Friends* by Simon & Garfunkel playing on the radio and comments to Olga before he steps through the bars of cage – now bars of light – for the last time.

Act 4: If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day

Scene 1 IF I HAD POSSESSION OVER JUDGMENT DAY

Our old bluesman plays his final piece by Robert Johnson: "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day". We turn back at the last to an intimate moment with Olga, as Ezra works through his sober self-examination of conscience. This is not the dramatic falling-to-pieces of the storm scene, Cast to Sea on a Raft, but the harder, harsher coming to terms with one's failures in the cold light of day. Pound enters the silence that largely consumed the final 10 years of his life and the larger silence beyond.

PROLOGUE

HALL: In Italy, at the end of World War II, the U.S. Army built a Disciplinary Training Center outside the city of Pisa, a last chance for insubordinates, deserters, rapists, even traitors to rehabilitate. The worst were housed in outdoor cages, where they might instructively contemplate the six gallows erected for those who failed. Here a man of conscience might view his guilt burst like gaudy fireworks against the dusk of shame and then fade to a burnout husk, an afterimage deprived of color.

CHORUS:²

A young man was born in Hailey, Idaho –

Growing up, he vowed to be a poet –

Emigrating to England, he showed great promise –

Adopted the pose of the aesthete –

The ardent young fool –

Insufferable –

Bombastic.

In love with the Medieval and Renaissance traditions –

He had the finest poetic ear of his generation –

Yet affected profanity and slang –

The rude voice of the American frontier –

An iconoclast trying to outdo himself –

Contemptuous of over-heated high society.

And though he was a poet of unexampled beauty –

The sweet voice of the Provençal –

The inventor of Chinese poetry for our time –

The crystal light of heaven –

Not yet the anti-Semite –

Not yet the crank economist –

And though he promoted his friends generously –

The young and unknown –
And argued into print the greatest works of his time –

Not yet the fascist sympathizer –
Not yet the rabid tirades against usury –

Though he was a monumental egoist –

He was also a generous man –
Even a deeply compassionate man –
So that when his friends –
And millions more –
Died in the Great War –
Outraged, he dropped the foppery, and

Driven to expose the roots of war –

His poems at first gained resonance –
But then slowly a new tone invaded –

Faint at first –
Then strident –
Paranoid –
Irascible.

Angered by cynical manipulations to foment war –

Demon bankers and financiers –

Jewish bankers and financiers –

He became a crank –
Sure, he had discovered a cure –
Social credit!

Sure of his calling to guide statesman

And instruct economists –

His friends found him absurd.
Sucked into the dark orbit of Fascist hero worship –
Adulating Mussolini –
He took to the air –
Broadcasting over Rome Radio –
The man whose pitch-perfect poetic ear taught beauty to a generation –
Ranted treason corrosive to the human soul –
And gave too little thought to where it would all end.

Imprisoned at the war's end –
Now passing the milestone of 60 –
Caged six months in Pisa –
At the Disciplinary Training Center –
Expecting to be executed –
The poetry returned –
The old voice rang out the noble line –
The famous Pisan Cantos –
But bent under enormous tragedy of the dream –
Until his government flew him home –
To stand trial for treason –
Though they soon thought better of *that* plan –
And agreed instead to –
Commit him to an asylum for the criminally insane.

For twelve long years –
His obsessions did not desert him –
But the poetry stayed as well –
Flying on one wing –

Until at last released –
Convinced of failure and error –
The old man at the end of his life –
Sank into silence –
Ten years of speechless despair –
His rare words obscure as the Sybil –
That Oracle centuries old –
Shriveled as a raisin –
Who, when asked by boys what she wanted –
Answered in her dry, cracked voice:

EZRA: I want to die.

ACT 1: EXTRADITION, ARRAIGNMENT & COMMITMENT

Scene 1 From Four Until Late

Music: SOFTLY IN THE BACKGROUND – “FROM FOUR TILL LATE” BY ROBERT JOHNSON

LYRICS From four till late
 Ize wringin' my hands and cryin'
 From four till late
 Wringin' my hands and cryin'
 I believe my soul, your daddy's Gulfport bound
 From Memphis to Norfolk is a thirty-six-hour ride
 From Memphis to Norfolk is a thirty-six-hour ride
 A man's like a prisoner and he's never satisfied
 When I leave this town, I bid you fare, farewell
 When I leave this town, I bid you fare, farewell
 And when I return again
 I'll have a great long story to tell

Ezra's Pisan cage has become his prison cell in Washington D.C. where he awaits arraignment on the charge of treason. He sits lost in thought, remembering Olga.

HALL: (*leaning on a wall, smoking, Film Noir style*) But he didn't die. He lived to the ripe old age of 87 and continued to write and speak oracles, not of death but life. Until one day he spoke no more.

All that is to come. Today he sits in a cell in D.C., waiting to face charges of treason, and writes to Olga in Italy.

EZRA: (*writing hunched over his notebook*) Tuhdaze HER birthday.³ HE brings her nuttin' but good wishes and bad deeds. If there's a trace of beauty in *en-athin'*, SHE sees it. For courage in face of evil, for courage in time of adversity, if anyone ever deserved April in all its beauty, SHE does.

Spotlight downstage. Olga enters a small Italian shop.

OLGA: A loaf of the fresh bread?

CHORUS (SHOPWOMAN): (*urgently beckoning Olga and spreading out a newspaper*) Signora – Il Poeta! See! – they've flown him to America. They say they will try him for treason.

OLGA: Oh God. (*turning toward the audience but speaking to an unseen Ezra*) Not to see you before you left. I can't imagine you gone. You are still here on the *salita* with me.

HALL: It would be 13 years before Olga would walk the *salita* with Ezra again. But like mated songbirds that become separated in a long migration, they never lost track of the ground to which each knew the other would head.

EZRA: M'amour, m'amour – where are you? Who was I, *il miglior fabbro*?⁴, to attempt *una paradiso terrestre*?⁵

HALL: Ah but you did write paradise on earth – the ant's foot, the smell of mint under the tent flaps, restoring to memory the illuminating detail.

EZRA: (*leans back*) What memory brings – always some trace of HER. Separated by a boundless sea I swim to the thought of you. Floundering at the edge of a ceaselessly heaving surf of recollection I haul myself out, tideswept on the reef of your memory.

Beached on the long-sought shore of you, facedown alone – unknown as the wind. Never the great sweep roars an end, but breath for breath, breathless breakers piling over breakers. Here ceaselessness is peace. Our few words the petrel's shrill mews, driven like nails into gray sea-weathered wood.⁶

Olga appears to him, speaking from another continent

OLGA: Ezra, my love – this moment, what are you doing?

EZRA: Imprisoned my love, with too much time to think. They've given me damn little, but they have given me time to reflect – as they did in Pisa. I hold long talks with Confucius. He says there are no righteous wars – neither in spring nor autumn.⁷ None perfectly right on either side.

In Pisa there were ants to watch, climbing thin blades of grass. Heat shimmered on drill fields, crickets hopped but did not chirp, and news was a long time arriving through crystalline sheets of ignorance.⁸ Here there are only dank walls. The dungeon.

OLGA: I would come to you even though they do not let me pass the gate. I would come to you had I to swim the earth.

EZRA: (*addressing the floor*) Earth. Let me sink into you by arm's length. Flow over me, make me drunk with your Aquavit of little herbs, ready me for the little death in her embrace as for the larger one in yours. Where I lie let thyme grow, and vasilicum. Let the herbs of April rise abundant.⁹

OLGA: You are thinking of death again.

EZRA: Not of death but of you.

OLGA: You survived the cage in Pisa – survive again! Give yourself to earth, but fight free of the earth's arms that draw all life at last to itself.

EZRA: The gorilla cage in Pisa at least was open on all sides. Birds on telephone wires picked out notes, as if they sat on the strings of your violin. How do tiny songbirds cross entire oceans? What a paltry word, "migration"! My thoughts, small birds with nowhere to land, cross seas to you, fly all night above over-piling seas. Troubled reflections, aching throat, the throb in the heart, the call that calls until the swollen throat can no more.¹⁰

OLGA: You are thinking of Whitman. When you sent your latest Cantos, I knew what you were thinking of.

EZRA: Whitman ... dead these 50 years. Most dead here in America where he is still exotic, still suspect.¹¹

OLGA: As you.

CHORUS (WHITMAN):¹² Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle, I, chanter of pains and joins, uniter of here and hereafter, a reminiscence sing.

Once at Paumanok, when the lilac scent was in the air and fifth-month grass was growing, up this seashore in some briars, two together nested and laid four light green eggs spotted with brown.

And every day he, to and fro, near at hand. And every day she, crouched on her nest, silent, with bright eyes. And every day I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing them.

Till on a sudden forenoon she did not crouch on her nest, nor returned that afternoon, nor the next, nor ever appeared again.

And thenceforward all summer in the sound of the sea and at night under the full of the moon in calmer weather, over the hoarse surging of the sea or flitting from brier to brier by day, I heard him call at intervals, or all night long, down almost amid the slapping waves, the lone singer called his mate, pouring forth meanings that all men know – and I, dimly, down to the beach where the echoes, the white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing – I barefoot, a child, the wind wafting my hair, listened long and long.

EZRA: The male, bereft, sang to the sea-winds "I wait and I will wait till you blow my mate to me."

CHORUS (WHITMAN): One midnight when the sea pushed madly on the land he called out, do I not see her fluttering out there among the breakers? That little white scrap, fluttering out in the black?

EZRA: Somewhere. I hear her calling.

OLGA: To you, my love, to you.

EZRA: I sing uselessly all the night. She is naught but the shining of the dark.¹³

CHORUS (WHITMAN): A thousand warbling echoes start to life within me, never to die. Loved! loved! loved! loved! But my love no more with me! We two no more. When I heard the bird singing to an empty sea that redounded to no reply as it crashed up the shore. I asked for a clue, a word that would speak to me of my destination, a word final, superior to all.

OLGA: And the sea did not delay answering.

CHORUS (WHITMAN): But whispered me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak lisped to me the low and delicious word –

EZRA: Death.

CHORUS (WHITMAN): And again Death – ever again Death, Death, Death.

OLGA: Just those two lines you used – the troubled reflection and the aching throat – and when you turned next to the earth I knew what you were thinking. But the troubled bird, even calling for its lost mate, still struggles toward life.

EZRA: Which I do not forget.

OLGA: (*despairing*) Lost!

EZRA: Found. A hard rowing that beaches on land rising abruptly from the sea, undiscovered, unknown – fate. Your breath. Until I end my song.¹⁴

Scene 2 ARRAIGNMENT

Enter Ezra, Julian Cornell and prosecuting attorneys. Ezra is handcuffed to a special agent who walks him into court for his arraignment. He sits and begins to write on a yellow pad. Judge Laws enters and seats himself at the high bench. In the background, Boogie Woogie piano, such as Bear Trap Stomp by Meade Lux Lewis.

CORNELL: No, you should NOT address the court yourself.

EZRA: Cat piss and porcupines! Does no one understand? NO ONE told me what to say! I read my *own* stuff, not Axis propaganda – is it that they do not know what I actually said on the air?¹⁵

HALL: Or is it that they do know?

OLGA: (*downstage*) The Liberators came to Europe to spread Mr. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, and they will not forgive him for making use of the First Freedom.

CHORUS (JAMES LAUGHLIN): (*to Olga*) You don't grasp the situation. It does not matter what he said over the air. If Ezra had said only that Jesus was a good man it

would still be treason if he had been paid to do it by an enemy with whom we were at war.¹⁶

EZRA: (*commenting, offhand*) Oh, I was probably offside – but my purpose was simply to keep all hell from breaking loose in the world *agin.*

CORNELL: Ezra, where there are a multitude of swords, try not to fall on the first one that comes to hand.

EZRA: (*brushing him off, addresses Judge Laws*) I want to act as my own counsel – I must explain my thought and the reasons for broadcasting.

JUDGE LAWS: That may be entertaining, but not likely to enlighten.

EZRA: Then let the court ask me questions until it gets what I mean.¹⁷

JUDGE LAWS: Overruled. The charges against you are serious. Counsel?

CORNELL: (*to the court*) My client is not sufficiently well to enter a plea himself. Although he can converse fluently about literary and political matters he has great difficulty concentrating on his case and appears unable to exercise any judgment whatever regarding the impending trial. Because of this and his mental exhaustion, we submit that Mr. Pound is not in possession of sufficient judgment to plead and ask that he be allowed to stand mute.

JUDGE LAWS: That would be a blessing.

CORNELL: We plead Mr. Pound innocent and request that he be examined by a qualified psychiatrist.

JUDGE LAWS: I am ordering Mr. Pound transferred to Gallinger Hospital for psychiatric examination. I will entertain motions from the prosecution and defense for qualified examining experts. The court will hear their findings next Tuesday.

Scene 3 LEGAL STRATEGY

Ezra is back in his cell, waiting. He has a transistor radio.

CHORUS (NEWSMAN): Pierre Laval, Vice President of the Vichy government, was tried today for his life, accused of treason as a Nazi collaborator.

EZRA: Laval was magnificent!

CHORUS (LAVAL): (*downstage*) I deny all charges! I have nothing to hide – I served my country!

CHORUS: (*shouting him down*) Liar! Traitor!

CHORUS (NEWSMAN): (*murmuring into his microphone as if calling a ballgame*) The courtroom is a madhouse. The judge has lost control of the courtroom, the jury itself is shouting down Laval. The wily statesman has deftly handled his defense, eloquently stating his position and making what seems to this reporter, a strong case.¹⁸

CHORUS (LAVAL): (*turning to the press*) I beg you, report my words exactly, for history will judge. (*to the jury*) To judge me you must examine the whole of my policies.

EZRA: (*excitedly*) Exactly!

CHORUS (LAVAL): I acted not to betray France but to protect her.

EZRA: (*enthusing*) The model for my own defense! Freedom of speech for the good of my country.

CORNELL: (*dryly*) One problem. He lost.¹⁹

HALL: (*even more dryly*) And was hung. They all lost – Laval, Quisling, Lord Haw Haw – all executed. *That* changed Ezra's mood. He no longer surmised that he would be released. The gray weather fell, it was a rainy, cold fall, and he began to despair. Six Italian radio technicians were flown to Washington to testify against him. By then he had no doubt what he was facing.²⁰

CHORUS (J. EDGAR HOOVER): (*downstage, dressing down a flunky*) We need *two* witnesses to each treasonous act, get that! And we haven't got 'em. I need *two* who can testify that they *both* saw Pound broadcast *at the same time*. These Wop radio techs don't even speak English! So how are they supposed testify to what they *heard*? I want a new indictment that does not expose our witnesses.

HALL: Maybe J. Edgar wasn't feeling frisky, but no experienced defense attorney would touch the case.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: (*countering*) Not bloody likely *we* would win.

OLGA: (*to Cornell*) But *you* found the opportunity irresistible, appointed yourself defense attorney in the midst of much confusion, and when no one objected, cooked up an insanity defense.

HALL: It seems no one foresaw the potential consequences of *that*, except perhaps the esteemed Dr. Overholser, overseer of the renowned asylum for the criminally insane at St. Elizabeths. It was a cacophony worthy of a madhouse, everyone looking to get in the game.

DR. OVERHOLSER: (*pompously*) This notion of Pound's insanity is nothing but laymen over-concluding from the episode he experienced in Pisa – little more than a brief period of confusion and claustrophobia brought on by isolation and exposure, mixed

with anxiety and depression over his fate. I thoroughly agreed with the camp psychiatrists that this was not surprising, given his age and confinement. *And I thought we could work with that.*

EZRA: (*to Cornell*) Yer tellin' me this insanity plea will get me released? Six months and I'm back in EYE-taly, a free man?

CORNELL: (*impatiently, to Ezra*) Yes, yes – we cannot chance trial now. Public sentiment is very strong and we must fear it. (*to Overholser*) He keeps talking about the possibility that government officials – with whom he hasn't the slightest acquaintance – might interest themselves in his case if only they understood his economic views. I think he *is* nuts.

CHORUS (WILLIAMS): (*assailing Cornell*) You make unfounded assumptions about Ezra's sanity. There is a curious similarity between Dorothy's account of his behavior and yours, and a complete difference of interpretation. Ezra seems to his wife to be as normal as he always was, while you, meeting him for the first time, surmise him to be much more unbalanced than he is. We who know him well aren't much concerned. A good deal of what alarms you about Ezra's behavior seems very much what we would expect at any time.

CORNELL: When I advised him to stand mute rather than enter a plea of not guilty he was unable to answer. His mouth opened and closed, he looked up at the ceiling and his face twitched, but no words came out. Finally, he said he felt ill.

HALL: You put him at war with himself, caught between a risk he can barely allow himself to countenance and his always-ready lecture itching to be delivered to a needy world.

Scene 4 EVALUATION

Ezra's cage upstage has been transformed into his room at St. Elizabeths – a large single room, a writing table strewn scattered books, manuscripts, writing pads and his old typewriter. A food tray, finished and set aside, sits amid the rubble. He lounges in a folding beach chair. The chorus, comprised of various inmates, bureaucrats and physicians, enters downstage. Pound confronts the examining psychiatrist. Downstage right, Dr. Overholser, Superintendent at St. Elizabeths, confers with the other consulting court psychiatrists. Downstage left, character witnesses address the court.

EZRA: (*erupting amid a zoo of inmate cacophony*) I need peace and quiet! If this is a hospital, cure me! And for the love of god do it quietly!

DR. GRIFFIN: Cure you of what?

EZRA: Whatever the hell is the matter with me – *you* must decide what that is. And whether I am to be cured or punished.

DR. OVERHOLSER: (*downstage*) The patient has long been recognized to be eccentric, querulous, and egocentric. At present, he exhibits extremely poor judgment as to his situation, both its seriousness and the manner in which the charges are to be met.

HALL: (*leaning against a far wall*) In other words, he doesn't get that they mean to hang him if they can. Nor that his good intentions and superior insight will not save him, even if he were able to get them clear. Not that he ever could.

DR. OVERHOLSER: The poor devil is in rather desperate condition. He is very wobbly in his mind, and while his talk is rational he flits from one idea to another so quickly that he can't focus long enough to answer a single question.

HALL: Not too different, many of his friends would say, from the old Ezra. But how few found *that* exculpatory. He wanted applause, they wanted blood. No character witness was going to change that.

(*amid the din of the mixed madhouse of courtroom and asylum, witnesses stand to try give testimony*)

CHORUS (KATHERINE HEYMAN): (*appealing to the court*) For nearly 30 years this utterly conscientious, overwrought and over-learned man has been my intimate friend. And though I have often quarreled with him over his ill-considered actions, I beg you, consider this rare being who is in your care, save him for his own country's sake.²¹

CHORUS (GIUSEPPE BACIGALUPO): It really became impossible to hold a normal conversation. He assumes you already know what he is talking about, makes cryptic allusions and moves on – rather like his Cantos.

CHORUS (DUDLEY FITTS): Mr. Pound's explanation for his behavior makes about as much sense as his poetry – it all reads as though he wrote it trotting through a cobbled street in his nightshirt, prodding an ancient typewriter suspended on straps over his shoulders as it bounces upon his bosom.²²

CHORUS (LUIGI VILLARI): (*testifying*) Before war was declared, I spoke with the American Ambassador and we both agreed that Ezra should not be let anywhere near a microphone. I doubted the man was sane. A pleasant enough madman and certainly a friend of Italy but what wild statements! It is better to stop such nonsense before it begins.

(*meanwhile the doctors confer*)

DR. OVERHOLSER: He insists that his broadcasts were not treasonable, but that his mission was to save the Constitution.

DR. MUNCIE: If you touch on his case, Confucius and all these other things get roped in.²³ He really believes that his mission is to save the Republic for the people of the

United States. He thinks he has found the key to world peace in Confucius. He thinks he could have turned around Japan through Confucian admonishment – they admire the Chinese don't they? He says he was double-crossed – that when they airmailed him back to Washington to stand trial they told him he was being sent to advise Truman.

DR. KING: There is much there that could be found at least ... megalomaniac. But perhaps not insane, that is, not very much so, not as such.

DR. OVERHOLSER: (*very firmly*) We need agreement here. We must speak with one voice. If you force me to, I will carry your reports with me to the courtroom and read them aloud, explaining in each case why I disagree. (*more kindly*) It is essential that we reflect credit upon our profession by showing that it can yield a single coherent judgment. (*teacherly*) Now first, let's note that he exhibits pressure of speech.

HALL: That means he is talkative. A good description of the man.

DR. OVERHOLSER: I propose that we find him paranoid –

HALL: After all they put him through, who wouldn't be paranoid?

DR. OVERHOLSER: – distractible, grandiose, expansive, and exuberant.

CORNELL: (*commenting aside*) This was a great surprise to me. Overholser was the government's star witness. He was supposed to counter the insanity defense. He should not be colluding with the defense, let alone volunteering opinions he had not vouchsafed to his own side – not that I minded. But then I found that Overholser was a most unusual man.²⁴

DR. KING: Dr. Overholser, I find him tiresome, eccentric, but entirely sane.

DR. OVERHOLSER: Please take another look Dr. King. I believe you must have overlooked something.

DR. KING: (*taking the hint, he glances back through the draft report*) Ah yes. I take your point. We must agree that while he has always been sensitive, eccentric, and cynical, these traits have multiplied over the years to the extent we may now find him afflicted with a paranoid state of psychotic proportions. For example, this story about being mistreated by some minor official. A clear over-reaction.

HALL: Ah. Strongly worded feelings of injustice place one at risk for being found insane.

DR. KING: Well he never hesitated to criticize, vilify, and condemn.

DR. OVERHOLSER: Yes, he is extremely vituperative of those who disagree with him. No, my opinion is unchanged.

OLSON: (*joining Hall downstage*) I first met him in the lock-up and liked him at once – a charming raconteur really. A handsome, quick mind. Oh there are jumps and leaps, but no more than any highly active creative mind might make. Yes, he sounds obsessed at times – but is he any more so than me, really? If I'd gone through what he has at his age, I might be a helluva lot worse.

EZRA: I don't much see what's nuts about my thought. I can't have committed treason because I never said anything I was ordered to say. Free speech should mean the right to say whatever I want over the air.

CORNELL: (*slaps his forehead*) Oy!

HALL: (*to Overholser*) In fact, all those who had taken a look at Ezra, and especially those who already knew him, thought him as fundamentally sane as ever – with all his eccentricities intact.

CORNELL: (*to Dorothy, with a wink and a nod*) Don't be alarmed. I am quite sure that you will find him his usual self. The aberrations the doctors have found are nothing new or unusual. I'm sure they would pass unnoticed by anyone such as yourself who has known him for years. In fact, any man of his genius might well be found abnormal by an examining psychiatrist.

DR. MUNCIE: I saw him once, just the day before trial. That was quite enough.

DR. KING: I will agree that he is psychotic. Dr. Overholser has made the diagnosis and we need to show solidarity. But to be honest, I couldn't elicit any symptoms of psychosis at all. There were no delusions, no thought disorder, no disturbance of orientation. I thought he definitely was not insane. But we all felt quite a bit of anxiety about what to do with the man.

DR. OVERHOLSER: We must be careful not to let judgment become distorted by patriotism.

HALL: Huh?

DR. OVERHOLSER: We all feel an understandable pressure. He is after all accused of treason and the public wants to see him stand trial for his life. But he continues to suffer from such delusions as believing that he has invaluable influences and connections in a half dozen countries, such that he should have been brought back to the United States as an advisor, not a prisoner.

EZRA: They won't believe me when I tell 'em the main spring is busted. I told 'em last summer it would bust. It's fatigue. No, I don't think I'm insane, but I'm so shot to pieces that it will take me years to write sensible prose again. I think I am of unsound mind and absolutely unfit to transact any business. But by God if I could learn a bit of Georgian I would be able to help with Stalin.

HALL: (*ironically*) A model of clarity – and not just Ezra. Confucius would say, when standing in a smokescreen, move clear of the smoke.

DR. MUNCIE: He seems to think that he is only exhausted; that exhaustion is behind the breakdown in his thinking processes.

DR. KING: He talks himself to exhaustion.

DR. OVERHOLSER: Well this “exhaustion” is out of all proportion – it is just another symptom of his psychosis.

HALL: Alice in Wonderland.

DR. MUNCIE: (*to Ezra*) How do you account for your extreme fatigue?

EZRA: (*exasperated rage*) All of Europe is on my shoulders, dammit!²⁵

DR. OVERHOLSER: He declares that he feels like the upper third of his brain has been replaced by fluid.²⁶

HALL: Apparently the ability to spot metaphor would be a disqualifying condition for the practice of psychiatric medicine.

DR. OVERHOLSER: I think our opinion should note his advancing years and state that his personality, for so many years abnormal, is now distorted to the extent that he is unfit to advise counsel or participate intelligently in his own defense. You can't keep him on a straight line of conversation. He rambles around with such a naïve grasp of the situation that it would be unfair to put him on trial. He is in other words, mentally unfit for trial, and in need of care in a mental hospital. (*looking around with air of having made an excellent summary of the obvious*) Well then! Our expert panel agrees unanimously on this finding? (*Muncie and King nod*)

HALL: Panel?? You're supposed to be speaking for opposing sides!

Scene 5 HEARING AND COMMITMENT

The psychiatrists return to face the judge and give their report. While the court deliberates, Ezra surveys his jury [the Chorus]. He hunches forward squinting, thrusting his head at them like a beak, squaring up to each in turn, rudely appraising them eye to eye. His face betrays little, he might be appraising a work of art hung on a museum wall. He finishes his examination and turns away, one hand working the opposite wrist, removing his glasses to rub his eyes and then suddenly slumps in his chair and leans on the table as if overcome.²⁷

DR. MUNCIE: Speaking for the defense, I find that the man talks non-stop. He exhausts me – that is to say, *he* is exhausted to the point of confusion. He states that the upper third of his brain is missing. No, no – definitely not sane enough to stand trial.

JUDGE LAWS: And you find him (*referring to the report*) ... psychopathic?

DR. MUNCIE: It's a catchall term. Not diagnostic. A large variety of maladjusted persons who are not definitely psychotic can be caught up in it – a wide net, you see? People who are lazy, egocentric, eccentric, quarrelsome, fanatic, emotionally unstable – etcetera. People who have never grown up emotionally and cannot adjust themselves to the world. That is how my esteemed colleague Dr. Overholser defines it, and I quite agree.

DR. KING: He exhibits all the characteristics of the spoiled only child, manifested as a narcissism, an inability to know his own emotions or emphasize with others, and a need to exploit.

HALL: That would be Ezra. Olga was worse, truth be told. But is *that* insanity? This smells like a virtuoso display of psychiatric pyrotechnics.

DR. OVERHOLSER: Well it is quite enough. He has long been recognized to have these traits and qualities, and he shows extremely poor judgment as to the seriousness of his situation. He seems quite deluded.

HALL: Perhaps that's because he's been told he will soon be out on bail and on his way back to Italy?

DR. OVERHOLSER: (*to the court*) In our opinion, with advancing years his personality, for many years abnormal, has undergone further distortion to the extent that he is now suffering from a paranoid state that renders him unfit to advise his counsel properly or participate intelligently in his own defense.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: He is completely unable to answer questions?

EZRA: Try me!

CHORUS (PSYCHIATRISTS, CORNELL AND JUDGE): Hush! (*Ezra slumps into his chair and lays his head on the table*)

DR. OVERHOLSER: No, it's more that he goes on too long. Perhaps with time it might be possible, perhaps at some far future moment we might get a lucid and concise answer to a question.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: (*languidly*) Did he give you anything about his belief in Fascism?

EZRA: (*leaping to his feet and shouting*) I never did believe in Fascism, Goddamn it, I oppose Fascism! (*shushed again by his attorney, he drops his head on the table*)²⁸

JUDGE LAWS: (*to the prosecuting attorney*) Try not to upset him.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: (*to Cornell*) Are you going to call Pound?

CORNELL: I don't think so.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: (*to the court*) Will you call him as Court's witness?

JUDGE LAWS: I'd rather not. It would take two or three hours and we need lunch.

CORNELL: He might blow up. He's been pretty nervous.

JUDGE LAWS: You don't want to argue the case do you?

CORNELL: Examine Mr. Pound? No.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: No.

CORNELL: Dr. King, as expert witness for the defense, do you agree with Dr. Overholser's assessment?

DR. KING: Yes I do. He is vague and grandiose, thinks he has no peer, or at best a few others occasionally do comparable work from time to time.

HALL: Might actually be right about that. If he sticks to poetry and leaves economics alone, that is.

DR. KING: His confabulations are caused by a loss of memory – a sure symptom of deterioration of the brain. In any case, all one needs to do is read some of these so-called Cantos to see that there has been deterioration for a number of years.

CORNELL: Can you put that in terms of a medical diagnosis? Or would that add anything to the picture?

HALL: Can you put that in terms of functional literary criticism?

DR. KING: I don't think it would. One can say in ordinary language that he has been a peculiar individual for years, and in recent years this has developed neurotically, perhaps even neurologically.

HALL: Am I in Moscow? Where can one get tickets for the show trials?

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Does peculiarity denote insanity? Do delusions that he could achieve world peace amount to insanity? Are they different in kind from the Hitler's and Mussolini's, who thought they could conquer the world?

DR. KING: Well, Mr. Pound is getting further and further away from the reality of the situation. Whether that really constitutes insanity, I would say one is entitled to some queer ideas. As to Hitler, I don't know – I never had the opportunity to examine him.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: And do all the examining doctors at St. Elizabeths agree with the diagnosis that Mr. Pound is mad? Is there is some dissent?

DR. OVERHOLSER: There has been no formal diagnosis – we've had some discussion, but it has not been formal. It's too early for that you understand. We will need some years of observation.

HALL: Wait a minute – are you going to leave it there? Commitment – and no formal diagnosis to support it?

CHORUS (PSYCHIATRISTS, CORNELL, PROSECUTING ATTORNEY): (*conferring among themselves*)

We can't exactly say that he is insane –

But he might be –

And we might be rid of him –

The Army doctors in Pisa did not diagnose insanity –

For god sake, don't call them!

It would be hard to prove –

That what he said on the air amounted to treason –

But if he were acquitted –

The howls of outrage would deafen peace –

Perhaps we best content ourselves that he be put away –

Let it be swept under the rug –

I don't care, so long as he's imprisoned –

Better without trial in this case.

HALL: Chickens will attack and pluck the one that seems most different from the flock, even peck it to death to be rid of its threatening strangeness. Have you never contemplated joining the clucking flock? Old women purse their lips and pluck bald the feathered head of the dotard reprobate. Such neighborly pastimes are well neigh irresistible. Refuse them at your peril.

CORNELL: (*handing papers to the Judge Laws and the prosecuting attorneys*) My client has suffered a complete mental collapse and loss of memory. He has been fatigued to exhaustion from the rigors of his confinement in that Pisan concentration camp – I'm sorry, there is no other word for it. He urgently needs medical care and should never have been brought to trial. Treatment is imperative – if he remains in prison he may never recover and be able to stand trial. A great literary genius will have been persecuted to no purpose. I urge the court to order his removal at once to a

mental hospital or sanatorium. I am confident that psychiatric evaluation will show such measures are imperative.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: (*aside*) They don't get it – indefinite detention. Not at all unsatisfactory to us. Not likely to be so satisfactory to him.

JUDGE LAWS: (*addressing the Chorus*) Members of the Jury, if you find the accused of unsound mind, the Court may commit him to hospitalization, to remain there until he is fit to stand trial. You have heard the opinion of qualified psychiatrists and they have certified that he is not fit to stand trial. It becomes your duty now to advise me whether in your judgment Mr. Pound is able to be tried. You are not bound by what the psychiatrists have said – you may disregard the experts if you wish and bring in a different verdict, but in this case, where the Government and defense are united in a clear and unequivocal view with regard to the situation, I presume you will have no difficulty in making up your minds.

CHORUS (NEWSMAN): (*continuing to murmur into his microphone*) It is quiet as a chapel. They fill the pews to witness a juicy scandal, but nothing disturbs the piety of the court. From the public seats, Ezra's face appears full of pain and hostility, like a cornered animal. He examines the faces of everyone in court looking for some connection, some support. The man who savaged American democracy now depends on its justice.

The jury consults and quickly indicates that they are ready²⁹

CHORUS (CLERK OF COURT): Mr. Foreman, has the jury agreed upon its verdict?

CHORUS (FOREMAN): It has.

CHORUS (CLERK OF COURT): What say you? Unsound?

CHORUS (FOREMAN): Unsound.

JUDGE LAWS: This court orders Ezra Pound be transferred to St. Elizabeths hospital for the criminally insane, where he is to be confined until such time as competent authority finds him capable of standing trial.

HALL: (*to Ezra*) No one thought the Federal case for hanging you was a winner. But off you go, safe within the walls of St. Elizabeths Hospital, to live with the wingnuts in the asylum.

DR. MUNCIE: (*enthusing to Overholser as they file out of court*) Win, I don't know how you manage to get me in on such interesting cases. It is always such a pleasure to work with you. Did you know Pound's publisher was in the audience? – and he told me how extraordinary it was to see the three of us united. I thought your testimony was very clear and had a telling effect on the jury.

DR. OVERHOLSER: Though I am already overburdened with the administration of St. Elizabeths, I am always willing to take on an important duty for my country.
(confidentially) Delighted really, to have such an interesting case on my hands. And with the prospect of unlimited time to discuss our literary interests!

Scene 6 Beauty Under the Elms

(Ezra is led back to his cell, where he sits wearily writing a letter to his family)

EZRA: At least I am well supplied with sweets. When they don't know what else to do, they poke buns through the bars. Though thanks to all this food we now have trouble with ants. One half of one crumb equals 9 ants. I thought the paté would last forever, but it grew a long beard sitting on the cold windersill.

CHORUS (CIRCE):³⁰ "First must thou go the road to hell, through overhanging dark, to see eyeless Tiresias, a shade who prophesizes."

CHORUS:

Coming awake in that echoing dark –
Through which passes the long slow tread of the Warder –
In the early hours between day and day –
Its resonant meaning unheeded too long –
Late in life suddenly crystalized –
Into the knowledge of what he should have done –
Precipitated headlong into an abyss of failure.

EZRA: Here Paradise is not artificial –

Jagged, it exists for a flash, for an hour.

Then agony.

Then an hour, then agony.³¹

Too spent to write.

Send me letters, full of ordinary gossip!

But expect no reply!³²

CORNELL: (*reading a letter from Ezra*) He has been placed in solitary confinement. He gives his address "Dungeon."

HALL: At least there were no treatments at St. Elizabeths, no drugs, no shock treatments, nothing. Not even therapy – one would have wanted to be there to overhear *that*. After all, what was there to treat him for?

EZRA: At least in the gorilla cage, there was Nature to study.

HALL: In Pisa, Nature had grounded him in the face of the madness raging both within and in the world without. But during his first months in St. Elizabeths he was placed in solitary confinement, not allowed outside his cell even to exercise.

EZRA: No green katydid restores the present moment. No ant hangs on a blade of grass, no blade of grass on which to hang sanity, no newborn wasp goads white oxen that trudge the road to Pisa, no smell of mint under the tent-flap.³³

OLSON: Later I was able to visit. Ghostly companions in the mental wards shuffled by, never at rest. Some never interrupted their aimless wanderings to come near, but at times, one would be drawn to us. The poor old ghost would bend down and peer intently into my face, gripping the arms of my chair, cutting off all escape. Then Ezra would take him gently by the arm and lead him away.

CHORUS (ANOTHER VISITOR): I watched him once at lunch. An old man shuffled solemnly forward and stood by his chair. Ezra fed the old man a mouthful from his own plate. He explained that people were out to poison him, and the old man was his taster.

EZRA:³⁴ mental contusion constitutional religion idiomatic contortion world
lost grey mist barrier impassible ignorance absolute anonyme
futility of "might have been" coherence constantly invaded *aiuto*

HALL: "Help"

DOROTHY: He wrote me a Chinese Prayer in May, which I took to be a confession of sorts.

EZRA: I errored, I pay, I awaken. Wasps be not stroked by men, nor hawk for wren mistaken twice. Let me not be engulfed in the magnitude of my calamities nor nest twice on a sand-storm.³⁵

HALL: But was it an error of moral judgment he admitted to? Or merely the tactical blunders of a political naïf, not so shrewd as the clever ones?

(*to Cornell*) You never told him that it would have been practically impossible to convict him of treason in the first place. Had you introduced Ezra's radio speeches in open court, what jury would not find them too absurd, too irrelevant to be treasonous?

CHORUS (JAMES LAUGHLIN): (*to Olga*) Now that he is safely in St. Elizabeths, there is little danger of his being brought to trial. I feel certain that after things cool down a bit, charges will be dropped and he will be let out. I know the news of his illness must

be shocking to you, but isn't it providential? Had he been brought to trial now, there is not a chance in the world but they would have hung him. The mob is blood-hungry and there is nothing our little band of intellectuals could have done about it. Fifty years from now history may well applaud us. And even if we could have spared him this indignity, that wouldn't help the man who gets hung in the heat of the moment.

HALL: It was a Pyrrhic victory – Ezra consigned to limbo, neither guilty nor innocent. He would reside at St. Elizabeths for twelve years, imprisoned, though unconvicted. Cornell called it a paradox, but it was one of his own making. He convinced Ezra to believe a sheer fairy story, the improbability that he could be unconditionally released on the grounds of insanity. And since Ezra could hardly expect to "recover" from a mental disturbance from which he did not suffer in the first place, he could hardly hope for release. And even if he were found ready for release, it would only be to stand trial all over again.

EZRA:³⁶ I go on livin' wiff no apologies.³⁷ No goddamned kike-kiatrist is going to get his hooks into me. It's all too goddamned simpleminded. If Hamlet was mad, so am I, and a puzzle just about as liable to be solved by *that* lot.

Trust no man who has not tended the eruption of evil within himself. High-minded men prefer to find it outside, in the world outside. Distrust any that fails to find his own personal e-fil. Even Luther threw his ink pot at sulfurous Satan's stink escaping his own arsehole – even ole Martin pinned it on the Devil.

I have swum in evil. I have stumbled in white fear – I watched myself as from a great distance, from somewhere near a high ceiling, wading in to swim in that deathly still pool – the liquid acid that is evil. The silence there is unearthly. A door at the bottom of a long stair opens to a threshold of black water lapping at the sill. There is no noise, pushing off into it, a quiet breast stroke into evil's narcotic water – the light unearthly, flat, lit from above and behind by a cold florescence beneath whose shine the black water's surface is an impenetrable narcosis –

I withdrew from it. I tried to forget that I'd ever swum that silent inner sea. I blocked all memory of it. I never speak of it. It is the moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from the quotidian to the unearthly. Or to death. But death is one thing, disintegration another, metamorphosis yet another. Sought heaven. Found my way to hell.

I too was let into the pigsty, Circe's swine-pen – goin' in all too eager to her harem – only then saw the wallowing pigs, the cadavers of souls, the bestialization of the West. "C'mon in, small fry" said the little coon to the big black – I tossed on the raft at Pisa and saw the slaver between decks, I saw all the presidents go by, Washington, Adams, Monroe, Tyler, Polk, all of them black in green jumpsuits...but one was named Edwards³⁸

Ezra grabs his microphone, his voice picking up over the loudspeaker, broadcasting again: You are in black darkness and confusion, you have been hugger-muggered and

scarum-shouted into a war and you know nothing about it. (*stops, agonized*) No, no – I am but an observer who has worked 25 years to prevent it.³⁹

Edwards, Edwards! Good Hermes, overstepper of boundaries, inventor of the lyre, conductor of souls into the nether world – Edwards! You who have passed the pillars and sailed outward from Herakles. God, Edwards, we have sailed and drifted the great periplus – circumnavigated the middle sea, the Mediterranean. The great periplus brings in the stars to shore.⁴⁰

No one. No one. I am nobody, no man, that is my name; Odysseus, the name of my family. The wind is also of the process. Fear God and the stupidity of the population.⁴¹

Before you come to your roads' end, your knowledge but the shade of a shade, you must sail after new discovery or old memory, knowing less than the drugged beasts.⁴²

Escape wandering by coming to know of beauty, of light. I have brought the great ball of crystal; who can lift it? Can you enter the great acorn of light? But beauty is not madness, though my errors lie in wrecks about me. I am not a demigod; I cannot make it cohere. If love be not in the house there is nothing.⁴³

HALL: He came out of it. They let him out to walk and sit in the great open grounds. Small things made a day. And he seemed happier there, safer in his own skin, than he had been in the storms before, or the misery that was to come.

EZRA: How came beauty against this blackness, twice beauty under the elms– to be saved by squirrels and blue jays?⁴⁴

ACT 2: NO MAN'S LAND

Scene 1: Cross Road Blues

Music: "CROSS ROAD BLUES" BY ROBERT JOHNSON

LYRICS | went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
| went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above "Have mercy, now
save poor Ez, if you please.

Mmmmm, standin' at the crossroad, I tried to flag a ride
Standin' at the crossroad, I tried to flag a ride
Didn't nobody seem to know me, everybody pass me by
Mmm, the sun goin' down, boy, dark gon' catch me here
oooo ooee eeee boy, dark gon' catch me here

I haven't got no lovin' sweet woman that love and feel my care
You can run, you can run, tell my friends out there
You can run, you can run, tell my friends out there
Lord, that I'm standin' at the crossroad, babe, and I believe I'm sinkin' down

Scene 2 PROLOGUE TO A TRIAL: THE TWICE CRUCIFIED

It is 12 years later. Asylum inmates convene a trial of Ezra to make up for the one he did not receive when he was committed. Ezra needs it to exorcise the demons that he was unable or afraid to confront in a real-life trial for his life – the trial of his ideas and values that he seemed to welcome, but ducked.

CHORUS (THE INSANE):

You been here –

How long now?

Twelve years?

And no trial?

We live here –

We belong –

We're insane.

But you fake it –

Why?

To hide? –

From what?

Who hates you? –

Who do you hate? –

So much you would hide –

(all) HERE!

12 years of your life!

You were afraid to face

They were afraid to try you –

We are not.

We will try you.

Three of the insane form a tribunal, pulling over chairs, another stands before them to prosecute, although the tribunal rarely restrains itself from interrupting and out-shouting the prosecutor

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

Charge him!

(leans forward, whispering conspiratorially to the prosecutor) What's he charged with?

CHORUS (THE INSANE):

Impersonating insanity!

– baldly!

– badly!

Talking economics!

– treasonably!

– loudly!

Irritating great men!

Offending propriety!

– vulgarity!

– bigotry!

Obscure poetry!

– stale creampuffs!

– out of joint with the times!

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): Mr. Pound, you are charged with idiosyncrasy, idiotic behavior, and imitating an inmate. These are serious charges. How do you plead?

EZRA: Many in positions of political and economic power have done worse to say less.

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): You cavil. Who but the sane shudder to see their worst prejudices and ignoramities exposed and displayed? You presume upon the rights of Presidents and monarchs! What is your economic policy?

EZRA: Keep money in circulation. Equal distribution to all. One tenth of one percent hoard the world's wealth – date-stamp their money so that it loses value every day! Let it slip through their fingers, flow away like water that feeds deep springs! Let all money return like water, soak back into the ground that produced it, the spring of natural wealth that benefits all!

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

This sounds suspiciously sane.

They say your economics is a joke –

They say you are a crank and a fool –

But to say such things –

If you want to stay here –

Looks bad, very bad.

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): Also, your writing seems suspiciously good. Didn't you win a prize for poetry after you were committed here?

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): What? Did you suddenly recover?

EZRA: No, that work was written before.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): A wily answer.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

Too wily for an insanity defense.

Where was it written?

When?

EZRA: In a gorilla cage. In Pisa. After the end of the war.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

A go-rill-a cage?

Maybe he's not sane.

What were you doing?

EZRA: Translating Confucius.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

Ah.

Ah.

Ah-so.

The Chinese sage.

Hah.

Was he not very sane?

EZRA: The only model by which the West could sanely govern itself.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

Hmm.

Must you not be very sane, to understand him?

What sane man could understand Chinese poetry?

Words standing around isolated from one another –

Like commuters in a New York subway station.

EZRA: Not at all. It's done in word pictures. *Id-e-o-grams*. It is idiomatic.

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): Idiotic.

EZRA: (*pedagogically*) The Chinese specifies no subject for its verbs and so becomes timeless. All is in flux, like ecology – all co-creates all. No word stands alone, but always in the field of Tao. All comes to be in relationship to all.

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): Pfff.

EZRA: Listen – I translated this from the Confucian Odes. (*he recites*):

"and when thou art thine own sole company
say not: No man can see thru the roof's air-hole
in my northwest ingle is naught can make shame
here is no eye."⁴⁵

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): Ahhh ... Uhhh ... No.

EZRA: Here's one you will understand:

"Clear as the stream her modesty
As neath dark boughs her secrecy
 reed on reed
 tall on slight
as the stream moves left and right
 dark and clear
 dark and clear.
To seek and not find
as a dream in his mind,
 think how her robe should be
 distantly, to toss and turn,
 toss and turn.
High reed caught in tall grass
 so deep her secrecy;
lute sound in lute sound is caught
 touching, passing, left and right,
bang the gong of her delight."⁴⁶

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): *This* is sane! Hah! Bang her gong!

EZRA: (*very sober*) But you must understand, she does not exist. Not as such. In the West, we mistake nouns for real things.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): What?? Not real? Insane!

EZRA: In nature there are only things-in-motion, things-in-relationship. No pure verb exists in nature – as if banging could exist apart from the gong, or running apart from the man that runs! The mind knows one thing: "man-running" – not "man" plus "running".

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): (*silly with hilarity*) Or bong-ganging. Gang-bonging. Gong-banging.

EZRA: (*soberly ignoring them*) Only relations are real; the things they relate, not. The eye is everywhere and nowhere, the mind floats on wind. Look at Chinese painting, there is stillness in movement. It a grammar hard to read at first – for the West.⁴⁷

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

Hmph.

Is this good?

This isn't good –

Not good at all –

For an insanity defense.

Or else it is.

You can't tell sanity from insanity in what he says.

We can't judge poetry –

Or economics –

But whether you belong among us –

That we can judge.

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): This man drew the entire Jewish people into his holocaustic fury even as others threw them into the furnaces of the Holocaust.

CHORUS (INMATE DEFENDER): Piffle. What did he have to do with that?

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): No man advocates a holocaust for others unless he has made a burnt offering of his own soul, and then when he hates, he hates with his soul, a soul that seeks to consume others – even if his atrocities are only the fierce cruelty of words.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

He was no longer catholic –

Drawing the whole together,

But caustic,

Burning the whole at once.

His own soul gone into the fire –
Where it burnt –
Charred and shriveled to a scrap.
He threw himself into the fire –
Confused to madness by hatred –
Seared by the acid he threw in their faces –
Can such a man be sane?

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR):

But is he *certified?* (*to Ezra*)
If you are insane you must be certified!
Where's your certificate?

EZRA: A Jew in a newspaper hat stole it out of my pajamas.

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): He has no proper certificate! No one can stay here without proper certification!

CHORUS (THE INSANE):

He is an uncertified man –
A man of no name –
And none to come! –
A man on whom the sun should go down –
A wanderer who found his way in here 12 years ago –
And never found his way home –
And although he fantasizes –
Wishing will not make it so –
He is no Odysseus.
And he's no lunatic.
A sorry excuse.
What rag of insanity can he claim?

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): *Question him!*

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): Let us begin with the written evidence. Is this your hand-writing?

EZRA: That is my 74th Canto, handwritten in the Gorilla Cage in Pisa.

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): Ahhhhhh. So, what have you crossed out here at the beginning – where you added new words?

EZRA: You have got your hands on an early draft. I rewrote it thus: (*reads aloud from Canto 74*)

"The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent shoulders.
Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,
Thus Ben and La Clara *a Milano*, by the heels at Milano.
That maggots should eat the dead bullock.
Diogonos, Dionysus – but the twice crucified
where in history where you find it?"⁴⁸

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

This *is* your hand?

Ben and la Clara *a Milano*?

A Milano indeed!

Who did you *mean*?

EZRA: The Boss. Muss. Old Ben. (*They stare blankly. Exasperated*) *Muss-o-lin!* Strung up by his heels, having first been shot by the Partisans – him and his mistress La Clara.

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): Is this not beautiful writing? (*to Ezra*) Was this not sane, revising your Pisan Cantos to open with so great a man swinging by the heels?

EZRA: No, no – he was a cartoon not worth the paper! It was more beautiful before. To ruin beauty – is that sane?

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): The twice crucified – who did you mean?

EZRA: Dionysus – the twice born. The Crucified One.

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): You don't mean it. You say you write about Mussolini. But you don't mean it. You write about yourself. (*to the tribunal*) Is this not sane, to hide himself so cleverly?

EZRA: Who I am slips out of my power to define – myself for myself.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): Call your first witness!

CHORUS (INMATE PROSECUTOR): He thinks he has great mind. Very well, we must have a great mind to judge him – but we must have one who went certifiably insane himself. I call Friedrich Nietzsche! (*Nietzsche appears*)

And he thinks himself a great poet, so we must have a great poet to judge as well – it is well known that only poets can understand other poets. But this poet too must be a shade – to set Friedrich at ease – I call Rainier Maria Rilke! (*Rilke appears*)

(*to Nietzsche and Rilke*) Examine him! – give us your judgment.

*Nietzsche and Rilke stand regarding Ezra in his cell.*⁴⁹

CHORUS (RILKE): Here is one to whom the past no longer belongs, and not yet the future.⁵⁰ He lives a shallow death in a dim gray light, desperate to convince himself of color. He celebrated life in all its agonies, sang the passion of Orpheus' song – and now look: His will is dazed, like a caged panther pacing behind its bars, a few feet one way, then swinging back a few paces the other way, behind a world that has become only bars – a thousand bars. And beyond the bars, nothing – his very seeing is too exhausted to hold the world. He spots his prey, something in the pupil leaps to life, a spark enters and travels down the quickening muscle to the heart – and dies.⁵¹

CHORUS (NIETZSCHE): It isn't martyrdom he wants – it would make no difference. What counts is the meaning of that suffering – the wild will to live, escaping to no other-worldly phantasm. Existence is sacred enough to justify any amount of suffering – *that* is tragedy: Dionysus cut to pieces promises life from dismemberment.⁵²

EZRA: (*commenting aside*) And there you have what the Xtians couldn't find to save their souls. In Pisa there was suffering worth any amount of redemption. What it was worth I cannot say, only what it *was*.

CHORUS (RILKE): Live the questions now. Perhaps you will live along some distant day into the answer.⁵³

EZRA: I never wuz in the market to pedal reCRUDescent answers REread from dead catalogues. The quotidian moment breaks through – *that* lights my Cantos. *It is the process*. The Emperor Tching Tang wrote on his bathtub in letters of gold, MAKE IT NEW.⁵⁴

CHORUS (NIETZSCHE): Is it new because it happens only once? Or does it not eternally return?

CHORUS (RILKE): *Once*, everything – only *once*. *Once* and no more. And we too, *once*. Never again. But having been this *once*, though only once, having been on earth does not seem too little.⁵⁵

CHORUS (NIETZSCHE): If you have said “yes” to a single joy then you have said yes to all woe. These things are entangled. If you ever wanted one thing twice, then you wanted it *all* back, entangled as it is. *Then* you loved the world when you said to woe, “go, but return – and bring back joy anew; I thirst so much for this world”.⁵⁶

EZRA: Once, yes – the luminous moment is unique each time it appears, but luminous details return and return: *once, yes*, in an Image so intensely embodied that it suddenly returns. *That* liberates. Use no unnecessary word. Better to write one Image in a lifetime.⁵⁷

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): (*to Nietzsche and Rilke*) Is this *very* sane? You are as hard to follow as he is. Anything I can’t follow easily must be nuts. If this is not insane, of what sense is sanity?

CHORUS (NIETZSCHE): Ach, I do not like these tense souls. If he grew tired of his sublimity, he might grow beautiful. His deeds lie on him as a shadow; the hand darkens the doer.⁵⁸

CHORUS (RILKE): He may be crucified, but he is not yet reborn. That beauty is nothing but the beginning of something terrible that we may barely endure – something so terrible that it disdains to destroy us.⁵⁹

CHORUS (NIETZSCHE): He has not yet overcome what he has done. Though I love the bull’s neck on him, I want the eyes of the angel. He still wants to be elevated – let him discard his heroic will.⁶⁰

CHORUS (RILKE): He spent a life struggling to avert the terrible suffering of war and poverty. But if he fails to affirm the terribleness of life he will never possess its bliss. And if he stays here, he will be neither living nor dead, cut off from the unutterable powers. He struggles with beauty and he does with terror. He could be one who shows that they are one thing, a man whose terrible and ecstatic face looks both this way and that.⁶¹

EZRA: I cut through the underbrush, but no one followed – no one followed.

CHORUS (RILKE): You must change your life.⁶² A god can do it. But can a mere man pass by a hairbreadth through that cleft? Try forgetting that you ever sang.⁶³

EZRA: Until they threw me into the Gorilla Cage at Pisa, I *had* forgotten. Got caught up in that vulgar struggle – economic injustice, social corruption! My sole aim was to dispel ignorance and suffering, and I made huge quantities of both – made them by hand! It would have been better to have kept silent.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): This *might* be sane.

CHORUS (NIETZSCHE): When power descends into the visible – *that* I call beauty. And there is nobody I want that beauty from as much as from you who are powerful: let kindness be your final self-conquest. I already know you capable of evil: therefore I want good from you. I have often laughed at the weak who thought themselves good because they had no claws.⁶⁴

EZRA: Woe to those that conquer with violence, whose only right lies in their power.⁶⁵

CHORUS (RILKE): Choose change. What locks itself up is already dead. Do you feel safe living in colorless gray? "Wait", the hardest stone warns you, "a hammer will fall." It may shatter you. You love the classics: think on Daphne. Since her transformation into a bay tree, she wants us all to change into wind.⁶⁶

CHORUS (NIETZSCHE): Listen, the secret is: live dangerously.⁶⁷

CHORUS (RILKE): The ball we threw into the air – when we catch it, doesn't it feel lighter than before? By the weight of return, it is less – and more.⁶⁸ (*they turn to go, without so much as a glance or word to the tribunal*)

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

But to stay here –

In this bedlam of voices that fail of meaning –

Holding court on the front lawn –

From a lawn chair in the shade of the elms –

Fawned over by sycophants –

Does it not betray sanity to prefer this?

No, your actions –

Your economics and your poetry –

Convict you –

You are sane.

But there is a second trial –

The penalty phase –

A trial of soul –

A trial known from earliest times –

In which you might yet be found –
To share guilt with the inarticulate –
Who cannot voice their shame.

Scene 3 TRIAL IN ST. ELIZABETHS

Downstage T.S. Eliot reports to Olga on his visit to St. Elizabeths. Upstage Elizabeth Bishop stands reciting her poem in bits, which will go on throughout the scene.

OLGA: (*to Eliot*) What was it like there?

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):
This is the house of Bedlam.⁶⁹

CHORUS (ELIOT): One endures the routine scrutiny and is passed through bleak corridors and halls; one clanks up the iron stairs, to be admitted by a faceless attendant at an iron-grilled door; one is shown into a locked ward lit by barred windows where imbecile inhabitants stare vacantly and old men sit stupidly, ignored by indifferent caretakers. At last one finds one's way to an alcove partially concealed by a screen, behind which one finds Ezra conducting classes or sometimes holding court for an important visitor.

OLGA: Not so *very* bad then?

CHORUS (ELIOT): There is never any real privacy. Inmates wander in at random. Ezra is invariably kind and understanding. He gives them bits of food and leads them away. Most often Dorothy is there, sitting rigid as a statue in the background near a battered piano. It is difficult until one gets used to it, to ward off the noise – a TV blares, a radio shouts, the demented punctuate whatever you talk about with the screams of the utterly lost. And the odors! Dried urine decades old. Cabbage permeating the walls.⁷⁰

Upstage: A Warden shows in Charles Olson to visit Ezra.

CHORUS (WARDEN): Here's a visitor for you Mr. Pound – this is Mr. Olson, a poet like yourself.

OLSON: (*extending his hand*) Mr. Pound, it's a pleasure.

They greet, then pull back and address the walls, the wind, the sky

EZRA: (*a weary aside*) Here's another young goose, more eager to be disillusioned than he knows. Incapable of so much insight as would yield an illusion. He'll begin in one corner and talk himself around to the opposite.

OLSON: (*to Eliot*) At first, he seemed open, even shy. And then, here he comes! – all head and chest, coming at me relentless as the blind swing of a battering ram, restless to get things going.

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):
This is the man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

EZRA: (*in a rush, flourishing a magazine*) Have you read what they're saying about me? There oughta be some way to answer these slanders, emmm? (*implying Olson, who draws back*) They need to talk to the Italians who *know*, we wuz on the inside working *against* Musso. Useta say we hadda walk on the OPpsite sida the street to avoid the stink – nearly as bad as the smell of the goddamned immigrant Jooze or Musselman who wanna come here. At least we *invited* the jigs.

OLSON: (*recoiling*) My people immigrated. Are they second class? The men you backed were fascist SOBs.

(*long pause*)

Let's start over – cigarette? (*offering Pound his pack*). You look lost. But not nuts.

EZRA: No, nuttin' wrong that way. But I can't seem to put two sentences together. It was better when they had me up at Gallinger – all padlocks and doors; I felt safer. And there was a boy to go for papers and candy bars. There's an Injun on the ward here who talks all night about killing people. Last night he got the number up to 10,000 he wuz gonna bump off. They treated me better in the Gorilla cage. What's behind it? Who wants this? Is it the Jooze? They don't know my work, they don't know what I was really doing in Italy. Hell I was working against Mussolini – from the inside.

OLSON: Ye-e-es?

EZRA: (*confidentially*) Lissen, without radar, the English never wudda won the war. If I could get some clothes, it'd be an act of grace ... even my pajamas are still at Gallinger.

OLSON: They tell me you wrote Cantos in Italian while you were in detention at Pisa.

EZRA: Yes, two, both in Italian – but they can't be published now. One tells the story of an Italian girl. She'd been raped, see, and then she was forced to lead a company of Allied soldiers to a nearby town. She took 'em through a minefield. And though she was blown up too – two legs off – it gave a cuppla German prisoners the chance to escape. She was a hero of the Eye-talyun ree-sistance, y'see.

OLSON: (*incredulous*) But Ezra, that *is* treason. You mean the Italian-German resistance behind the Allied lines. You're talking treason – if you're with her, you're a traitor!

EZRA: (*quietly, as if explaining to a child*) She'd been raped.

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):
This is the time
of the tragic man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

CHORUS (INSANE TRIBUNAL):

Enough small talk!

Time for a trial!

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):
This is a wristwatch
telling the time
of the talkative man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

CHORUS (INSANE TRIBUNAL):

Who will persecute, to try the defendant's soul?

(correcting his colleague) That's prosecute.

All righty then – who will prosecute?

OLSON: I must.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): And for the defense?

DR. TORREY: (*rising smugly in his white psychiatrist's smock*) Gentlemen, what can be said, I will say.

CHORUS: (*to Ezra*) Witchim on yer side – wachout!

CHORUS (INSANE TRIBUNAL): Get his particulars.

EZRA: (*stands almost at attention staring into the middle distance and speaking with pauses as if answering an inaudible interrogation*)

Pound, Ezra.

Born Montana, though generally said to be Hailey Idaho

1887

Writer – Cantos. ... The stuff that *stays* news – the history of today.

A crank? I guesso, yes – if you mean a man who has ANY ambition other than to save his own skin from the tanners.

Waal, if I ain't worth more alive than dead, then that's that.⁷¹

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): Persecutor, your opening statement?

OLSON: It is far past time for Ezra Pound soul to stand trial for his soul. A rope could redden his freckled neck.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

Negative son.

They don't allow rope in here.

Proceed.

OLSON: Look at him. That's how I first saw him in court, when he was committed, mute before the judge, eyes of hostile pain – cornered, no one near him but a lawyer he'd met just the week before. The man of words as mute as if he hadn't spoken for years.

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):

This is the sailor
wearing the watch
that tells the time
of the honored man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

OLSON:⁷² (*weaving and wobbling, like a sailor on a tossing deck, between the urge to attack and a desperate admiration that desires to redeem Pound*) Well, he had his chance to broadcast, and at last the State replied. His penny postcards, cancelled Rapallo, addressed Rutherford, New Jersey, came home to roost. It brought a flush of satisfaction to his enemies – perhaps even to him. Suddenly he *is* history. At long last, the climax! There he is! – *Persona (non grata)* in the drama in which he'd longed to posture.

He thought Truth would be given a hearing – *his* truth. But I could have told him, truth's a bore – and everyone has private information on what it really is, anyhow. So his trial was emptied of meaning before it began. The frame's askew. The only premise by which Pound could be brought to proper justice was lacking. He had become international. But we, not yet.

We have shown a peculiar lack of interest in Ezra Pound – beyond his ranting, that is. Eliot, Williams, Lewis – the men who knew him all these years – why have they not stood up, explained him? They knew him better than we younger poets. Our own case

remains as yet unexamined by life. How shall we try men who have examined us better than we have ourselves? They know what they fight against. We do not yet know who we are. How have the questions raised by Pound gone unexamined, unquestioned. How do men who owe him so much continue in silence? Their voices were drowned before they spoke by the flood of hate he inspired.

Yes, I hate him for a fascist and an anti-Semite! And though he had the courage to face the questions of our time, he was traitor to things more important than the United States. No man can attack an entire race and remain useful to anyone as an artist.

But let any man who becomes the State's man beware – the man who becomes a True Believer becomes party to the mob and the mob's condemnation. Let any man who has not examined the premises of justice beware for himself most of all. Let him beware when he places justice itself on trial.

It isn't enough to call Pound a fascist – he *is* a fascist, the worst kind of farcical intellectual fascist, a mouther of filthy slogans in service of a dictator. He brings shame on all writers, this *man of words*, this succubus who sold his voice to the enemies of free people. But let his detestable farce not impugn justice herself as she hands her free, blind gift to any man, no matter how contemptible.

No poet can afford to let Ezra Pound to go untried. He stands forth to be judged in all the violence of his thought. The fact that he is a poet – and an exceptional one, has no bearing on his trial by the State – but *as a poet* his case must be examined by we who call ourselves poets.

What has not yet been done needs be done now, because this is a trial of us all. This man, as good as any of us, is a fascist and a hater. But he is no mere dried whore trumpeting fascist propaganda. He is as brilliant a maker of language as we have had.

We must place treason to Truth central to his indictment. For treason to the State is no crime if it is loyalty to Truth. The point is not that his skill mitigates – it does not even in any way relate to his crimes, if he has any. But it calls into question: how came such a poet to allow himself to become the voice of Fascism? Was it through speaking Truth, or lies? Lies peddled in service of ignominy create no private warrant to Truth. But Truth spoken, Truth affirmed, abrogates all shrill charges brought against it, no matter what over-heated rhetoric is tweeted by those in power.

Only under indictment for the Truth he served or failed *as a poet* could Ezra Pound be properly tried, and I propose that he be so examined and tried by those who can recognize and judge his work, not to decide if he was a traitor to America, but to find out: was he fascist to Truth? Did he assert totalitarian power over Truth? Did he prostitute Truth? Or was he an Odysseus, shipwrecked in service of Truth? Try him for his radio broadcasts and side-whacked economics, but try the whole body of his creative work.

That trial is long overdue. It cannot be postponed, for no matter how the United States may try him, the people will try him as the Poet, Ezra Pound. And the people will try the Truth, as dark and fumbling as their ability to know it may be.

We all know that Pound is not crazy. We know him to be as gifted a poet as any who has written the English language in this century. We may find ourselves forced to deal with an unpleasant *persona*, but none may deny the power of his language. He came to that moment when his own work spoke to him and said, "if you turn aside now, go and be damned, your tongue will fork no lightening".⁷³

His business as a poet is to serve Truth. Try this man as a poet, and then condemn him if you can. Shall we who also serve Truth also fail to do what the State has failed to do? Shall we write essays that explain one hundred Cantos and not answer as an anti-Semite and a fascist the man who wrote them? Shall we learn from his line and not answer his lie? The first rule of an honest life is, do not lie to yourself.

We hear it said that the poet must be tried to prove that poets are responsible citizens. That is a cropper and we all know it. A poet's responsibility is to his own sense of life, without regard to state, system, or someone else's dogma. Pound would be the first to stake his work as social. For behind his art lies a respect for true authority – though behind that may lie disrespect for democracy. But be honest – many of us, here in America, shared that disrespect, mouthed it, are guilty of it.

Fascism caught a legitimate criticism of democracy and demonized it, and then put any critic who talked back in the camp of the enemy, and finally put them on cattle cars to the concentration camps. It is time we faced this – for the danger is made visible in what happened to Pound. He was, in a way, driven to where he stands.

Respect for authority is respect for tradition and the State. It also can be respect for the authority of Truth. Can respect for the one debilitate respect for the other? That way lies totalitarianism and a cult of the elite. Sometimes even our best move dangerously close to those lines. Pound went all the way over.

If he were not first rate, he would be of little interest. Can any man, equipped to hold an opinion, find Pound other than a serious man? You will hear it again and again – just one of those damned Bohemian writers – they're crazy. No. The poet's vocation is itself on trial and must be seriously examined. For Pound is not isolated in his racism and his fascism. He is only – as so often – extreme. If he were nothing more than a posturing *persona*, then all his work would be so much wadding stuffed in a hole to keep the wind away, the wind that blows away the pages of history.

But what Truth stands behind what he became? Perhaps it was empathy. He reviled the Buddhists, but perhaps, as is so often the case, it was because he saw something of himself in their compassion. This, the psychiatrists missed. The FBI never saw it – had no interest in seeing it for all the diligence with which Ezra tried to educate their agent. Even his friends seem to have lost track of what wound his mainspring. They don't

remember the unbearable compassion of the man driven over the edge by his vision of Great War trenches – young men standing shell-shocked by barrages of artillery, petrified in mazes of mud, ordered over the top into hailstorms of bullets.

Ezra was as deeply traumatized as those who survivors who stumbled home afterwards, and he became a man who flailed obsessively for 20 years to find some means to undercut the economics that, as he saw it, relentlessly drives war after war like surf upon the world's shore – a man who trained himself to see how bankers and financiers enrich themselves, gorging on the flesh and blood of cannon-fodder – a man disgusted at the rigging and the funneling of cash, wealth beyond what anyone could possibly need or spend, into pockets lined with skins flayed from battlefield corpses – a man who saw a way to fairly redistribute wealth while at the same time disrupt war financing – a man who aggressively publicized his truth in the most vile and venial of ways.

Here and now: examine the case of Ezra Pound, fascist, anti-Semite, lover of humankind and poet of the first order.

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):
This is the roadstead all of board
reached by the sailor
wearing the watch
that tells the time
of the old, brave man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL): Defense?

DR. TORREY: (*rising*) Let me begin by illustrating my point with a short scene –

A youthful Ezra enters among a gaggle of college students. He sports purple socks and other exotic garb, for which he is unceremoniously snatched and dunked in a pond. He exits dripping, only to return again, somewhat older, the young literary lion in London, still in lurid hosiery, propelling a young woman before him into a literary gathering, who sitting down to breakfast, sees a rose on his plate, whose petals he methodically proceeds to eat with knife and fork.⁷⁴

DR. TORREY: (*meanwhile Torrey narrates, turning to Ezra*) Come, this is all too obvious. You strut onto campus, a mere *Freshman*, and lose no time taunting your superiors with your deliberate eccentricities – flaunting your purple socks to provoke the Sophomores into throwing you into the lily pond!

CHORUS (INMATE TRIBUNAL):

Wait, I'm confused –

The man who was to prosecute defends him –

And now, the man who was supposed to defend prosecutes –

Are you appearing for the defense?

Who's prosecuting?

Who is for the defense?

DR. TORREY: (*undaunted*) We're well aware that you continued that provocative attitude of yours and your attention-seeking ways right up to the time you were arrested in Pisa. When you were hired into your first professional position, when you joined the faculty at Wabash College (*as if this were some damning revelation*), *there were the same hosiery that landed you in the lily pond before*, lavender, purple, green, orange! – You invite the world to throw you in the pond over and over again, and thus make yourself a celebrity.

That's what you are all about, isn't it? Celebrity. Eccentricity. That's all you are after now. That's what this is about, isn't it? That's all you have ever been about – a gadfly in lurid socks! Flouting social rules, bringing young women to your rooms – *dismissed* by two academic institutions in less than a year. What could any young man with "taste" do that year but go to London literary breakfasts and eat rose petals! We have a word for that in the profession – (*hissing*) Narcissism!

CHORUS (CLAMOR OF HISSING VOICES): Exhibitionist! Narcissist! Gad-fly! *Must* we share all of Mr. Pound's growing pains, pang by pang?

YOUTHFUL EZRA: (*replying*) Dolts! Fools! Morons!!

DR. TORREY: London doesn't appreciate you. Very well, off you go then to Paris, posing and prancing with Dadaists and the *avant garde*, too proud, too superior, too much the gadfly. Utterly deficient in true introspection and any discerning insight into those destructive forces in the psyche that are the source of social evil and injustice. Paris bores you – off to Italy then, where you stay 20 years, smoldering with the bitterness that would ultimately break into flame with caustic rants against your native land.

EZRA: The future of civilization rested in the hands of Philistines – present company excepted, I'm sure.

DR. TORREY: However, I hand it to you: to achieve notoriety here at St. Elizabeths, where eccentricity is the norm, that's quite a feat. I must say your attire continues to fascinate me – I look forward to it every morning.

CHORUS (THE INSANE):⁷⁵

Your attitude's been noticed you know!

Oh yes, it's been noticed!⁷⁶

Your friend Gaudier –
Nothing but a creep with a phallic obsession –
Sculpting his bust of you.
That feeble literary Vortex you invented with your friend Lewis –
Nothing more to it than a pressing desire to ejaculate.
And you lost control of the Imagism movement –
To that heavyweight Amy Lowell and her seven dwarfs –
You covered up your thwarted masculinity by identifying with Mussolini.
And the more Mussolini threw in with Hitler –
And the more that evil lot accomplished –
The more you swelled like a stiff dick, until –
Your need for radical denial of it all –
Grew so unstable that it drove you mad.

EZRA: So the brilliant doctors say – the Freudians – God, I wish I'd had as much sex as they think! (*to Torrey*) You try to turn me and my work into nothing but a case study offered at the altar of the Great Freud. You've got as much Dogma working for you as any good Catholic. That's your phallus and it rises up like a cross. You're not so cunning by half, going about all dressed up in your pretty mid-century psychiatric theories about my sexual history, my obsessions, my anti-Semitism, my ego, my bitterness.

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):
These are the years and the walls of the ward
 the winds and clouds of the sea of board
 sailed by the sailor
 wearing the watch
 that tells the time
 of the cranky man
 that lies in the house of Bedlam.

CHORUS (THE INSANE):

Sweet Jesus –
Haven't we *all* had it up to here with that?
Psychiatrists lording it over us –

Therapizing us –

Minimizing us –

No notion of soul –

No, this psychiatrist won't do –

His defense needs a poet –

Like the one we had for the prosecution –

Only a poet could defend his soul –

(*the shade of Yeats appears*)

Oh Gawd –

The dead again!

Who're you?

CHORUS (YEATS):⁷⁷ I am William Butler Yeats, come to you troubled beyond the grave by my friend Ezra, who is a revolutionary simpleton. He makes himself too likely to be mistaken for all such buffoons who, given a platform, trump all civil and rational discourse with the pathetic tweets and growls that befit only animal communication.

Try to understand what it is like in the fascist mass state. Ezra's confusion is symptomatic of the loss of reality experienced by almost all men there. This isn't an individual psychosis, but a mass delirium within which an individual of genius struggles to maintain some equilibrium – and sometimes loses.

In private, he is sane; in public he loses all grip on reality. To this he brought the still-open wounds of the Great War, as has already said (*indicating Olson*). He was one of those survivors who never recovered, raging at the needless loss of life – the loss of his friends. In war of that scale, the shockwaves of trauma spread far beyond the front lines. We, his friends who survived, were dismayed to watch his empathy obsess into crackpot economics – driven by some conviction that only *he* could help avoid it all repeating again. He had not recovered from the first war when the second exploded.

EZRA: It was a matter of finding the precise word. The men of old, wanting to rectify their hearts, sought precise verbal definitions of inarticulate thoughts. The sun's lance comes to rest on the precise spot, verbally.⁷⁸ If the root be in confusion, nothing will be well governed. Find the precise word that opens the inarticulate heart – *that's* how you go about not lying to yourself.

CHORUS (YEATS): I confess I am not very interested in his hysteria – or yours. We of Ireland have lived long enough with treason to get comfortable with it. It isn't as dramatic as you think. When you shout, better men than me have stooped and written

with their finger in the sand until you are done. I warned him, stay out of politics – I learned that we poets do not belong in the Senate.

Ezra wanted too much to reconcile the messy contradictions. But oppositions do not make true contraries. You can quote Blake for that, but it's long been known. He wrote his Cantos in search of the concordance of opposites⁷⁹ for which he longed and sadly never truly found.

It's true – we who love the mind, love elegant order – the same elegant order stuns both the scientist and the artist into reverence. We value it, we make it our work. We are as opposed to a leveling, rancorous rationality as we are to opening the Pandora's box of hatred and lies.

Look with empathy at Ezra's dire uncertainty in the face of chaos. *That* led him to defer to the claims of fascism, a man who confused the love of order in the universe with some distorted need for fascist authority. Ezra is ever irascible and in haste, excitable and impatient to establish the True Order. And so he became attracted to the psychopaths of history who took up the chaos of other men's lives and molded it to shape the world they wanted, the tyrants who put an end to this sea of questioning by claiming all answers for themselves.

It's true that Ezra erred in hugely laughable ways, to think that his brilliant ability to examine the Western tradition with courage and to translate the poetry of the Chinese with eloquence would somehow bleed over into a facility with social and political and economic cures. He thought that his ability to *make language new* enfranchised him to raise up a new political and economic order to set our messy world right. So here we have the frenzy that follows when a man's mask gets set askew.

He played himself false, suborning critical intelligence to authoritarian order and the dictates of petty fools. When a man does that, his own hidden cruelty and narrowness gets exposed in the service of the preposterous purposes of psychopaths until nothing is left but some absurd fixed idea and hysterical hatred.

I have re-examined his work of decades and I would undo no single work among all that he has written, quarrel with him as I have – even though I take his Cantos to be a botch and a thrown-together heap of chameleon color. Ezra is a man who brags triumph over his own incoherence, a man who always looks to be counted among the elite brawlers. It was his obsession to draw up all things in a pattern. As ignorant as he was of economic science it should be no surprise what a fool he could make of himself.

When your own time experiences the titanic struggle of centurion forces, you must forebear, you must look deeply. Half of you think that you have emerged with a victory over the forces of evil, half of you that you were defeated by that same evil, and all of us are locked in a civil war with ourselves for as long as humans have written down history.

I had a friend I thought half lunatic, half a knave. And I told him so, but friendship never ends. And what if minds seem changed and friendships fade? – when thoughts rise up unbidden on the generosities he did, I grow half contented to be blind.

OLSON: Yet set the great speeches aside, the man remains a virtuoso hater, especially of Jews. He must be tried on that score.

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):

This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances weeping down the ward
over the creaking sea of board
beyond the sailor
winding his watch
that tells the time
of the cruel man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

EZRA: I kin tell a Jew right away – soon as he starts DISagreeing with me (*begins dancing a macabre little jig*)

OLSON: Dance Ezra – dance on the head of a pin, dance like a Kike in the wind – target practice for camp guards, tap-dance like a jibaboo steppin' desperately for bed-sheeted Klansman, fruitlessly trying not to dance at the end of a rope, dance like strange fruit hung from the limbs of your own Cantos.

YEATS: Dance if you can out of that burning hatred, dance yourself to the love of your life, dance a long flight over the ocean, twelve years long, dance to the end of love.

CHORUS (LEONARD COHEN): (*breaks into song*)

Dance me to your beauty
with a burning violin
Dance me through the panic
till I'm gathered safely in
Lift me like an olive branch
and be my homeward dove

Let me see your beauty
when the witnesses are gone
Let me feel you moving
like they do in Babylon
Show me slowly what I only
know the limits of
Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to the children
who are asking to be born
Dance me through the curtains
that our kisses have outworn
Raise a tent of shelter now
though every thread is torn
Dance me to the end of love

YEATS: A true, native-born American Jeremiah.

OLSON:⁸⁰ Where did your moaning for lost Confucian purity lead? A sniffing about for Jewish banking conspiracies. Xenophobia. Hatred of the foreign. Distaste for immigrants. White supremacy in minds destabilized by any whiff or prospect of the dignity of people of color. Foot-stamping adolescent demands to bring back rusted factory ghosts, yeoman farmers, and bed-sheeted Klansmen.

YEATS: (*picking up the thread*) The wish to return America to a land of small businesses lorded over by the great families. Your anxiety to protect against usury and restore the old ways leads to an unaccountable championing of the extraordinarily wealthy. To civil liberties that protect only the rich. To a deep fear of the masses. And then what happens to your people? Consumed in blackshirt tides.

EZRA:⁸¹ (*slipping into the slangy voice that he used to cover a lack of confidence, overdoing most it when he most strongly feels the secret fear that he might be in the wrong*) I am all agin' abstraction. Gotta begin somewhere. I got a poetic – that is – a CONCRETE mind."

Eff there wuz a man runnin' for Prez who had the balls to say 'build a wall, keep 'em all out – AN' make 'em pay for it' – OR keep 'em all in, concentrate 'em in a camp – I maughta voted him in. A man with the trumpings of success maught need to be a bit of a Carne Barker to con 'em in. Con's okay so long's it swells the crowd.

Zukofsky was my fren' though heez Joowsh. He guv the straight stuff: how the Joowsh fomented the Civil War raught chere in Murka, how the Hidden Hand assassinated Lincoln – as they had six Romanov Czars before, doncha know, plus 10 kings and scores of ministers, all done in *con-spear-a-see* to bleed nations. They were all over the south, doncha know. Yep, after Lee's surrender, foreclosing mortgages. They had of course boycotted abolition. Marxists, democrats, liberals, Bolsheviks – they're all Joowsh. Russia was their first victim: Joowsh internationalists seized the machinery of government in Petersburg and have held it ever since. They proposed to make Roosenfelt world emperor and erect the New Jerusalem on the Isthmus of Panama. You let the kikes get away with it, you get the jigs up next, lording it, pretending to power. Mebbe the Protocols of the Elders of Zion wuz a forgery, but *that is the one proof we have of its absolute authenticity*. Hitler saw that – read *Mein Kampf*!

OLSON: There he goes again. There's the old blabbing broadcaster.

EZRA: "Make it new" means purify it, cleanse it of dogpiss. The fascist state may be the only way to ensure benevolent dictatorship – *that's* Confucian wisdom. They may martyr me. They brought down Hitler's Third Reich and the Boss's Great Effort, strung up Bull *Moose-a-lini* by his heels, even reached out their tentacles to pull down Hirohito's empire. The World War no less than the Crusades before were orchestrated by arms manufacturers and loan kikes. All the Barons hocked their castles to Jews to go on Crusades y'see. Walk the south of France – I bin there. You walk that country, you'll see those castles, the ones they hocked. Find out for yourself. See what happens when you hock your castles to the Jew.

OLSON: Affshhugg!

EZRA: Make no mistake – the Joowsh conspiracy survived the holey-caust. And if Hitler hadn't been bit by the Joowsh bug for world domination, he would have saved Europe from Western liberal democracy. Though I consider genocide impractical –

OLSON: IMPRACTICAL! What about IMMORAL??"

EZRA: Well, but SEE, the cathedrals rose when *seg-ee-gation* was in fashion. No, the only escape for civilization from bourgeois liberalism and loan-sharking kikery will be to establish a Confucian dictatorship, with wisdom descending from the clouds.⁸²

OLSON: Go on, sing hate. There is a court, traitor, where order keeps the fragrance of a hyacinth in the palm of the hand, where the wind is a warm breath that blows no ashes under a lowering sky, where justice does not stink of flesh in a furnace. But the wind that rises from your bilious belly, traitor, stinks in the nose as vomit ... poet.⁸³

CHORUS: (*satirical*)

Oh yes, the Jewspapers –

Franklin Finkelstein Roose-a-felt –

Are to blame.

It is offensive stuff –

"Kikes" –

"Sheenies" –

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion –

Mein Kampf!

Mein Got!⁸⁴

EZRA: (*now broadcasting again*)⁸⁵ The Italians have at last translated *Mein Kampf*. What are the three points of the Hitler program? The health of the race – that is point

one. Breed good and preserve the race, conserve the best of the race. That means eugenics and it does not please the Jews who want to drive all other races drive down into wage slavery. You set up a Jew government in Germany and the Germans had to get rid of it or die.

CHORUS (LOUIS ZUKOFSKY): But you know, I personally never felt the least trace of anti-Semitism in his presence. Nothing he ever said to me made me feel the embarrassment I always have for the Goy in whom remains a residue of antagonism to the Jew.

EZRA: The Jews were nice enough to me. Now they're my doctors and keepers. I guess the definition of a lunatic is a man surrounded by Jews. Ha! (*suddenly, bluntly*) Can you get my broadcasts published? (*Olson backs away, horrified*)

OLSON: Yeah, you're crazy like a fascist. Your conclusions are wrong, but the right to inquire and report – that is not. But no court will try you on that.

EZRA: (*suddenly agonized*) It never was the *Jews* I hated, but the *usurers!* Usurers have no race. From the time of Moses, the Jewish people have had rules against usury – Neschek. How long the sorely oppressed Jewish people are to be made sacrificial goats for the USEurer I know not.⁸⁶

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):
This is a world of books gone flat.
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances weeping down the ward
over the creaking sea of board
of the batty sailor
that winds his watch
that tells the time
of the busy man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

EZRA: Another war without glory, another peace without quiet. I stand with the lovers of ORDER.⁸⁷

OLSON: You stood with the "lovers of ORDER" 19 years. You might remember that as you stand before an American jury, dependent on the American justice you sneered at. Your indictment reads: *lover of the obscene, by obscenity undone*.

EZRA: Jefferson thought the American system would work – and it did until the time of Grant, (*fortissimo*) the carpet-baggers, the nigger-lovers, the Chews (*shakes his head, stops himself*) – it did work, but the condition for it working was that there should be a government comprised of sincere men willing the national good ... I offer the

hypothesis that when you have a single mind sufficiently ahead of the mass, a one-party system is naturally bound to arise, whatever the details of administration.

OLSON: (*grimly*) Shall we call that your Mussolini hypothesis? You said yourself that a good government is one that operates according to the best that is known and thought. And, you said, the best government is that which translates the best thought most speedily into action.⁸⁸ But who decides what is best? If the one who decides is the same as the one who asserts it, many will die.

EZRA: I think the American system *de jure* Adams, Jefferson, VAN BUREN is probably quite good enough if only 500 men with guts had the sense to USE it –

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):
This is a boy that pats the floor
to see if the world is there, is flat
for the widowed Jew in the newspaper hat
that dances weeping down the ward
waltzing the length of a weaving board
by the silent sailor
that hears his watch
that ticks the time
of the tedious man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

YEATS: (*to Olson*) You vent the bitter conflict between the treasonous, anti-Semitic villain you see before you and the values you share with him. If you love the brilliant genius captured he captured like light in a bottle in his Cantos, what will you do with the vile asides?

EZRA: Oh make no mistake, I see it. My own stupid, stupid prejudice! But do you comprehend the struggle that engulfed my Cantos and my life – do you see that they are one thing? I struggled with the treason and the hatred, of which, God forgive me, I may be guilty. But even that is all part of a single fabric, all part of the process. I wove that fabric, anticipating that moment when it would all come right and be revealed as meaningful pattern.

(*breaking down*) My life, my actions, my Cantos, have all been blind as a worm inching toward some light, some revelation ... that did not occur. But light ... there is a light ... a light I sighted more than one hundred times in my Cantos, and each time I cried out, "there, go toward the light!"

"All things that are, are light ... Light, and the first light, before ever dew was fallen ... Fades light from the sea crest ... The light has gone down into the cave ... In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it ... Then light, air, under the saplings ... And the light became so bright and so blinding' ... Light tensile, *immaculata* ... God's eye art 'ou –

overflowing, light over light ... The body of light come forth ... composed almost wholly of light ... The light flowing, whelming the stars ... The light there almost solid ... Such light is in sea-caves ... Let the light pour ... Our job is to build light ... A noose of light ... The gold light of wheat surging upward ... Give light against the falling poison ... For the little light and more harmony ... A little light ..."⁸⁹ Erigena, Plotinus, teach me again of light!

CHORUS (PLOTINUS): (*a Classic white-robed philosopher stands forth*) But Ezra, what awakens all this passion? There is no shape, no color, no grandeur of mass: all is Soul, something whose beauty rests upon no color. For the moral wisdom the Soul enshrines is all a hue-less splendor of the virtues. It is that which you find in yourself, or admire in another – loftiness of spirit; righteousness of life; disciplined purity; courage of the majestic face; gravity, modesty that goes fearless and tranquil and passionless; and shining down upon it all, the light of godlike Intellection.⁹⁰

But Ezra it is no good to find it, as you have, and to enshrine it in Cantos, as you have, yet go on living a life as foul and shit-smeared and full of hate and rant and treason as you have. There is no redemption in merely recognizing it and writing it down.

Let us suppose an ugly Soul, dissolute, unrighteous: teeming with all the lusts; torn by internal discord; beset by the fears of its cowardice and the envies of its pettiness; thinking, in the little thought it has, only of the perishable and the base; perverse in all its impulses; the friend of unclean pleasures; living the life of abandonment to bodily sensation and delighting in deformity.⁹¹

What must we think but that all this shame is something that has gathered about the Soul, some foreign bane outraging it, soiling it, so that, encumbered with all manner of turpitude, it no longer has a clean activity or a clean sensation, but commands only a life smoldering dully under the crust of evil? So that, sunk in manifold death, it no longer sees what a Soul should see, no longer rests in its own being and is dragged ever towards the outer, the lower, the dark?⁹²

An unclean thing, I dare say, flickering hither and thither at the beckoning of the objects of the senses, deeply infected with the taint of body, consumed always by Matter, absorbing Matter into itself; in commerce with the Ignoble it has trafficked away for an alien nature its own essential Idea.⁹³

If a man has been immersed in filth or daubed with mud, his native comeliness disappears and all that is seen is the foul stuff besmearing him: his ugly condition is due to an alien matter that has encrusted him, and if he is to win back his grace it must be his business to scour and purify himself and become again what he first was.⁹⁴

EZRA: (*turning to the tribunal*) The body is *inside* the soul – the lifting and folding brightness, the darkness shattered, the fragment.⁹⁵ I plead *nolo contendere*.

CHORUS (THE INSANE):

We find you both insane and guilty –
Insane by reason of your hatred –
Thus you are one of us and may stay –
Guilty notwithstanding –
In this court there is no plea of “not guilty by reason of insanity” –
It is precisely because you are insane –
That you are guilty.
Such hatred is no artistic achievement –
It brings no economic relief –
Such hatred is only the guilt of the soul
As it descends, an Orpheus
That sings not of love
Even as it braves hell to bring back Love,
But of the hatred in whose embrace it stinks –
A stone that clatters to rest at the lowest point –
A stone lying on lying stones.

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):

These are the years and the walls and the door
that shut on a boy that pats the floor
to feel if the world is there and flat.

This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances joyfully down the ward
into the parting seas of board
past the staring sailor
that shakes his watch
that tells the time
of the poet, the man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

OLSON: So, Pound, you've found the gallows tree with your thumb at your nose and the word in your mouth and your freckled red neck about to break. They'll cant your body, canto maker, sudden to one side at the drop.

YEATS: Ezra, you've found truth in a mirror that you yet dare only peek into. You will look deeply before you're done.

EZRA: The grave.

OLSON: Nameless – if you get what you deserve.

YEATS: Never forgotten – if you get what you deserve.

Yeats fades away. Olson rises to go. Shakes hands with Ezra. They walk to the locked door at the end of a corridor. They knock, then pound on it and shake it. No response. They return to sit.⁹⁶

CHORUS (WARDEN): (*from beyond the door*) Cut that noise!

OLSON: (*speaking through the door*) I want to get out!

CHORUS (WARDEN): You don't say!

OLSON: I'm only a visitor.

CHORUS (WARDEN): Sure, sure. Next you'll tell me you're sane.

EZRA: No, he ain't. But he ain't been certified yet.

CHORUS (ELIZABETH BISHOP):
This is the soldier home from the war.
These are the years and walls and the door
that shut on a boy that pats the floor
to see if the world is round or flat.
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances carefully down the ward,
walking the plank of a coffin board
with the crazy sailor
that shows his watch
that tells the time
of the wretched man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

ACT 3: RELEASE

Scene 1 RELEASE

MUSIC – “PREACHING BLUES” BY ROBERT JOHNSON

LYRICS I woke up this mornin', blues walkin' like a man
 I woke up this mornin', blues walkin' like a man
 Worried blues, give me your right hand
 And the blues fell mama's child, tore me all upside down
 Blues fell mama's child, and it tore me all upside down
 Travel on, poor Ez, just can't turn you 'round
 The blues, is a low-down shakin' chill, yes, preach 'em now
 Is a low-down shakin' chill
 You ain't never had 'em I, hope you never will
 I can study rain, oh, oh drive, oh, oh drive my blues
 I been studyin' the rain, I'm gon' drive my blues away
 Goin' to the 'stil'ry, stay out there all day

A hearing room in the same court. The court is addressed at times, and at other moments side conversations are held downstage. Hall comments aside.⁹⁷

OLSON: What can be done to save the scoundrel's skin? Though he is a Fascist SOB, we must do what we can, because this fool of hate is also a fool of love.

HALL: The authorities tell us Ezra Pound is not quite sane nor yet quite guilty. Having neither a clear diagnosis nor a conviction by a jury of his peers, he is indeed No Man, a man in limbo, an Odysseus wandering his 20 years home. Had he been tried, he would have been released by now, as Axis Sally was, and all the others. Why was no appeal made sooner? At first, Dorothy refused to allow it.

CHORUS (DOROTHY): At least I know where my husband is sleeping tonight.

HALL: But more fundamentally Dr. Overholser held the line. Perhaps it was only a misguided effort to protect Ezra – though some felt he enjoyed his celebrity prisoner a bit too much. Perhaps it was only the grinding privilege claimed by psychiatry, that no one else could understand their patient's true condition. Yet there were disagreements.

CHORUS (PHYSICIANS):

I have frequently visited Pound at St. Elizabeths and find him quite sane.

He should either be released or brought to trial.

The Pound case is among the most flagrant abuses of psychiatry I know of.

Indeed, it is one of the most flagrant in which I have ever participated.

CHORUS (REPORTERS):

A storm trooper, responsible for one of the worst of the Nazi massacres, is out of jail
He joins a growing line of parolees.

Attention is surely due the case of Ezra Pound.

His room at St. Elizabeths is rightly called a closet which contains a national skeleton.

HALL: It didn't help that there would always be the peculiarities and eccentricities that made up Ezra's flamboyance – together with a certain low-grade paranoia, which led him to keep up the appearances of incapacity.

CHORUS (YOUNG CORRESPONDENTS):

A letter from Ezra!

Oh lemme see!

EZRA: (*chastising a young writer*) God bloody DAMN it, SHUT up about it! You are not supposed to be receiving ANY letters from E.P. They are unsigned for a reason!

CORNELL: (*to Dorothy*) He asks me to explain that there is much he cannot put in letters to you because they are read by hospital staff who communicate with enemies on the outside.

CHORUS (CRITICS, LITERATI, AND BUREAUCRATS):

And how is it that a lunatic maintains a voluminous and intelligible correspondence with scores of young writers and magazine editors?

Well it was hardly all *that* intelligible. We sometimes wrote to him for the sheer comedy of his inimitable, unsigned and *un*intelligible replies.

Intelligible or not, it is recommended –

and we all concur –

that no steps be taken at present to reopen the question of Pound's sanity.

Good God, great difficulties would be caused if the matter were forced to trial.

HALL: In other words, let him rot and spare us the embarrassment. All the doctors who examined him found him "quite sane" regardless of what was said in court. Treatment for insanity was a choice that both sides made to avoid trial, though for different reasons. But in a sane man, what was to be treated? It was all quite ... Soviet.

CORNELL: Dr. Overholser states that the defendant can never be brought to trial on this indictment and will spend the rest of his life imprisoned on a charge that can never be proved. We respectfully submit that this is unconstitutional. In fact, Ezra is displaying an extraordinary clarity of mind – even shrewdness – in respect to his business dealings.

DR. OVERHOLSER: My dear Julian, I simply cannot comment. At most I can tell you that he is adjusting satisfactorily.

HALL: Was he sane? Wasn't he sane? Was he ever sane? Was he any less sane than he had been before?

Court convenes again. Witnesses mill around gossiping among themselves and testifying willy nilly. Pound sits in the back of the courtroom dressed in a shabby jacket, shirttails untucked, his pockets stuffed full of scraps of paper.

DR. OVERHOLSER: We have a formal diagnosis.

JUDGE: Proceed.

DR. OVERHOLSER: Code 24.2 Psychotic Disorder, Undifferentiated.

HALL: Convenient. A diagnosis so ill-defined that it brooks no clear criteria for recovery. But at least – after only 10 years – you grant him the privilege to sit outside on the lawn on summer evenings.

DR. OVERHOLSER: I will admit – off the record and only to another Harvard man – that Ezra could walk out tomorrow if it weren't for the indictment. I'd let him out in minutes if the DOJ would quash that.

CHORUS (MACLEISH): (*standing forth*) I vowed then that I wouldn't rest until he got out. After more than ten years it began to look like persecution, and if he were to die there we would never wash out the stain.

CHORUS (REPRESENTATIVE BURDICK): I've never read a line of Pound but I'm against people being railroaded into insane asylums.

HALL: A storm was growing, literary men who had been too timid to speak out a dozen years before now nerved themselves, non-literary men who had never read Pound began to feel uncomfortable, and Olga never rested.

OLGA: What have you done for Ezra? STOP whatever it is that you are doing, and *think* about Ezra.

CHORUS (HEMINGWAY): Miss Rudge: I will try to be as short and as blunt as you. You ask what I have actually done for Ezra. I monitored his broadcasts during the war – Ezra was my true friend and I wanted to see what sort of ass he was making of himself,

so that I might come to his aid when it became necessary. His broadcasts, though they contained occasional sense and brilliance, were really awful, and I saw that there would be a difficult problem when the war was over.

When called, at his attorney's request, I made a statement that Ezra was of unsound mind. If he were released now – adjudged to be of sound mind – he would be tried and sentenced to 10 to 15 years. He made the rather serious mistake of being a traitor to his country, and must lie in the bed he made.

If I were a King or a President or even a divisional commander, I would have pardoned Ezra instantly, but I am only his friend, and can only use my head in his behalf. He may deserve punishment and disgrace, but what he really deserves is ridicule. He should not be hanged, but neither should he be made a martyr.

I hope this answers your questions as bluntly as they were put. To be even more blunt, I have always loved Dorothy, and still do.⁹⁸

CHORUS (MACLEISH): Treason is a little too serious and a little too dignified a crime for a man who has made such an incredible ass of himself and accomplished so little in the process.

CHORUS (HEMINGWAY): What I would like to do is get him the hell out of St. Elizabeths, give him a passport and allow him to return to Italy where he is loved. He made a bad mistake in broadcasting for that sod Mussolini, but he has paid in full and continued confinement is cruel.

EZRA: (*to MacLeish*) Archie, you may say to any jackass you meet that Ez considers anti-Semitism un-Aristotelian and unscientific, and that every man should be judged on his own merits.

CHORUS (WILLIAMS): I could never take him as a steady diet. He was often brilliant, but an ass. But I never ceased to love him. Could such an ass commit treason?

CHORUS (MACLEISH): The long, dim corridors where he is held are inhabited by the shells of men. A conscious mind capable of the most complete human awareness, incarcerated among the ghosts of minds scarcely capable of human consciousness, is a horror that can be relieved neither by the intelligence of doctors nor by the patience and kindliness of the man who suffers it.

EZRA: Huh. Lunacy *outside* the bughouse rises at 1000 times the pace that it increases inside. The density of iggurance on this continent increases daily.

CHORUS (ATTORNEY GENERAL): Is there any point to keeping him in there if he can never be tried?

DR. OVERHOLSER: Pound is permanently and incurably insane and will never be competent to stand trial. He will die in St. Elizabeths Hospital without trial if the

indictment remains pending. Further confinement can serve no therapeutic purpose. It would be a needless expense and burden on the public facilities of the hospital. There is a strong probability that the crime charged to Pound – pro-Fascist broadcasts from Italy during WWII – was the result of insanity. It is doubtful that any prosecution could show criminal responsibility. If the indictment is dismissed, I will recommend release of the poet in the custody of his wife. Ezra Pound is not dangerous; his release will endanger no one.

CHORUS (ROBERT FROST): (*with barely concealed distaste bordering on contempt, putting as much distance as possible between himself and Pound*): I am here to register my admiration for a government that can rise in conscience to a case like this. Relief seems in sight for many of us, besides Ezra Pound and his faithful wife. He has countless admirers the world over who will rejoice in the news that he has hopes of freedom. I myself speak as much in the general interest as in his, and especially for my friends, Archibald MacLeish, Ernest Hemingway and T.S. Eliot. None of us can bear the disgrace of allowing Ezra Pound come to his end where he is. It would leave too woeful a legacy in American literature. He went very far off the tracks in his wrongheaded egotism, but he insists it was from patriotism – a misguided effort to save the American constitution. He insists that he never went over to the enemy, any more than writers at home who despaired of the Republic. I hate such nonsense and can only listen to it as evidence of mental disorder. But mental disorder is what we are considering. I rest on Dr. Overholser's recommendation that Ezra Pound is not too dangerous to go free and too insane ever to be tried – a nice discrimination.

CHORUS (ATTORNEY GENERAL): This petition is in the interest of justice, and should be granted. It would be virtually impossible to produce evidence of Pound's sanity during the war years in Italy at this late date.

JUDGE LAWS: I order the indictment against Mr. Pound dismissed. He may be released in custody of his wife, Dorothy Shakespear Pound, with bond and under such terms and conditions as will serve the public good.

HALL: (*as dry as ever*) Thus did Noah's sons walk backwards to cover his nakedness, when that great man of God passed out, drunk.

Scene 2 The Return

Ezra, released, wanders downstage in his pajamas, to sit on the steps of his parent's old home at dawn.

CHORUS (NEWSMAN): (*reporting*) Pound, released, will sail for Italy as soon as possible. Authorities report that his release presents no danger, but what Americans want to know is, does he feel remorse? Were his Pisan Cantos truly penitential?

HALL: Why must they be anything but a cry of the heart *in extremis*? Did it begin at Pisa? Did it begin in the thirties, obsessing over the economic foundations of justice? Does it go back to the Great War?

CHORUS (NEWSMAN): (*to Ezra*) How does it feel to return to the land of the sane?

EZRA: When I was in that hell-hole, I used to think that there were 160 million worse cases outside – the kike-kiatrists should attend to those.

CHORUS (NEWSMAN): (*reporting*) One thing is clear – Pound has not altered one whit those virulent views that got him into trouble in the first place. (*turning back to Ezra*) Where do you plan to go?

EZRA:⁹⁹ Waal, the old family home has sprawled to its demise and is gone now – there's no returning there. But the body still remembers it, though everything that was in it is boxed up. Memory fits the soul, though fragments remain.

(*Flamboyantly dressed in a long yellow scarf decorated with Oriental characters, Ezra boards ship to Italy, only to be interviewed again as soon as he debarks*)

CHORUS (ITALIAN NEWSMAN): When were you released from the asylum?

EZRA: Never was. When I left the hospital I was still in America. (*laughter*)

CHORUS (ITALIAN PHOTOGRAPHER): Your photo, Mr. Pound?

EZRA: (*demurring*) I'm more used to being fingerprinted.

CHORUS (ITALIAN NEWSMAN): Give us that old salute Mr. Pound?

CHORUS (AMERICAN RADIO REPORTER): (*scandalized*) Ezra Pound hails his adopted nation with the fascist salute!

CHORUS (DOROTHY): (*indignant*) He was shielding his eyes from the sun!

HALL: (*downstage*) How does a man return, late in life, to what he once was? Is it possible? What happens when a man, in his 70's, finds everything he strived to be closing in around him like the hard shell of a crustacean he never meant to become. He finds, like some unwieldy freak of nature, that he has grown an exoskeleton.

CHORUS (WILLIAMS): All the soft flexibility that God's design hung on a framework of bone has become interred within a crisp crustacean shell, built painstakingly by hand over a lifetime. He lives in an armor fired in the crucibles he mistakenly supposed were indispensable to get ahead in this life – the kiln of temper, the kiln of self-aggrandizement, and the kiln of desensitization.

CHORUS (HEMINGWAY): He thought it babyish to complain, but now the world abhors him and he finds that all that protects his thin skin, boils down to this –

CHORUS (YEATS): His wrath too quickly swells, his swollen ego rises like a hot-air balloon above the messy fray, and his skill lies in parrying the hand that reaches towards him.

HALL: One might say that Ezra Pound became a metaphor: the cage, the trials, the confinement. Across what declivity does this human metaphor leap? A chasm he whipped up out of a private truth, the intemperate and ill-considered blasts he threw into the teeth of inclement opinion, the distaste he stirred up until he provoked those he offended to throw him into a cage. A man confronts himself and finds, what? Beneath his hard-shelled defiance, the bony knobs of a botched life, a landscape of rocky outcrops – he finds his own heart beating.

When the fear of public temper gives way to the temptation to cop a plea, the crustacean pulls back those soft feelers that explored life. So Ezra pulled back into a shell that became a hideaway. And that escape was priced at the cost of only one-sixth of his own life.

That life in the asylum stretched out into no Biblical desert where he could wander, furnished with manna falling from the sky, but entered a landscape of rude defiles, close passes between cliff-edges defined by the walls of a small asylum room, where confinement poorly kept off neighbors who were insane and visitors who were sycophants.

He had ducked the trial of ideas that he had sought all his life – the inner trial to which each adult inevitably must come or is dragged, to try in private their own shortcomings against the soaring ideals of their youth. It was staged for Ezra by a fruitcake of nuts with tin ears.

There followed a fall into a hot sleep over which time passed like a wash of early dawn that blots out the stars. Rip van Ezra now starts awake to find an unaccountable lapse of life passed by – How? Suddenly, my seventies? Released only to find his life essentially over, himself no longer vital, a one-day sensation that's stale the next morning, the credit reel still impossibly running though the theater emptied long ago of people who weren't watching anyway. He's free – to return to an existence that neither he nor anyone much cares to entertain. How oddly apropos some of the poetry he wrote early in life now sounds, in the ear of memory.

EZRA:¹⁰⁰

CHORUS:

See, they return; ah, see the tentative movements, and the slow feet,

The trouble in the pace and the uncertain wavering!

See, they return, one, and by one,

With fear, as half-awakened;

As if the snow should hesitate
and murmur in the wind,
and half turn back;

With them the silver hounds
sniffing the trace of air!

These were the swift to harry;
These the keen-scented;
These were the souls of blood,

Slow on the leash,
pallid the leash-men!

Scene 3 INTERVIEW IN ROME WITH DONALD HALL¹⁰¹

Pound's cage has changed to a sunny room, heavy with tables, sofas, and big comfortable chairs. On the lamp table are spread copies of Confucius in Chinese, Pound's own Work (Women of Trachis), and an edition of Chaucer. Hall approaches the door to the room and knocks.

HALL: I grew up with the Second World War. It began in Poland when I was 11 and ended in Japan when I was 17. I could not conceive that a peacetime newspaper would have enough to fill its pages. Every movie was a war movie, every radio show entertained servicemen, every sacrifice was dedicated to the war effort. At high school the heat went off at noon, even in the dead of winter – we conserved to support the war effort. In gym the boys all learned to box, toughening ourselves up for war. The heavyweight finals were held in the auditorium in front of the whole school. I remember George Taubel, a big blonde senior, knocking out Bill Herbert, who was strong but awkward – knocked him out cold right on the stage. And less than a year later Bill was dead in the first wave of marines landing some Pacific Island. I was sure that I would go into the army, fight in the war – which I assumed would go on forever – and die too.

Like almost everyone of my generation, I never doubted my country's virtue. Maybe the Great War *had* been a trade war – *this* war was for justice. Hitler was evil. I *knew* the United States was right and I *knew* Germany and Japan and Italy were wrong. And so when I bought T.S. Eliot' Collected Poems at 14, I drew a circle around the dedication to Ezra Pound and wrote "Nerts!" in the margin. Like most young people then, my politics were conventional, unformed, and naïve. But my poetics were not. Soon after I wrote my patriotic "nerts" to Pound, I began to read him seriously. I read him in anthologies prefaced by angry introductions. I read him in textbooks with more

nuanced and backhanded academic rejections. I read his own collections. I even met someone who had known Pound a little.

When I got out of Harvard, I entered on a literary career and soon found that the occasional literary interview paid better than the poetry. So in 1960 I journeyed to Rome, where I knocked on the door of Pound's apartment, unsure whether to expect madness, or arrogance, or a rude rebuff. He had been out of St. Elizabeths less than two years and was on the brink of the withdrawal that would silence the last decade of his life.

EZRA: (*answers door, separating his words into bunches "like burst of typing from an inexperienced typist"*) Mr. Hall – you find me – in fragments. You have driven – all the way – from England – to find a man – who is only fragments. *He turns and leads Hall into the room.*

Throughout his interview Pound repeatedly starts up with bursts of energy that quickly tire and die. At times he is unable to talk in continuous sentences but only in fragments punctuated with fatigue (these staccato breaks are indicated with a dash, longer pauses with ellipsis). He walks up and down the small room, pausing to sit in a chair, then suddenly his face sinks, his eyes glaze and he collapses onto the sofa to lie exhausted and motionless as if dead – only to spring up again, reanimated, his speech vigorous and exact.¹⁰²

HALL: Mr. Pound, thank you for agreeing –

EZRA: (*worried, breaking in*) What questions do you have, Mr. Hall? I never did well on examinations when I was at university. Don't ask the hard ones first. Who is it that you represent, again?

HALL: (*fiddling with his tape recorder*) I am poetry editor for the *Paris Review*.

EZRA: Should one distinguish – between magazines that wish to *print* one – and those – that only want one to be interviewed?

HALL: (*caught by surprise*) I hadn't thought – you said once that the *Review* was an operation of the pinko-usury fringe – do you *want* to be published there? I hadn't considered – surely *you* may publish where you like?

EZRA: (*interrogating but pleading*) I am, frankly – looking for people – who will feed the producer – whereas they mainly – want me to help them – time and again – by the dozen ... No doubt the supported – think such an attitude – crass ... News to you – probably – that such conditions exist.

HALL: No, no. I am freelancing myself. (*chipper*) But I'm sure the *Review* should be able to afford a Poundian portfolio.

EZRA: The next Cantos – I've made a mess – heaven knows when they will be – or if – anything more than *fragments* – or will be available. (*peering at Hall*) Perhaps instead a miscellany – uncollected letters – some old Latin translations.

HALL: I'm sure we can –

EZRA: These for example – letters from Bunting¹⁰³ (*hands them to Hall, who glances through*) – he wrote me in the thirties – told me Mussolini was no good – warned me my thinking was cockeyed – (*jaunty*) Bunt knew a bit more than EP. (*fatigue overcomes him like a sudden shower and he lies back in the armchair, eyes closed*)

HALL: (*aside, glancing over them*) Why he means these for *my education* – in the errors of Ezra Pound. Perhaps this is as close to confession as he can come. (*looking up to the audience*) He wants to know, can a man admit his errors and survive?

EZRA: When think you are alone and no one can see, never say "in my northwest ingle is naught that can make shame. Here is no eye."¹⁰⁴ (*Hall looks puzzled*) You see yourself.

HALL: The Confucian Odes! You translated that in St. Elizabeths? (*Ezra nods, suddenly exhausted*)

(*aside*) The interviews went on. He gave me three days, and never finished a thought. He read aloud from books and manuscripts, alternating pairs of spectacles as if he were juggling in a circus. Frequently he could not finish a sentence. Trying to answer a question he would go back to supply background information, then decide *that* needed qualification, and then qualify the qualification – and no longer remember where he was going.

(*turning back to Pound*) It must be 30 or 35 years since you've written any poetry outside the Cantos – why?

EZRA: (*rambling, circuitous*) It got to the point – where anything I had to say – fit the general scheme. There's been a good deal of work – thrown away – and I must tell you – the Way is – as the Chinese knew – one which – are you acquainted with the Unwobbling Pivot, Mr. Hall? (*Hall shakes his head*) – No? – we must begin there (*two beats*); I had you know – the Japanese Noh plays – from Fenollosa – there was a group tried to stage 'em, y'know – in London – after the Great War – and I and Eliot went down –

HALL: (*completely muddled, trying to follow*) I don't –

EZRA: I am beset – by the Jamesian – parenthesis!

HALL: *Henry James*?

EZRA: I have brought you – all the way from England – and I cannot give you – an interview! A strange day came – and I realized – I did not know anything. And so words – have become – empty of all meaning. I have even forgotten – the name of that Greek philosopher – who said – nothing exists. And even if it did exist – it would be – unknowable. And even if – it could be known – it would be – incommunicable. (*he slumps into alarming exhaustion*)

HALL: (*makes a concerned noise*)

EZRA: (*wrenching himself back up, with emphasis*) An epic is a poem containing history.

Once a great many of the answers could be assumed – between author and audience.

A great deal thrown away, I was saying. One gets attracted – to an historical character – and then finds – he doesn't fit. I have tried – to make the *Cantos historic*. (*Looks expectantly at Hall*) ... Giovanni (*still no recognition from Hall*) – relation of history to tragedy. Two articles, ten years apart. Some philological periodical. Not source material, but – not fiction. The material one wants – to fit in – doesn't always work. (*Suddenly summing up his point:*) If the stone ain't hard enuf to maintain the form – out it goes.

HALL: (*to audience*) Sometimes the tape would rasp, reminding him that all this stumbling was being recorded.

EZRA: (*upstage*) No, no, no, no – turn that damned thing off!

HALL: (*returning to his microphone*) You first came to Italy in 1908?

EZRA: First one must understand – the Philadelphia mint –

HALL: (*confused*) The *Philadelphia mint*?

EZRA: Yes, yes – listen ... my father took me there as a boy – I saw them *shoveling coin* ... paper money *thrown into the furnace* – (*he lapses into brooding silence*) ... Money a surplus shoveled up like manure.

HALL: (*aside*) The fragment of an answer hung between us and was forgotten, dissolving like a delicate mist in the air, the landscape fading, the foreground never painted in.

EZRA: (*at last*) It's the years at St. Elizabeths. You get used to the company of nuts – get out of the habit of making sense.

HALL: (*aside*) Depression thickened the room, his accumulated complaints of failure grew larger than the failures themselves. Gradually, I realized that he was convinced of failing not only the interview, but himself. He doubted the value of everything he had done. I began to look for ways to buck him up.

(*to Pound*) You know, Henry Moore told me that as a young sculptor he took great comfort in your book on Gaudier-Brzeska.

EZRA: (*revived, enjoying the news a moment in silence*) There is no doubt – I have been of some use – to *some* people.

HALL: (*aside*) One only says “there is no doubt” when one has felt doubt. So he doubted even his generosity to others – this man who had discovered and promoted and found publishers or patrons for the best writers of his generation.

(*to Pound*) At Harvard, you recorded some poems for the Poetry Room archive when you visited the United States in 1939. A marvelous reading of the piece where Bertrans de Born begins (*loudly*) “Damn it all! All this our South stinks peace.” I jumped – the shout nearly broke my eardrum! And were you playing a kettledrum? It sounded like someone kicking a filing cabinet.¹⁰⁵

EZRA: (*with a black look, breaks in acidly*) So they’re letting anyone listen to that are they?

HALL: (*chagrined, confesses*) Well there was a note on that disk, “do not play band six” – so of course I played *that* band as soon as I saw it.

EZRA: (*pauses to find the right phrase*): War – is no longer – *amusing*. (*he collapses suddenly on his sofa*)

HALL: You are tired. I must not outstay my welcome.

EZRA: (*bolting upright again, eyes boring into Hall with sudden energy, disappointed, even sorrowful*) Must you go?

HALL: My wife – Kirby – is with me. But – ah, how about dinner? And tomorrow morning at nine, let’s continue.

EZRA: You needn’t think you’re taking any of my time, you know. I’m here to be interviewed.

Pound lies back on his sofa for a nap. Lights down and Hall comes down center stage.

HALL: I had been afraid I was knocking on the door of a lion’s den. In 1956 he had agreed to an interview and then reneged, exploding with invective against the *Review* (we had two Jews on the masthead then). He inveighed against “Weinstein Kirchberger” – which took me a while to translate: he meant Winston Churchill.

I found – well, not a lamb, but the old lion in ruins. The old man wanted approval. He wanted to confess his errors, after a fashion. He *needed* to publish. He was alone, isolated from the literary world, and needed funds. I was taken aback at his hints. I had assumed that Ezra Pound could print his poems anywhere. But he couldn’t, of course.

American magazines that pay notable sums would not have welcomed a poem by Ezra Pound. He sold where he could, for little. And though he lived on little – all his life, as he put it, he'd lived on "low overhead" – he could not make a living selling Cantos at 50 cents a line. Teachers did not assign his books in American universities – they were too hard even for the professors. Political disrepute and a reputation for obscurity conspired against him.

I had expected him to be busy and arrogant, perhaps set aside at most two hours and lay down rules. Instead I found him worried, afraid he would not answer well – with wit and full recollection. Most writers toss off interviews and interviewers with small respect; Pound worked at it.

We talked for hours and I saw no paranoia, no incoherence, no brutality, no readiness to take offense. I saw fatigue – or rather, energy and fatigue in constant war. Fatigue continually overpowering energy, only to have energy revive in small rallies – and then flag and fall back under the dour attack of weariness. And then whole cycle repeated. And he worried about how he would write that up too.

EZRA: (*upstage, suddenly sitting up and leaning forward, pleading*) Don't – let me sound – so tired.

HALL: The old man's pride seized me by the throat (*he pinches the bridge of his nose, struggling a moment*). The fatigue was more than physical – it was a fatigue of meaninglessness and abject despair. When I left I was exhausted myself.

Upstage – a table nicely set for dinner. Very European, fresh flowers, real linen, a genuine white tablecloth, several glasses for wine and water at each place setting. Pound joins Hall and his wife Kirby at table. Pound is got up in fine fashion, a light gray jacket, shirt open at the neck, a great yellow scarf, a stout stick leaned against his chair and a large black hat perched on his head.

CHORUS (KIRBY): Crispi's ought to do, Mr. Pound? Why this is delightful!

EZRA: (*in fine humor, delighted to be in the company of a lovely young woman again, his mane of gray hair thrown back, beard jutting out, eyes glinting, he leans flirtatiously toward her*) I attended on Crispi's before the war, you know – when one considers the general run of post-war DEcrepitation, Crispi's has held up well. Not half bad.

HALL: (*music is heard wafting in the window*) That sounds like old time music-hall stuff – is it coming from the street?

EZRA: Eliot and I once made up a music hall song, back in the years after the Great War – the Yiddisher Charleston Band.

HALL: That was the one where, when it was played, *everybody* danced?

EZRA: Eliot wrote a series of pornographic verses to it – those are lost, thank God. (*roguish again*) – though there *might* be a copy in the Pound archives.

HALL: Do you remember any of it? I've heard Mary Magdalene puts in an appearance.

EZRA: (*looking at Kirby with a foxy, roguish expression as he sings*) Mishtah Cool-idge – de Pres-i-dent / He couldn't come – but de fam-il-y vent. (*Kirby looks pained at the allusions. Pound leans forward, wagging a finger*) Baptist?

HALL: (*aside*) It hit me then. He looks through pre-War eyes. The church picnic, young ladies in straw hats and white collars huddle together and giggle. The young EP approaches and with a fine sardonic air speaks with daring levity – about the literalness of the Bible perhaps or the sanctity of the 4th of July.

CHORUS (KIRBY): (*as if caught up in Pound's vision*) Oh! Mr. Pound! The things you say!

EZRA: (*serious again, but assuming a covering jauntiness*) I miss good ole Murka. I would like to go – see the country *outside* asylum walls. Perhaps I could fly over for visits? Do you think someone would pay the way, perhaps to lecture?

HALL: (*seizing on the chance to help the old man*) Of course they would! Any number of colleges and universities would pay handsomely to hear you read!

EZRA: (*enthused*) Do you think so? Could you help? I don't know people anymore – who to write – the right word, the right ear – (*confidentially*) my friends don't seem to *want* me to return.

HALL: Yes! Of course we would help. We'd be honored. As soon as we return to England, I'll write letters.

Lights fade over the happy table. Hall turns toward audience.

HALL: Mostly it was grandpa's night out. He was happy and funny. And if he didn't want to talk about the past for serious publication, he loved to reminisce – and mimic. After dinner it was clear he wasn't ready to go back to his rooms. He suggested a walk. It was a mild spring night. We bought gelato.

I had no doubts that Pound could handle himself on a reading tour. The old energy would return. There would be none of the fragmented mind, the losses of memory if he had the text in front of him. I convinced myself he would not collapse into a rag-doll heap with fatigue. And *this* was the man who had poured the foundations of modern poetry in English.

Return to the interview. It is a bright morning. Pound greets Hall bouncing on his toes. He hands him several sheets of paper.

EZRA: Here – better answers than I gave you yesterday.

HALL: Are you ready then, after that gala night out?

EZRA: That's what I need – more nights like that. I haven't relaxed like that since – I don't know. I want to be able to talk to bright, normal people. Europeans don't understand anything. (*walks to the window and gazes out; a beat – he gestures*) You see that building – the huge stone one? There's the scene of the crime.

HALL: Where you made the broadcasts?

EZRA: Where I handed 'em in.

HALL: I read the Bunting papers.

EZRA: I was off base all along – on usury. I was out of focus. Took the symptom for the cause. The cause is avarice.¹⁰⁶ How long ago, more than 30 years, I knew and said – good arises from ordering oneself, and spreads silently; evil arises from messing in the affairs of others.¹⁰⁷

Hall sits in silence, Pound grows increasingly agitated.

EZRA: I did not commit treason – there can be no treason without treasonous *intent*. My intent was to defend the constitution – from Roosevelt and the rest of his gang. I tried to leave Italy, but I was blocked. They turned me back – several times.

HALL: (*aside*) He reminded me of my Connecticut grandfather. Fourth of July oratory. (*to Pound*) When you were arrested by the American military – did you expect to be convicted? To be hanged?

EZRA: At first I puzzled over – having missed a cog somewhere. I turned myself in and expected to be asked – about what I learned. I wasn't. Several times I checked myself – on several broadcasts – it wasn't up to me to do – certain things. Oh it was paranoia – to think one could argue – against the usurpations, against the folks – who got the thing started – who got America into it. (*emphatically*) Yet I hate the idea of obedience to something which is wrong.

HALL: And after you were arrested?

EZRA: I was driven into the courtyard at Chiavari. The partisans had been shooting whomever they caught – and I thought – I was finished, then and there. (*beat*) If they had any shame they would exonerate me. Wars are made to make debt. That's what the first one taught me. I have been unable to get straight answers out of people on vital questions. That may have been due to my own violence or obscurity. (*suddenly turning*) Their hypocrisy serves forgiveness – why not me? Some of my best friends were Jews – Zukofsky for example. (*at last he breaks down to the main point*) Do you think they should have shot me?

HALL: No, Mr. Pound, I do not think you should have been shot. I think you became trapped in your own performance.

The tension breaks and they both go into hysterics, laughing until they are laughed out. Then Pound slumps. All the bounce is gone. Fatigue rolls over him like a tide. He lies down again on his sofa bed and closes his eyes.

HALL: I'll let you rest. (*studies Pound's face, thinking him asleep*)

EZRA: (*opens his eyes, catching Hall studying him; two beats*) The question is – whether I give up now – or hang on another 20 years – to write. (*they continue to gaze at one another; beat*) All the time – I feel the hands of the clock – moving. (*he swings he legs over the side of his sofa-bed and sits up, looking hard at Hall*) From what you see of me – do you think – I will be able to go on writing? Do you think – there is enough of me – here – to work?

Lights fade and Hall turns again to the audience.

HALL: I, who had expected arrogance and contempt – was asked to judge Ezra Pound's mental competence. From the time I was a small boy, I had loved the company of old people. Now I felt close to Ezra in his predicament. He stood where we all will stand if we live long enough – at the long and agonizing moment of power's ebb, when energy and understanding flash forth only to be overcome again. I would not lie to him. (*turning upstage to Pound*) Maybe you are too tired. I don't know.

EZRA: (*continues to stare with devouring intensity as Hall returns to his tape recorder, then suddenly a sigh goes through him, his body loosens*) All I need, really, is two months of relaxation like last night. That would fix me up.

HALL: Did your interest in economics begin with your father's work as an assayer at the Philadelphia mint?

EZRA: No, no – that dwells too much – on the past. You think – I must've lived my life – only to prepare to talk about it.

One could go on a long time on that. Government offices were more informal then. A kid – I was taken 'round the smelting room – you could see the gold – piled up. They told me – "go ahead, you can have it – if you can take it away – with you". And you couldn't – lift it.

When the Democrats came in – they recounted – all the silver dollars. The bags had rotted – in these enormous vaults – and they were heaving it – the coin – into the counting machines – with *shovels* – bigger than coal shovels. Coin shoveled around – like it was – rubbish – these fellows – sweating, naked to the waist, as if they were laboring in the mines – shoveling it around under – gas flares – the sort of thing that – strikes – the imagination.

HALL: There is a rich vein of allusions.

EZRA: Gold – you can tell the grade of the ore by the weight. But silver – the test is a cloudy solution – the accuracy of the eye – measuring the density – of the cloud – it's an (*pauses for the right word and on finding it, chuckles and looks to Hall for approval*) aesthetic perception. (*beat*) Like the critical sense. (*his energy goes behind a sudden cloud and again he slumps*)

HALL: When I came back the next day, he was waiting again with a clutch of papers.

EZRA: (*handing papers to Hall*) This might help a bit – in case I konk out.

HALL: (*reading aloud*) "I must clarify obscurities – make clearer definite ideas – find a verbal formula to combat the rise of brutality – before I conclude the peripilum".

"Periplum" – that's the Odyssean voyage around the periphery of the known world that the traveler must endure before returning home – have you ever returned home, Mr. Pound?

EZRA: No, no – it's the truth seen through the ideogram. The fragment circumscribes all knowledge and brings you direct to center.

HALL: (*handing several books to Pound*) Before I go – would you sign these for me?

EZRA: (*commenting as he signs*) This at least contains horse sense – "To Hall, having mercy" – "To D.H., attempting consolation". (*finishing, he strides across the room and pulls an old suitcase out from under the desk. He extracts a loose pile of papers and carries them to the sofa, sitting beside Hall*) Go ahead. Read 'em.

Hall sits on the sofa reading and rereading, pointing out lines, exclaiming over them. Pound interrupts three or four times.

HALL: (*slightly in awe*) These are the drafts and fragments of the last Cantos! (*reading*) What's this? "Things to be stuck in." (*Hall reads, rapt, while Pound paces anxiously*) These are the best Cantos since the Pisan! The return to lyricism and personal vulnerability – *your* life, surfacing through the details of history.

EZRA: Only a musical form would take the material – the Confucian universe – as I see it – is a universe of musical tensions.¹⁰⁸

HALL: Why, these are almost finished – not that all the issues raised are perhaps resolved, but finished in their ascent. Fragments are paradisial –

EZRA: (*interrupts*) Do you *really* like them? (*And then all the air goes out of him again like a popped balloon. His body sags. He crosses to his sofa bed and sits on the edge with his head in his hands.*) There can be such – communication – in silence.

HALL: (*aside*) He sat possessed again by the conviction of impotence, the inability to finish, and the conviction that he had made huge mistakes. It took me all spring to piece together a coherent interview. People from the States began to answer my letters about his reading tour. At first I was astonished. But then I reminded myself – American English Departments had never wanted to listen to Ezra Pound. Some wrote, "Don't do it. If he comes over, they'll boo him off the stage." I wrote to tell him that it was hard to get anything done from England. And his letters to me no longer mentioned visiting the U.S. Late in spring I had a letter like all the others, about the Cantos. I answered it, but he never wrote me again. I wrote again, and again. A year later Dorothy Pound wrote me enclosing the corrected interview she'd found in a drawer in his writing table.

EZRA: (*upstage*) I did not enter the silence. Silence captured me.¹⁰⁹

Scene 4 A VOICE OUT OF SILENCE

Pound is back in his old cage at Pisa, but now the bars are made of vertical streams of light that enclose him, streaming up from the stage and disappearing into the dark above. A pile of packing cases rises along one wall. Ezra sits barely moving. When he talks, it is largely to himself – and then his interlocutors hear nothing (except Hall, who continues to hear and comment). He speaks slowly and heavily, sometimes in fragments, like his Cantos that illuminate as they connect.

EZRA: (*mumbling*) *Tempus tacedni, tempus loquendi.*¹¹⁰

HALL: A time to speak, a time to be silent. Hard-earned knowledge.

EZRA: Got used to being the life of the party, or thinkin' I wuz – wore out ever'buddies indulgence. I ain't blamin' others fur the defects of my kerrakter.

HALL: The Twenties have become the Sixties. The combative, rambunctious youth tires, grows a shock of white hair. Some days he says nothing, just whispers "yes" or "no".¹¹¹ But not all found the atmosphere oppressive.

CHORUS (ALLEN GINSBERG): I visited him in Venice. Though he answered but one question the entire evening, there was no weight in the silence. It was like being with Prospero!¹¹²

EZRA: (*suddenly looks Ginsberg, a Jew, squarely in the eye*) Wurst mistake I ev'r made – that stupid, suburban prejudice of anti-Semitism.¹¹³

CHORUS (MARY): There was a long illness, long convalescence, as if he were shedding all the toxins accumulated in St. Elizabeths – and in the fascist years before. But by the time the magnolia bloomed – the very tree that bloomed when my son – his grandson – was born, he came out and walked in the garden. And ever since, he and Mamile have been taking care of each other.¹¹⁴

HALL: Olga fetched him, and for the rest of his life, she took care of him. She was the sea in which he floated.¹¹⁵ He said so little, every utterance was almost as obscure as the oracle at Delphi.

OLGA: For the most part he lived within silence as if it were the Mediterranean Sea and he the shipwrecked Odysseus of voice.

HALL: The old poet was not going out like the singing head of Orpheus bobbing down a moonlight lane. No, the old man – an Odysseus without an Ithaca – had come home to Olga, his Penelope, bearing lines written a half-century ago and 25 centuries before that, lines from beyond the grave: "*Shall return / thru spiteful Neptune, / lose all companions*".

EZRA: Fordie gone, Possum gone – who is there now with whom to share a joke?¹¹⁶ Gaudier, so many years gone. Uncle Bill – Yeats, Hem, H.D., Cummings, even ole Bull Williams, all gone. One must attend the dead. The souls of those who die unattended become companions of the wind.

CHORUS (FROST):

Where had I heard this wind before
Change like this to a deeper roar?
What would it take my standing there for,
 Holding open a restive door,
 Looking downhill to a frothy shore?
Summer was past and day was past.
Somber clouds in the west were massed.
 Out on the porch's sagging floor
 Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
 Blindly struck at my knee and missed.
 Something sinister in the tone
Told me my secret must be known:
 Word I was in the house alone
Somehow must have gotten abroad,
 Word I was in my life alone,
 Word I had no one left but God.

HALL: There is a ceremony for those lost at death, meant to bring back spirits that rove with the wind. It is taught by the Na Khi, a people who migrated more than one thousand years ago from Tibet to Yunnan. Roughly, they call it "wind sway perform". Ezra built one of his last Cantos – the 110th – around it.¹¹⁷

EZRA: Not to be a suicide, unattended at death, but to remain with life.

HALL: But though he chose life, like Oedipus at the end of his life, he was beyond grief. Rarely, he emerged from apathy to show flashes of the old energetic brilliance. The year Marianne Moore died in her sleep, he read her poem *What Are Years* at her memorial service.¹¹⁸

EZRA: (*reading aloud*)

What is our innocence,
what is our guilt? All are
naked, none safe. And whence
is courage: the unanswered question,
the resolute doubt, –
dumbly calling, deafly listening – that
in misfortune, even death,
encourages others
and in its defeat, stirs

the soul to be strong? He
sees deep and is glad who
accedes to mortality
and in his imprisonment rises
upon himself as
the sea in a chasm, struggling to be
free and unable to be,
in its surrendering
finds its continuing.¹¹⁹

CHORUS (REPORTER): Where are you living now?

EZRA: In hell. (*He presses a hand over his heart, mumbling to himself*) Here – here.

HALL: Perhaps it is less painful to live in denial in an insane asylum than to be freed to confront the self-made ruins of a life. Dante climbed out of *Inferno* through Purgatory to reach his Paradise. But though Ezra passed through his personal Inferno, he seemed to find himself in a purgatorial trek that stretched out endless from the lip of hell.

EZRA:¹²⁰ Should I be writing a *Paradiso* or an apocalypse? It's all a botch anyhow. I picked out this and that, what interested me, and jumbled them together in a bag. That's no way to make a work of art. I cannot make it cohere.

Things that seemed so important once, so special because they happened to *me* – are now some country visited long ago, nearly forgotten – souvenirs carted home that a few years later one hardly recognizes, a vague memory of a view from a hill toward

some tiny medieval walled town through the mist of a morning that was perhaps in some other country on some other trip, after all.¹²¹

(*he begins to ramble in fragments, many from his late Cantos*) A poet cannot save himself by the power of his own intellect, now but a candle flame. Falling spiders and scorpions – give light against falling poison! A wind of darkness hurls the forest. Candle flicker, grow faint. What is light, against this tempest? A shrine seen and not seen among waving boughs. Pray, pray – there is power.

CAN I repair harm done to simple people? Seeking good, a man does evil. In my home the dead walked and the living were made of cardboard.

We must hold to what we love. When friends hate, how can there be peace in the house? That love be the cause of hate, something is twisted.

The kindness, infinite, of her hands. And that truth is in kindness.

I was told, the ash flew in the air like countless gray moths. The beautiful remains of beautiful human beings. Their cries gone into the ground, almost inaudible. Many, so many.

The light sings, a pale flare over marshes where the salt hay whispers to the tide's change.

A few things can be relied on. Musical form. The precision of the natural world. The beloved. A memory. Imagination. The dedication of those who work to increase the store of human knowledge. Saving what flotsam I can for memory. We are but the memory of a memory. Even the memory of a memory grows dim.

I am a blown husk that is finished.

We grieve not lovers well laid to rest so much as the loss of the path home through the dunes under the stars, where a single bird calls for its mate. Neither life answers, nor death.

This life has found no culminating *Paradiso*. Here is only an old man's body. Not my body of work. It has not grown old, but it will never be more final than it is now. No man can see his own end. One cannot lessen human folly, only strengthen the heart to endure it. What was it Williams wrote of death?

CHORUS (WILLIAMS): Death has no peer, wandering in the woods. A field crowded with small flowers in which the wounded beast lies down to rest. We shall not get to the bottom: death is a hole in which we are all buried, Gentile and Jew. The flower dies and rots away. But there is a hole in the bottom of the bag. It is the imagination, which cannot be fathomed. And through this hole we escape.¹²²

EZRA: I dream so little now – or remember so little of what I dream. Days go by, I see no one, talk to no one. There's nothing to think on but the past. And I dream nothing. Old men just get stupider as they get older.¹²³

I dream of Lethe – that sweet forgetfulness. The moment just before death when it all floods back – the vows and commitments that set course for a lifetime, the knowledge that *I* was alive at *this* time, in *this* place, and loved them deeply.

The moment after it all floods back, I will drink death and all is forgotten. The blessings of the River Lethe – that long remembering that allows forgetting, this last lethal longing as one leaves. Upwelling draught, well welcomed. Come, swallow down, hollow out, follow forever.¹²⁴

*He falls asleep, then shakes himself awake and fumbles to climb the piled packing cases in his cell as if were still in his dream.*¹²⁵

I climbed a steep hill – I tried to climb a hill. Though it was near vertical toward the summit, it would have been an easy scramble when I was a young man. But now, old as I am, I can barely walk straight on a flat plane.

As it steepens he makes slow headway, slows to a crawl, then barely inches up, barely able to lift his arms and legs, they are so weak and tired. His friends are waiting at the top.

I knew my friends were waiting at the top to attend a show with me – they were already inside the theater atop that hill; they stood just inside the door and every few minutes one of them would open the door briefly, just wide enough to glance out and see that I was not yet in sight.

The murmur of their talk, the jumble of noise an audience makes before settling down, is audible, though it cannot be made out what is said. He can see the door crack open just enough for one of the men inside to check with a quick glance whether Pound can be spotted walking toward him, then quietly closes again.

They could not see me – or else did not think to look downhill for me, prone on the slope, trying to drag myself the final few feet to its top.

At length with great effort he is just able to heave one arm and leg up over the crest, but no matter how he strains he cannot pull himself over the top.

I could not toss the great wrecked bulk of my body those final few inches over that last height. I lay as if thrown upon a great sea-pounded shore, shipwrecked, wracked and sore. I felt as if I were under heavy wraps, under wet canvas or in a straightjacket – a seafarer forgotten, driven against some barrier island in sight of a great continent but too weak to pull himself out of the waves. I was so weak that even half-straddling the summit I could no longer do what comes so naturally to a child – even easily to a middle-aged man – I could not stand up, or even roll myself over the top.

The door opens again. All Pound can manage is to heave out a groaning "heeeeyyy" that can barely be heard – and then they are all upon him, grasping his arms and legs, and pulling him up.

from under the heaped rubble, lift me,
CHORUS: *m'elevasti*

from the dulled edge beyond pain, raise me,
CHORUS: *m'elevasti*

out of Erebus, the deep-lying,
from the wind under the earth
CHORUS: *m'elevasti*

from the dulled air and the dust
CHORUS: *m'elevasti*

by the great flight
CHORUS: *m'elevasti*

from the cusp of the moon
CHORUS: *m'elevasti*¹²⁶

HALL: Did he lay his burden down? His foolish errors ripened into a bitter fruit – harsh, self-judged failure, even of his own Cantos; it all weighed heavily on his last years. But though he spent his last decade in silence, perhaps he who expended so much effort trying to tell others what to think and do, at last began to put it together for himself. Perhaps the question should be, "did he cohere?" Did he make of himself the last Canto, coherent in inner form?

EZRA:¹²⁷ I was trapped once, in hell, as if I'd been sent to the front myself, ankle-deep in the muddy trenches of the Great War with my dearest friend, Gaudier. I found my way out with the help of an unlooked-for guide, the philosopher of light, following a path no wider than a hair.

Afterwards, the guide gone, recovery was slow. Walking, like other survivors, numb and traumatized through decades, stalemated in other trenches, a muddy economic hell, seeking some way around the needless loss of life, unable to bear the vision of those my friends lost there – even the Medusa was but half potent against the mass grave.

Disintegration.

How to fix the world? An obsession. How to reform it, how to prevent it all happening again. Not I alone – many of us kept on until, driven up against the collapse of the thirties, we groped our way to fascism and to Nazism. Seduced by what we thought to be a clear pool, we threw ourselves into it and as if in some nightmare woke in a

cesspool. We had not recovered from the first great war when the second exploded. So many of us lost our centers.

Psychiatric breakdown, post-traumatic shock, were not recognized in those days – men were executed for cowardice instead.

These hells move in cycles, no man can see his own end. The Gods have not returned. Rather, they have never left us, the air moves with their living. Pride, jealousy and possessiveness: the three pains of hell. But there is something intelligent in the cherry-stone. Connections that life finds, like an ecology.

The Venetians call them “cuniculi” – little canals that run underground and connect.

To make a Cosmos – to achieve the possible. Mussolini was wrecked for an error. But perhaps my palimpsest, my Cantos, will give off a little light in the darkness. From time’s wreckage, I have shored these fragments against ruin.

The story of Persephone is not just of abduction into the underworld, but also of rebirth, spring, eternal return. We may view the simplest life in nature with awe. And, that we may be able to tell interest from *usura*, we *must*.

Seas of malady break over the roof, but still the lovely sea breaks on the headland. And somewhere in the snarl of every relationship there is tenderness. A blue light under stars. And for a little magnanimity somewhere, one must know the share from the charge. God’s eye art ‘ou, surrender not perception. And in thy mind beauty.

I remember a field – I was young and lay in the soft grass by the cliff’s edge with the sea 30 meters below, and within hand’s reach I saw crystalline light moving below as if it were water, crystal that can be weighed in the hand, clear over the rock bed. Wild animals grazed domestically, fawns decorated the fields, there were corn flower and thistle and sword fern; grass to a half meter’s growth – I lay on the cliff edge, lazy on the edge of God, and lazily I viewed the Great Mother’s land, the long meadow hazy with poplars, over it the mountain, a shut garden of pear trees rested where paradise is not artificial. These states of mind are inexplicable. We find them through suffering.

Holding to Confucius by a hair, holding to the thin thread of light, striving to bring the god within to the world without; the divine at the center. Every soul knows its own center; knows that, un thwarted, it will not go linear, but circle on its own center, circle in to the point that gave it rise. And then – hilarity, sublime joy, wonder, still fresh.

Have you seen a boat’s wake on sea-wall, how it crests? It is like the spiral stair, the half turn of the Spanish dancer or the cavalry horse – the wake we celebrate, the wake left by a lifetime’s passing, waking exuberant, awakening, wide awake. What panache! Cyrano’s white plume, the crest. That is gaiety, we exult, the wave crest runs on the seawall.

By naming over what we know of beauty, we may draw back some vestige of it back on ourselves.

Not the manner of death or even death itself, but our attending on loved ones passing, attending to what continues, not *just* in memory, but yes, in memory. There is a way to do it. Lose not your dead to the wind, though wind is also of the process. The universe lives. There is a god within. When that stirs, we glow, like pine needles burning.

Thus we know that the intelligence of the human mind is the ability to love. Pine needles glow red as wire, the universe within bursts the universe without, as alive itself as we are in it, possessed by an intense passion for itself as we are by our own passionate love.

To be God's eye, to *see*, the feared absence of light no longer oppressive, darkness dispelled, the black unconscious unfathomed but no longer an abyss, with new humility we may give up fighting – what splendor! It coheres all right.

HALL: You could see him going back and forth at the end, uncertain whether to accept his own coherence. Even as memory fades, values emerge from remembering. The mother of the nine muses is memory, and what they inspire us to create arises from musing on their mother.

EZRA: It does not matter a two-penny damn whether you load up your memory with Chronos and Fame – when it was all done and who did it – or the authors of books or generals or political spouters, so long as you become mindful of the process. What matters to true memory is what you have loved well.¹²⁸

HALL: What we create from musing on memory is character, however ill-formed. What we create are values. And if some of those memories come back a little changed, with different meanings and new values, perhaps this is a little premonition of heaven, a peek ahead to when we may let drop the weight we've been carrying and jubilate a little as the taste and look of our worst memories wear away to become something we might call transformation.¹²⁹

EZRA:¹³⁰ And yet, it does cohere – splendor. The brightness of the moon – there are no *former* friends; they all remain. The dead have been attended. They have gone where gray winds call; gone as a gust of breath. The point of rest is at the center. Long ago, I followed the light there. Body inside soul, Soul everywhere, none excluded. It is most sublime in the intelligence of the human mind and the ability to love. I worked all my life to dispel the dark, and now – light, splendor.

It coheres all right, even if my notes do not cohere. The intemperate fanatic understands nothing. Many errors are tempered by the little bit one gets right, the true man is not excused from hell, but stumbling over little errors may wander out of hell over a frontier into some larger coherence beyond the old Western authority, redeemed simply for having wandered into wider blossom-blown fields. As to why we go wrong,

thinking of the right – we may confess wrong without losing rightness. And knowing how much damage has been done by intemperate speech, stay silent.

Charity I have had sometimes, though I could not always make it flow through. And as to who will copy this palimpsest, working late alone, in the small hours, with the darkness describing a huge circle – (*he breaks off, gesturing*) by Gawd I set myself *against* violence! And though I'm no hero, I wrote *against* violence!

Affirm the gold thread in the pattern – a street in Rapallo where looking up we could see blue sky. And I see now that there is a difference between usury and avarice.
Serenitas.

Olga arrives with tea things, and sets a table for the two of them. They sit quietly together, listening to the radio.

MUSIC, "OLD FRIENDS" BY SIMON & GARFUNKEL

LYRICS Old friends. Old friends
sat on their park bench like bookends.
A newspaper blown through the grass
falls on the round toes
of the high shoes
of the old friends.

Old friends.
Winter companions, the old men
lost in their overcoats,
waiting for the sunset.

The sounds of the city sifting through trees
settle like dust
on the shoulders
of the old friends.

Can you imagine us years from today
sharing a park bench quietly?
How terribly strange to be seventy.

Old friends.
Memory brushes the same years,
silently sharing the same fears.

EZRA: (*musing*) Young fella singing there has one bit wrong. Not so terribly strange to be seventy –

OLGA: More than eighty, *caro mio* –

EZRA: Nope, we're not sittin' here silently sharing fear. (*shakes his head*) Nope. It's not fear at all. "Preserve your memories" he said, "they're all that's left you." Had that right, and yet a bit wrong again too.

Ezra steps again through cage bars of light, crosses through the dark and comes down to sit center stage in an old chair, the sharp hawk face no less piercing for all his now obvious age.

HALL: He closed the Cantos with these words: "To be men, not destroyers."¹³¹

OLGA: I threw his I Ching the morning he died. It was Hsieh – Deliverance. There was no last message, no death-bed repentance. I did not know, though his hand was in mine, when he had gone.¹³²

EZRA: Let the gods forgive what I have made. Let those I love try to forgive what I have made.

I have tried to write Paradise.

Do not move.

Let the wind speak.

That is paradise.

HALL: The rest is silence.¹³³

3 beats

EZRA: A little light, like a rushlight to lead back to splendor.¹³⁴

ACT 4: If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day**Scene 1: If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day**

MUSIC, "IF I HAD POSSESSION OVER JUDGMENT DAY" BY ROBERT JOHNSON

LYRICS If I had possession over judgment day
If I had possession over judgment day
Lord, the little woman I'm lovin' wouldn't
Have no need to pray

I went to the mountain, lookin' far as my eyes could see
I went to the mountain, lookin' far as my eyes could see
Some other man got my woman, lonesome blues got me
I rolled and I tumbled and I cried the whole night long
I rolled and I tumbled and I cried the whole night long
Woke up this mornin', and it was gone

Ezra and Olga, taking tea, speak together quietly

OLGA: Tea?

EZRA: A little.

OLGA: Will you write today?

EZRA: No.

OLGA: Ezra –

EZRA: No. No more.

OLGA: Let's go out in the garden to have our tea –

EZRA: It's all a botch –

OLGA: You could straighten it out.

EZRA: When a man's been so wrong, he shouldn't speak.

OLGA: He has no right?

Pause

EZRA: I did not start out to hate.

OLGA: You cared too much.

EZRA: So many wretched things I said.

OLGA: Some were beautiful.

EZRA: My error was to speak.

OLGA: The garden is lovely in the early morning. What will you do now?

EZRA: Not speak.

OLGA: The affirmative is the negative action.

EZRA: It is always going forward from here.

Pause

OLGA: More tea?

EZRA: No.

OLGA: Listen – the early birds –

Pause

EZRA: What a joy this is.

The old poet nods, eyes closed, in his chair. The glow begins to fade from Mt. Taishan. The great leonine head of hair is white. The eagle's beak nose remains sharp, but the face is creased with age.

Olga leaves and reenters, shrunken and aged too, crosses to Ezra and drapes a blanket over his shoulders. She places her hands tenderly on both shoulders, bends to the ear for a moment, straightens. He has made no visible response, but she appears satisfied, straightens up, nods, pats his shoulder.

Sources & Annotations

This play, like Ezra in Pisa, draws on Pound's poetry, prose, broadcasts, and letters to capture his speech in his own words as much as possible. Throughout the play the Cantos are mined or adapted for incidents and dialogue, together with his translations and a host of academic, biographical and classical sources. A variety of period news sources and archival documents are employed to the story of Pound's psychiatric evaluation, incarceration, release and return to Italy.

There was once a closely annotated copy of the play, although that was many versions ago and would require some work to reconnect the dots. However, a preponderance of citations interrupts the flow of the play, so citations have been retained only where sources are directly quoted or explanation is needed, and a list of principal sources is given below.

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Endnotes

¹ Donald Hall, who as a young poet in the early 1960's met and interviewed Ezra Pound in Rome, after the ordeal of his incarcerations was over. In this play he plays the role, as he did in his interview, of honest broker and reliable commentator.

² Members of the chorus speak the lines alternately. Some lines adapted from Hall, p. 119

³ Olga Rudge was born April 13, 1895

⁴ "The better craftsman" – Eliot's dedication to Pound of *The Wasteland*, refers in turn to Arnaut Daniel, troubadour translated and loved by Pound. This was the phrase used by Dante in Canto 26 (428) of the *Purgatorio* to refer to Daniel.

⁵ Notes for Canto CXVII et seq.:18-26

⁶ from Jeremy Pratt, "beached on the shore of you", in *Love in the Space of No Space*, unpublished

⁷ The reference is to Confucius *Spring and Autumn* cf. Canto 79/483, Canto 82:83-84, both written at Pisa.

⁸ Canto 82:74-75, 86-90

⁹ This last, Canto 82.100-108

¹⁰ see Whitman, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* ll. 122-123, echoed in Canto 82:97-98

¹¹ see Canto 82.95

¹² Through the end of this scene lines are quoted or adapted from Whitman, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* (ll. 54, 77, 79-80, 108, 114, 124, 129-131, 152-171, 176-179, 184)

¹³ see also Surette, *A Light from Eleusis*, p. 214

¹⁴ This last, Canto 74:424

¹⁵ *Letters in Captivity*, p. 111

¹⁶ Conover, p. 179

¹⁷ *Letters in Captivity*, p. 22

¹⁸ This and the following draw on Torrey p. 15 et seq., quoting from the *Stars and Stripes* Paris and Mediterranean editions, October 5-16, 1945.

¹⁹ Laval was executed by firing squad October 16, 1945

²⁰ Torrey op cit., in part quoting Robert Allen, "The Cage" in A Casebook on Ezra Pound, p. 25

²¹ Letter dated August 26, 1943 to Attorney General Biddle on Scriabin Circle letterhead, inferred to be from Katherine Ruth Heyman.

²² quoted in Carpenter p. 507

²³ *Letters in Captivity*, p. 24

²⁴ See Wilhelm Ezra Pound: *The Tragic Years* p. 266

²⁵ *Letters in Captivity*, p. 25

²⁶ see Sieburth p. xxxvii

²⁷ see Charles Olson's description, from Seelye, Catherine (ed.) *Charles Olson & Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths*. (1975) University of Connecticut. The following speech draws on the same source.

²⁸ O'Connor, *Case Book*, p. 23

²⁹ It took 3 minutes – Carpenter 751

³⁰ From her instructions to Odysseus

³¹ Canto 92/620

³² See *Letters in Captivity* p. 26

³³ See *Letters in Captivity* p. 27

³⁴ *Letters in Captivity* p. 27 and p. 271. January 27, 1946 Letter #83, to Julian Cornell

³⁵ *Letters in Captivity*, p. 31

³⁶ Paragraphs 2 and 3 adapted from Jeremy Pratt, *The Lucid Hallucinatorium*, "Meditations on Evil" (unpublished)

³⁷ *Letters in Captivity* p. 27

³⁸ Adapted from Canto 74.403-9. Pound observed that many of the ex-slaves bore their once-master's names, who happened to have been Presidents. Yet one that appears frequently in the Pisan Cantos was named Edwards.

³⁹ Pound broadcast, July 14, 1942

⁴⁰ Canto 74:19-20

⁴¹ Canto 74:23-27

⁴² Canto 47

⁴³ Canto 116:23-30

⁴⁴ Canto 116:31-34

⁴⁵ Confucian Odes, Part III The Greater Odes, Book 3 The Decade of Tang, No. 7 (trans. Ezra Pound)

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- ⁴⁶ Confucian Odes, Part I Folk Songs Book 1 Chou and the South, No. 1 (trans. Ezra Pound)
- ⁴⁷ Froula, "The Beauties of Mistranslation" pp. 49-71 in Zhaoming Qian, ed. *Ezra Pound and China* 2003
- ⁴⁸ Slightly adapted from Canto 74: 1-8
- ⁴⁹ This "examination" is derived from Walter Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, Chapter 12 "Nietzsche and Rilke"
- ⁵⁰ Rilke, 7th Elegy
- ⁵¹ Paraphrasing Rilke's poem, "The Panther" from New Poems, First Part (1907)
- ⁵² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Aphorism 1052
- ⁵³ *Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties*, trans. John Mood, p. 25
- ⁵⁴ See Surette *A Light from Eleusis*, Chapter V. "Make it new": Canto 53;274-5
- ⁵⁵ Rilke, 9th Elegy
- ⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "Drunken Song" (WK 231) (my adaptation)
- ⁵⁷ These last two sentences are from "A Few Don'ts by an Imagist", Pound's Imagist manifesto, in *Poetry*, March 1913.
- ⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "On Self-Overcoming"
- ⁵⁹ From Rilke's First Elegy
- ⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "On Self-Overcoming"
- ⁶¹ Adapted from Rilke's letter April 12, 1923 – see Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, p. 226.
- ⁶² Rilke, Archaic Torso of Apollo
- ⁶³ Rilke 3rd Sonnet to Orpheus
- ⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "Drunken Song"
- ⁶⁵ Canto 76:336-337
- ⁶⁶ Rilke, 12th Sonnet to Orpheus
- ⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Aphorism 283
- ⁶⁸ Rilke, quoted in Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, p. 238.
- ⁶⁹ Bishop, Elizabeth. "Visits to St. Elizabeths" (1950) in *The Complete Poems*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1979)
- ⁷⁰ Quoted in *Wilhelm Ezra Pound: The Tragic Years* p. 269
- ⁷¹ Olson quoting Pound in "Your Witness". Source may be letters or anecdotes
- ⁷² Olson's speech includes pieces from Seelye, op. cit., with additions from "The Trial of Ezra Pound" and interpolations and lines added from "Fragments"
- ⁷³ With reference to Dylan Thomas, *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*.
- ⁷⁴ The following draws on Torrey *The Roots of Treason* (see especially pp. 24, 27-28, 37, 41, 70-71, 224)
- ⁷⁵ See Torrey p. 73-74, 76 et seq., 78, 79 et seq., 81-82, 85 and Flory B beginning with Ch. 3
- ⁷⁶ These words were spoken to another poet – Zhivago (and indirectly Pasternak), they are the words of the Communist house wardens occupying Zhivago's home when he returns from the war in the move Dr. Zhivago.
- ⁷⁷ Drawing upon Seelye, Margaret Canovan Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought, 1994, pp. 111-116, and two essays, Emily Wallace, "Why Not Spirits – The Universe is Alive" and Wendy Stallard Flory, "Confucius Against Confusion" pp. 143-162, both in Zhaoming Qian, ed. *Ezra Pound and China* 2003
- ⁷⁸ One of Pound's favorite formulations drawn from his own idiosyncratic interpretation of the Chinese characters.
- ⁷⁹ See Bruno Bettleheim, *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age*. The Free Press, 1960.
- ⁸⁰ Seelye, based on Olson, Canto 2, January 15, 1946 and Canto 3, January 24, 1946
- ⁸¹ Material in this speech adapted from Surette, *Pound in Purgatory* (e.g. pp. 200,242-248, 252-253) and O'Connor, *Case Book*, p. 107
- ⁸² Surette, *Pound in Purgatory* p. 279-282
- ⁸³ Seelye, modified with lines added from "A Lustrum for You, E.P."
- ⁸⁴ Quoted in Doob, p. 427
- ⁸⁵ Condensed from Pound broadcasts, May 18 and May 24, 1942
- ⁸⁶ Terrell, p. 724.
- ⁸⁷ This exchange with Olson from Seelye, modified with interpolations and lines added, from "Your Witness" and "A Lustrum for You, E.P."
- ⁸⁸ Olson quoting Pound in "Your Witness". Source uncertain, not in Cantos concordance
- ⁸⁹ See list given in A Concordance to Ezra Pound's Cantos (Robert J. Dilligan, James W. Parins, and Todd K. Bender), pp. 193-194
- ⁹⁰ Plotinus *Enneads* 6 [1] 5.
- ⁹¹ Plotinus *Enneads* 6 [1] 5.
- ⁹² Plotinus *Enneads* 6 [1] 5.

⁹³ Plotinus *Enneads* 6 [1] 5.

⁹⁴ Plotinus *Enneads* 6 [1] 5.

⁹⁵ Canto 113:808/809

⁹⁶ Sequence from Carpenter 777

⁹⁷ Material in this scene and the beginning of the following scene is adapted from O'Connor, *Case Book* (e.g., pp. 5, 118, 125, 128, 132, 135, 140, 144-145); Carpenter (e.g., pp. 757, 760-761, 790, 807, 816-817, 825-826), US Government Office Memoranda (e.g., October 28, 1948, from William Foley, Chief, Internal Security Section to files; June 6, 1950, from Mr. Whearty to Mr. McInerney) sourced from Department of Justice files published on the Internet under FOIA request; Conover p. 215; Wilhelm Ezra Pound: *The Tragic Years* p. 269; and *Letters in Captivity*, p. 94

⁹⁸ Conover, p. 193, and Carpenter, p. 699 (combining letters by Hemingway to Olga and to WCW)

⁹⁹ Adapted from Canto 76:457-458, 460; Canto 113:81-88

¹⁰⁰ Ezra Pound, "The Return", from *Ripostes*, London 1912

¹⁰¹ Large portions of this scene are taken, rearranged, condensed, or altered from Hall's interview with Pound (1979 and appendix).

¹⁰² See Donald Hall, "Ezra Pound Interview". Paris Review 28. (Summer-Fall 1962), p. 129

¹⁰³ Basil Bunting

¹⁰⁴ from *The Confucian Odes*, trans. Ezra Pound, Part III The Greater Odes, Book III Decade of T'ang, #7 (p. 177). New Directions 1954.

¹⁰⁵ The kettledrum reference is from Carpenter p. 563

¹⁰⁶ from Pound, Selected Prose (Forward)

¹⁰⁷ Wilhelm, *Ezra Pound: The Tragic Years*. p. 24

¹⁰⁸ Paris Review interview, Hall 1979 appendix.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted by Wilhelm in *Ezra Pound: The Tragic Years*, p. 343

¹¹⁰ See Canto 74:137-161. Erigena. Terrell 74:89.

¹¹¹ See Conover p. 234

¹¹² See Conover p. 238

¹¹³ See Carpenter 899

¹¹⁴ See Conover p. 226

¹¹⁵ See Conover p. 239

¹¹⁶ Quoted by Wilhelm in *Ezra Pound: The Tragic Years*, p. 339

¹¹⁷ See Emily Wallace, " 'Why Not Spirits?' – 'The Universe is Alive' " in Zhaoming Qian, ed. *Ezra Pound and China* 2003. especially 246-266. Although much of both plays was written before this source was encountered, it is echoed throughout. This is the substance of Canto 110, according to Wallace.

¹¹⁸ Told in Conover p. 253

¹¹⁹ Excerpted from Marianne Moore's "What Are Years?", in *Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, p. 95 (Penguin 1991)

¹²⁰ This speech draws from Canto 110/800-801; Canto 115:8-28; Canto 113:38; Canto 114:80; *Kakitsubata* (see Flory A, p. 282); Canto 113:84-86; Terrell, Canto 110, Comment 57; Daniel Cory, 'Ezra Pound: A Memoir', *Encounter* 30 (May 1968): 38; Flory A, pp. 276-278; Emily Wallace, "Why Not Spirits – The Universe is Alive" in Zhaoming Qian, ed. *Ezra Pound and China* 2003; Canto 115/814; Canto 114/813

¹²¹ Jeremy Pratt, untitled, in *I Come Back on a Day That is Always Today*, unpublished

¹²² Williams, *Paterson*, Book V, Part I.

¹²³ Canto 76:456-7

¹²⁴ from Jeremy Pratt, "Lethe", in *Mowing in Failing Light*, unpublished

¹²⁵ this dream, from Jeremy Pratt, in *The Lucid Hallucinatorim*, unpublished

¹²⁶ Canto 90:43-56

¹²⁷ Some of this speech from Canto 116; Canto 93/652; Canto 113/807-808; Canto 110/801; Canto 113/808-810; Canto 116/885 and Wallace p. 248; Canto 110; Canto 74/445; Canto 104/75-97; Canto 112/804; Canto 113/807; Canto 116/817

¹²⁸ Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, pp. 51-52

¹²⁹ See James Hillman, *The Force of Character*, Ch. 10. Ballantine Books 1999.

¹³⁰ Some of this speech from "For E. McC." in *A Lume Spento*, 61; A Note on Canto 110, Emily Wallace, "Why Not Spirits – The Universe is Alive" esp. p. 252 in Zhaoming Qian, ed. *Ezra Pound and China* 2003; Canto 116/815-817; Canto 116:55-75; Canto 113

¹³¹ from Notes for CXVII et seq.

¹³² Conover p. 257

¹³³ Quoted by Wilhelm in *Ezra Pound: The Tragic Years*, p. 367

¹³⁴ Canto 116:76-77