

Ezra Pound and Richard of *St. Victor*: *Ubi Amor, ibi Oculus*

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Abstract: In the fifties, Pound maintained that he had absorbed more in 1909 from Richard of Saint Victor than he “remembered from specific sentences”. At about the same time, he had encouraged Vanni Scheiwiller, who would soon publish the original *Rock-Drill*, to set up a “Cursus Ezraticus”, based mainly on Saint Victor’s works, as a prerequisite for studying Dante. In 1956 Vanni published a small booklet in Latin, *Pensieri sull’Amore, Richardi Excerpta, Accurate Ezra Pound*, some of which Pound translated and published in various venues. Nevertheless, little attention has been given to St. Victor’s presence in Pound’s oeuvre. While the Medieval mystic had been on Pound’s mind, and in his prose, for at least 45 years, his name and excerpts from his writings actually pervade his poetry only in the second half of *Rock-Drill* and often in connection with the idealization of Pound’s love for Sheri Martinelli, with implied allusions to the philosophy of love and light from Canto XXXVI. However, in Canto XC and elsewhere in *Rock-Drill*, love and light have imperceptibly acquired an uncertain hue by evoking a disquieting closeness between light and darkness suggested by the canto’s images. In *The Washington Cantos*, absence seems to intrude into fullness, darkness into light. In this essay, I will follow up Pound’s frequent references to and quotations from Richard’s works and try to show how differently such quotations work when they are inserted in his prose or, alternately, in his poetry. The difference notably shows when Pound sets about “to write paradise”.

Keywords: Pound; Richard of St. Victor; light; darkness

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1. Writing Paradise^[1]

Richard of St. Victor, the twelfth-century exponent of a mystical and rational theology, is everywhere in Pound’s works, not only in his prose, journal articles, translations, and edited excerpts but, more importantly, in his poetry. As early as 1909, in a long and detailed commentary to “Guillaume de Lorris Belated”, Pound translates Richard’s distinctions between three modes of thought, or levels of intellectual activity—cogitation, meditation, contemplation—borrowing them from what he then thought was *Benjamin Minor*, which will stay with him throughout his career. While the three categories are also a staple of the various declensions of Neoplatonism Pound was familiar with, when he mentions the whole triad, or the latter two, he always refers, if implicitly, to Richard’s thought. Indeed, already in 1916, in “Psychology and Troubadours”, while discussing the “*phantastikon*”, Pound mentions a beautiful passage by Richard on the splendors of paradise: “by naming all over all the beautiful things we know, we may draw back upon the mind some vestige of the heavenly splendor”.^[2] Richard’s distinctions became a recurring allusion in Pound’s prose shifting from mystical and religious grounds to the ethical and political sphere which dominated his thinking in the late ’30s. In *Guide to Kulchur*, at the height of his political engagement, Pound twice repeated the triad more concisely, leaving out the 1909 final lines: “Poetry in its acme is expression from contemplation.”^[3]

Why was the Victorine theologian so important to Pound and so little attended to by most critics? Such negligence is surprising if one remembers Carroll Terrell’s conviction that Richard’s distinctions between the three grades of knowledge worked as a structural model for *The Cantos* as important for Pound’s poem as Dante’s pattern of the three realms, *Hell*, *Purgatory*, *Paradise* were for the *Divine Comedy* (Terrell, 470). On the other hand, the conception of a long poem in three parts had been on young Pound’s mind at least since 1904 when he first encountered Dante’s works at Hamilton College, or even before. In recent years, many studies have been devoted to the scholar-canon of St. Victor—also known as Victorines—and their influence on Medieval literature, especially on the Troubadours and Dante, who praised Richard’s style and learnt from it. A major theme of their studies was the anagogical relation between the secular and the divine, with a special attention given to the tropological meaning of day-to-day occurrences. Among them, two single contributions to a very recent volume of philological enquiry, dedicated to studying the connections tying the monastic school of Saint

[1] The first results of my research on Pound and St. Victor were presented during *The 30th Ezra Pound International Conference* (Edinburgh, 2023). An abridged and altered version of the last two paragraphs of the present essay appeared as “Ezra Pound and Richard of St. Victor: Forms of Religious Appropriation” in *Appropriation as a Practice of Memory: Inventions, Uses and Transformations of Religious Memory*, Dimitar Daphinoff and Franziska Metzger, eds., Köln: Böhlau, 2024.

[2] Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, 96. All further references to this work will be abridged SR.

[3] Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, 328. All further references to this work will be abridged GK.

Victor to Medieval literature, have praisingly referred to Pound's early allusions to Richard of St. Victor and to the translations he later commissioned. ^[1]

Even though the Victorine had been on Pound's mind for at least 45 years, yet, his name, or excerpts from his writings, pervade his poetry only starting with *Rock-Drill* and, more specifically, its second part, Cantos XC to XCV, the Paradise proper as Pound defined it, and often in connection with the idealisation of Pound's love for Sheri Martinelli. In those cantos, Martinelli figures prominently as sea-nymph, siren, Castalia or Undine, a salvific, if dubiously so, presence in Pound-Odysseus' shipwreck, when, as Leucothea, she encourages the castaway to leave his foundering raft for her bikini, entrusting himself to it ("My bikini is worth your raft," XCI/363). ^[2] In 1956, Vanni Scheiwiller, Pound's young Italian publisher, reluctantly brought out a booklet of Martinelli's paintings (without stating his name on the book cover), in which Pound's introduction exalts her work and invokes the repeated warning not to use "l'occhio per la mente" ("the eye for the mind"). The introduction also came out in *Edge* with the title "Total War on 'Contemplatio'" (Zinnes, 177–79).

In Canto XC, full of Richard's quotations, the main one concerning love and eyes, "Ubi amor, ibi oculus", ("where love is, there is the eye" Terrel, 541), the mind's eye performs a luminous and restorative, function evoking Dante—the pilgrim's ascent to the splendours of Paradise, by looking lovingly and steadily into the divine light enkindling Beatrice's eyes. The canto intentionally harkens back to Canto XXXVI, Pound's rendering of Cavalcanti's *Canzone*, his enquiry into the nature of love, where Pound famously turns Cavalcanti's pessimistic view of love's dark power into a Dantean illuminating, salvific "white light that is allness." ^[3] It is worth remembering that Pound adds "light" to Guido's original merely "white", the enigmatic *bianco*, (which could mean void), pointing instead to Beatrice's eyes that beam with divine love–light. As is well known, the great divide between Dante and Cavalcanti turns on the opposition of real and metaphorical light and darkness.

However, when Pound introduced him into *Rock-Drill*, more specifically in Canto XC, Richard's reception slightly changed. Once excerpts from Richard's texts move from prose to poetry, from Pound's discursive rendering to his dislocating fragmentary quotations or allusions from their theological context into his poetry, their meaning becomes more doubtful and more complex, taking on unforeseen connotations, as they resonate with the rest of the poem and the section as a whole. The eye and the light have imperceptibly acquired an uncertain hue by threateningly suggesting a closeness between light and dark: darkness seems to intrude into the souls' luminous ascent toward a fragile paradise. In what follows, I will briefly sketch the main stages of Pound's reading of St. Victor, then focus on the final phase when, in 1954–56, Pound not only chose Richard as the

[1] See Corrado Bologna and Carlo Zacchetti, eds. *La scuola di San Vittore e la letteratura medievale*. In "Dante e i Vittorini", Mira Mocan opens her essay by mentioning Pound's remarks on St. Victor from *The Spirit of Romance*, 378. In the same volume, Lorenzo Fabiani examines Pound's prose in order to retrace his allusions to Richard, 431–452.

[2] Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. All further references will be given by Canto number/page number.

[3] This passage is particularly obscure and has been interpreted in various ways through the centuries. For a pessimistic view of Cavalcanti's love I am here indebted to Giorgio Agamben and Jean-Baptiste Brenet, *Intelletto d'amore*, 20–21, and Peter Nicholls, "Gold and Gloom in Ravenna: On a line in Ezra Pound's *Cantos*", 551–52. An exhaustive analysis of the "white light" in Pound's poems in imitation of the Troubadours is in a paper by John Beall, "Pound's White Light in Canto XXXVI" presented at the 28th *Ezra Pound International Conference* in Salamanca, "Ezra Pound and the Spanish World", 27 June 2019. I tried to trace back the first occurrences of Pound's "white light" in his early lyrics on the dawn, and even as far back as a translation from a Provençal Alba, in my "The Pale Dawn of Spain: Pound's Morphology of Dawn" in *Ezra Pound and the Spanish World*, Viorica Patea, John Gery, and Walter Baumann, eds., 51–66.



paradigm of his paradisaical cantos but also tried to spread his thought and teachings by publishing excerpts of a few passages from his work, and having him translated and published at different venues.

2. Intellectual Mysticism

It is hard to ascertain what and how much Pound actually read of St. Victor at least until 1954. His life and whereabouts are equally little-known. Richard (d. 1173) was a Scotsman who joined the Abbey of St. Victor at an unknown date. He probably studied under, and was deeply influenced by Hugh of St. Victor, who had been in charge of the Parisian abbey, whose canons were renowned for their theological as well as their philosophical attainments. He devoted himself to the study of philosophy, became prior of the Abbey and a prominent mystical writer and theologian, so widely known that scholars and learned people came to St. Victor to consult with him. He was also known as *Magnus Contemplator*.^[1] His mystical theology is chiefly laid out in two treatises, *The Twelve Patriarchs*, known as *Benjamin Minor* or, *The Preparation of the Soul for Contemplation*, and *The Mystical Ark*, known as *Benjamin Major* or, *On Contemplation*, which aimed at giving a rational account of the contemplative life and to approach faith through reason. The two works are strictly connected and portray Richard's intellectual development. The former is an allegorical analysis of a few events and characters of Genesis. In a mainly tropological manner, Richard interprets the story of Jacob and his wives, Rachel—reason and Lia—affection, their maids and their offspring, so as to illustrate how, on the moral and the cognitive plane, the soul can prepare for contemplation. In the latter, he traces the three different processes of human thinking, giving them a precise definition, and pointing out how they interrelate and retroact on one another. Contemplation is not a fixed state but a fluid and dynamic activity of mind. Although the three modes of thought are mainly dealt with in *Benjamin Major* in a lucid and argumentative prose, *Benjamin Minor* employs a realistic narrative to illustrate the steps the soul and body are to go through in order to rise to a contemplative dimension. The final goal of contemplation is *excessus mentis*—Dante's “*transumanar*”—a state of mystical ecstasy wherein man transcends his own nature, a mental process at its highest stage, by which the mind is unified with the object of contemplation. Although ecstasy is reached through knowing, in both treatises love takes precedence over knowledge, because it is love that gives rise to the desire to know (Melone, xv). The mind in contemplation may be concerned “with the visible things of creation, but it HAS THE POWER to ascend to ecstasy in order to understand the invisible”. Love is the compelling force behind the power to see, guiding the mind on the way to understanding and ecstasy.^[2]

[1] For the following information on Richard of St. Victor I am mainly relying on: Richard of Saint Victor, *Benjamin Minor*, edited and translated by Stanislaw V. Yankowski and Rik van Nieuvenhove, *The Cambridge Introduction to Medieval Theology*. For the Latin text: Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 196, *Opera Omnia Richardi a Sancto Victore; De preparatione animi ad contemplationem, liber dictus Benjamin Minor* and *De gratia contemplationis, seu Benjamin Major*.

[2] See Yankowski's “Introduction”, which betrays many of Pound's idiosyncratic wordings and script, such as capitalizing relevant statements.

3. From *Personae* (1909) to *A Visiting Card* (1942)

We do not know for certain how Pound became familiar with Richard's oeuvre. What is certain is that he eagerly read at least one of his works, or perhaps more, starting from very early on and referring to it intermittently up to and including the paradisaical section of *Rock-Drill*. In 1909 in his first version of *Personae*, he added a long endnote to "Guillaume de Lorris Belated: Visions of Italy", summarizing and paraphrasing from memory what Richard's intellectual legacy was, drawing from the text he thought was *Benjamin Minor*.^[1] The endnote contains a faithful description of Richard's three stages of intellectual activity (cogitation, meditation, contemplation). In cogitation, "the thought or attention flits aimlessly about the object"; in meditation, "it views it systematically, gaining perspective"; in contemplation, "the thought radiates from a centre, that is, as light from the sun reaches out in an infinite number of ways to things. Following St. Victor's figure of radiation: Poetry in its acme is expression from contemplation."^[2] Already from this first reading Pound must have been thinking of Dante's *Paradise* X, 131–132, both in the notion of *excessus mentis* and in the image of light radiating from a centre. He further adds that the wording is his own, as he does not have the *Benjamin Minor* by him.

The poem is slight and was rightly dropped from *Personae* 1926, but in spite of its rather intricate allegories and personifications, it is worth remembering for various reasons. Set in a dramatic monologue, the poem stages a disembodied voice who meets the spirit of Guillaume de Lorris, the author of *Roman de la Rose*, imitating its rhetorical traits and figures in rapturous dreamy visions. A procession of ethereal maidens "slender and mist-wrought" immersed in love rays turn into personified cities from Northern Italy which Pound admired ("Each as a woman wonder-fair"), foremost among them "svelte Verona". Then a change of dimension takes place and Verona appears in a realistic light, with its churches and monuments and, towering above its square, the statue of Cangrande della Scala, the patron of Dante's exile. Pound must have remembered that in famous *Epistle* XIII, 80 to Cangrande, where Dante's own elaborate reading of his poem appears along with a key to its allegorical elements, he cites Richard's "De Contemplatione" among examples of tracts by theologians who dared to write about ecstatic visions of Paradise. In Pound's poem, the long paraphrase from *De Contemplatione* is added as an endnote when the I emerges from a dream and turns into "deductive intellect", seeing "How all things are but symbols of all things".

In all probability, Pound encountered Richard's works at Hamilton College, as he attended Dr. Shepard's lectures on Dante and Provençal poetry, followed up by their frequent conversations. In a letter to his mother of 1904, voicing his dislike for Aquinas ("Bill ... told me I could go to Thomas Aquinas & other medieval Latin writers. I said, 'No thanks this is enough' so we go on to Canto X"), Pound announces his class's next assignment, where he would read of St. Victor (Pound 2010, 16). In *Paradise* X, 131–132 Dante meets

[1] In all likelihood, Pound became acquainted with both treatises during Dr. Shepard's classes. Afterwards, he may have used Richard's citations from memory, mistaking one for the other until he could get hold of the actual texts when in St. Elizabeths. Only then did Pound acknowledge the elements distinguishing *Benjamin Minor* from *Benjamin Major*.

[2] Ezra Pound, *Collected Early Poems*, Michael John King, Louis L. Martz, eds., 99. Here Pound faithfully translates from the Latin of *Benjamin Major* I. iv.



Richard of St. Victor describing him as the one who “in considerar fu più che viro” (“in contemplation was more than human”, my translation). As a keen scholar of Provençal, William Shepard undoubtedly introduced his students to the *Magnus Contemplator*, underlining Richard’s “intellectual mysticism”. Indeed, Richard’s connection with Troubadours was then a widely studied topic, and would be at the heart of philological research for quite a while, up to recent times when philologists have started seeing religious writers and lay poets as belonging to the same epistemological milieu (Bologna, Zacchetti, xxiii). In a later letter to his mother, he tells her about his planning to write a history of Medieval philosophy, but then decides to give it up for purely practical reasons: “The prose book was to have been about philosophy from Richard St. Victor to Pico della Mirandola, ... but I’m casting about for something more lucrative.” (Pound 2010, 252).

Whether from Shepard’s lectures or by his own intuition, in “Psychology and Troubadours” (1916), Pound anticipates philologists by insisting that “the servants of Amor saw visions quite as well as the servants of the Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy” and since most troubadours had been taught in the monasteries “visions and doctrines of the early fathers could not have been utterly strange to them (SR, 91).” As late as *A Visiting Card* (1942), while defining Dante’s *De Vulgari Eloquentia* as his “Baedeker in Provence”, Pound explicitly connects Richard with the Provençal poets. In the late thirties Richard and his three levels of intellectual activity are enlisted in Pound’s political and economic agenda. In “Immediate Need of Confucius”, where he sees a possible solution to Western predicaments by assimilating Confucius’ *Ta Hio*, Richard’s triad is linked to Confucius’ teachings, as a way to drill them into people’s minds, like a *mantram* (Pound 1975, 77). Further on, Pound expands on the “gradation of processes” insisting on contemplation in a more philosophical bend and linking it to *atasal*, a form of union with the divine: (1) the aimless flitting of the mind, (2) the systematic circling of the attention around the object, (3) contemplation, the identification of the consciousness WITH the object.” (GK, 328). At times, the first stage is identified with *Inferno*.

4. Cursus Ezraticus

After the war around 1953–54, Pound was again engrossed in Richard’s works, and in 1954 he wrote many similar letters to various correspondents regarding the Victorine’s influence on his own thought and maintaining that he had absorbed more in 1909 from Richard of St. Victor than he “remembered from specific sentences” (Quinn, 59). The notable ones are addressed to Olivia Rossetti Agresti, Boris de Rachewiltz, and Vanni Scheiwiller, who will publish Pound’s choice of Latin quotations from Richard’s oeuvre, under the Italian title, *Riccardo da S. Vittore, Pensieri sull’Amore: Richardi excerpta—accurante Ezra Pound*, in 1956. In 1952, 17 year-old Vanni Scheiwiller, now in charge of his father’s publishing house started what would turn out to be a long correspondence with Pound. Giovanni Scheiwiller, his father, had published *Profile* (1932) and *Confucius. Digest of the Analects* (1937) and in February 1954 Vanni published the original edition of Pound’s pre-war economic pamphlets in Italian, under the title *Lavoro ed Usura*. In an unusual act of submission, Pound accepted Vanni’s new title instead of the original *Oro e Lavoro* (1944). Although the essays had already been translated and published in English as *Gold and Work*, according to Mary de Rachewiltz, Pound was particularly pleased

about their appearing in the original Italian version. Vanni's enthusiasm and expertise had boosted Pound's spirits and in 1953, after Mary had returned home from visiting him in Washington, Pound encouraged, or better, commanded her to get in touch with young Scheiwiller: "Meet Vanni!"^[1] After an extensive exchange of letters, in 1955, Pound decided to have Vanni publish the original of *Rock-Drill*, which only afterward came out in offset with *New Directions* and *Faber and Faber*.

In a letter to Vanni on 20 May 1954, Pound suggests that he should print a *Cursus Ezraticus*, a small course of Dante Studies, starting with the "forerunners", mainly, Richard of St. Victor, whom he is now "reading and re-reading, very important. Dante is full of R. st V/ and I am too, having read it, that is, *Benjamin Minor*."^[2] (my translation from Italian). Besides Dazzi's translation of Mussato and his own edition of Cavalcanti from 1932, Pound adds *Benjamin Major*, Book I, chapters 3 and 5 and *De Gradibus Charitatis*. A few days later, on 29 May 1954, he wrote Rossetti Agresti about Richard's connection with Confucius and with his own *Gold and Work*, stressing the link between Richard, Confucius, and his own economic theories: "Vanni has had foolish impulse / probably before he got clear idea of Cursus Ezraticus / must keep series UNIFORM with Lav / ed Usura / Kung / Mussato / Richard St. Victor. A catholic biJAYzuss author whom a Confucian CAN read, and whom Dante & Guido damn well DID read. Wd / have improved my G. C. (Cavalcanti) notes if I had reread him in 1927." (Tryphonopoulos, Surette, 153). Pound probably forgot, but he had in fact thought of St. Victor at the time he was translating Cavalcanti's *Canzone* as is shown in a postscript he added to *The Spirit of Romance* in 1932. At about the same time, in a letter to Boris de Rachewiltz, Pound is even more explicit: "Must be 20 Kung texts embedded in him" (de Rachewiltz 1965, 77).

Indeed, Canto LXXXV opens the historical section of *Rock-Drill* with repeated allusions to St. Victor, now the capital example of a tradition preceding and culminating with Dante ("Dante, out of St Victor (Richardus)" 566). Right in the middle of the history of Chinese dynasties going back to the first inklings of the Confucian tradition, a Dantean line from *Purgatorio* XXIV, 54, "ch'e ditta dentro" (LXXXV/572, "in the way in which he (love) dictates within me," my translation) connects this famous manifesto of Tuscan love poetics with the virtuous disposition of rulers who come to power because of "a great sensibility". Such moral disposition is anticipated in one of the excerpts from St. Victor Pound will collect in Scheiwiller's *Pensieri sull'amore*: "Qui secundum cor dictat, verba componit" (Who composes words, as the heart dictates), afterwards translated and published in *Selected Prose* (71-72).^[3] The two letters indicate the way Pound will now use Richard's legacy. On the one hand, connecting *Rock-Drill* back to Cavalcanti's *Canzone* and Canto XXXVI, with its metaphysics of love and eyes. On the other, stressing Richard's significance for his own overall indictment of usurious practices, when he sees his enemies waging "total war on CONTEMPLATIO" (LXXXV/566). The same charge

[1] Mary de Rachewiltz's unpublished Letter 22 November 1953 to Vanni Scheiwiller, *Apice*, *Archivio Scheiwiller*, (undergoing re-arrangement), Subfondo Vanni, Serie Carteggio Vanni, fasc. Pound Ezra, Università degli Studi di Milano.

[2] Pound's Letter 20 May 1954 to Vanni, *Archivio Scheiwiller*.

[3] Pound published several similar, but not identical, collections of excerpts from Saint Victor causing a certain degree of confusion if one wants to trace them all correctly: *Riccardo da San Vittore, Pensieri sull'amore: Richardi excerpta - accurate Ezra Pound*, (1956) culled from the Latin original; a slightly different choice appeared as an appendix in Richard of Saint Victor, *Benjamin Minor*, trans. Stanislaw V. Yankowski; this same choice was published in *Selected Prose*, 71-72, both translated by Pound himself. In addition, further citations appear in *Rock-Drill*.



is repeated in the introduction to *La Martinelli*, where “useless cogitators” are “usurious” critics or art collectors, probably unable to appreciate Martinelli’s art.

5. A Richard of the Nile

In the same years, around June 1954, Pound started an intense correspondence with his son in law, Boris de Rachewiltz, who was most influential for the Egyptian and Sumerian elements in *Rock-Drill*. Pound had been impressed by Boris’s *Massime degli antichi Egiziani*, which Scheiwiller published early in 1954, where he found the figure of King Kati, “the bright light of that collection”, whom he now associates with St. Victor, enquiring in one of the letters: “If you can dig up a Richard of the Nile, I’ll give him a canto.” (de Rachewiltz 1965, 26 and 77). Elsewhere he compliments Boris for having humanized the Egyptians (de Rachewiltz 1969, 180). In a letter of about the same time, in a rather idiosyncratic phrasing, Pound anticipates what will become the opening of Canto XC: “Theological taste good in Ric / s time. Animus humanus non est amor / dilexit in amore that pours from it (“Not love but that love flows from it / ex animo / & cannot ergo delight in itself / but only in the love flowing from it,” XC/629). Tree of knowledge / error in that: RAPIT (to hell with, my tentative translation) the knowledge, like Yeats always poking round seances etc / instead of Observing, let us say, blue jays.” (de Rachewiltz 1965, 77). While Richard’s theological argument describes the flowing of love between the persons of the Trinity, Pound chooses to appropriate such dynamism in a quite earthly context, in this case, his love for Sheri Martinelli, whom he usually refers to as blue jay. More than any other prose writing, the letters to Boris show in detail not only the growing importance Pound attaches to St. Victor, but also the new paths he had been pursuing both in the direction of the love theme and regarding the lucidity of Richard’s arguments. Significant in the exposition on Richard is Pound’s detecting Richard’s method which he indicates observing that: “he doesn’t explain what he is doing... just goes along Dissociating ideas, à la De Gourment [sic], defining his terms” (Trembaly, 158).

6. Richard in Washington: Dissociations

Around 1955, in order to further spread Richard’s message, Pound would entrust the Polish scholar Stanislaw Yankowski with translating Richard’s *Benjamin Minor* into English, which was published by an obscure German publisher the following year. Vanni, on the contrary, offered a particularly favourable channel: his was a small but relevant publishing house with a select audience, who were familiar with Latin, or used to reading it, and curious about novelties especially where Ezra Pound was concerned. Vanni himself was surprised at the tiny booklet’s success. In 1954, in one of his first letters to Yankowski Pound had urged: “Goacher might like yr/ note on TRAX/ what is WANTED is an English or American translation of Richard of St. Victor’s Benjamin Minor, sive De Contemplatione, plus two or three chapters of the *Benj. Maj.* and a page of sentences from the

rest of the volume. MIGNE 196. Patrologia selected by yr. anonymous correspondent.” (Pound 1991, 503).^[1]

Reading the actual *Benjamin Minor* after so many years, effected a slight change in his perspective. While Pound was still relying on the more philosophical *Benjamin Major*, Richard’s realistic narratives in *Benjamin Minor* now reveal new aspects.^[2] The “anonymous correspondent” will do more than just choose Richard’s quotations. Yankowsky’s introduction to his own translation is blatantly Poundian and sounds like it was dictated by Pound himself. Or else, Yankowski was so much under Pound’s spell as to adopt his turn of phrases and habit of capitalizing words that seemed important. As one would expect, Pound did not follow Richard’s theological system closely, but chose to stress the themes that had always interested him most, culling excerpts or ideas, mainly in the line of the three crucial citations he will use in Canto XC/626: “Ubi Amor, ibi oculus / vae qui cogitatis inutile / quam in nobis similitudine divinae / reperetur imago.”

In order to prepare for contemplation, *Benjamin Minor* tells the story, both realistic and allegorical, of Rachel and Lia, the two wives of Jacob, representing in turn reason and affection, both necessary to rise to the experience of contemplation. Their children allegorize activities and inclinations of mind each relating in turn to reason and love. One of the most cogent allegorical narratives is the episode depicting a fierce battle between the four sons of Bala and Zelpha, Rachel’s handmaids, who represent the four virtues, and their enemy, the vices (Yankowski, 7). The treatise ends with the life of Benjamin, the youngest of Jacob’s twelve sons, the last and most loved by Rachel—reason, who represents pure intelligence and contemplation, at whose birth Rachel dies: when the mind of man is ravished in ecstasy above itself, all human reason collapses: “What else then is the death of Rachel, save the eclipse of reason?”^[3] What is most striking in Yankowski’s introduction is the emphasis given to Richard’s method, the distinctive feature of which he finds in the use of “dissociations”, the habit of dramatically contrasting ideas, persons, and things by staging their impressive opposites in close juxtaposition: Pound’s letters to Boris are certainly behind this, but most remarkably, Pound himself insisted on it in a letter to the Polish scholar: “the Benj is INTELLECT making dissociations.” (Pound 1991, 517). In *The Spirit of Romance*, in one of his many ground-breaking comments, Pound had praised Richard for having written “a prose which becomes poetry, not because of its floridity, but because of its intensity.” (SR, 116). Now, however, stylistic intensity has turned into a more specific trait. Characteristic of Richard’s narrative in general, in Yankowski’s words, are chains of dissociated statements in which the differences between the brothers, but also between the two wives, between Rachel and her handmaids, “the dissimilarity in similars”, acquire strong poetic intensity. Yankowski makes the point: “In our time it was Ezra Pound who, amid the voluminous folios by the mystical writers of the Middle Ages discerned *the intellect making dissociations* (sic) and has been trying to rouse interest for the little known, inspired monk and philosopher of the 12th century.” (Yankowski, 7–8). “Dissociations” had been on Pound’s mind for a while, if referring to economic ideas. Recalling Remy de

[1] The long correspondence was edited by Stanislaw Helczynsky in 1970 and republished in *Ezra Pound’s Poetry & Prose*.

[2] By now Pound had been able to read Richard’s two works in the original Migne edition, and add other treatises more specifically dealing with divine love.

[3] Richard of Saint Victor, *Benjamin Minor* LXXIII, in Yankowski’s translation, 84.



Gourmont's opinion that discrimination was a more valuable capacity than the recognition of similarity, in a letter of 24 May 1951 to Rossetti Agresti, Pound writes: "Now, lacking Remy de Gourmont on *Dissociation d'idées* cd / at least note the following. Douglas failed to emphasize." (Tryphonopoulos, Surette, 63).

What probably attracted Pound's attention again was Richard's three levels of intellectual activity encompassing distinct faculties: imagination, based on sense experience, reason, which focuses on intelligible things, and "intelligence", which contemplates invisible things: all the three distinct modes are different ways of relating to the same things. Contemplation seizes everything in one vision and is a flowing and dynamic process. The three degrees are never stable, though always distinct and "dissociated", each stage has an inner dynamic towards "self – transcendence" (Van Nievenhove, 138). However, what Pound leaves out is the mystic's presupposing that the thrust toward contemplation is impelled by grace, the only possible guidance to *excessus mentis*, i. e., the mind facing the unimaginable essence of God. From Richard's theological perspective, dissociating ideas simultaneously reveals the divine agency that connects them. While one can reasonably assume that the clipped ideogrammic form of the *Rock-Drill* Cantos appropriates Richard's "dissociation" of ideas in order to set up an "unwobbling pivot", i. e., the paradisaal vision of a permanent world, Richard's mystic visions once taken out of context may end up disclosing the fragile nature of Pound's all too human a paradise. Although Canto XC is both the enacting of a ritual leading to the intensity and clarity of vision, and the creation of a state of mind "making Paradise", its dynamism may also disclose what ritual and liturgy are meant to fend off: uncertainty, absence, or loss of self.^[1] Their opposite is ever present, a counterpoint made up of barely perceptible gaps that intermittently surface as the paradisaal sequence unfolds. As Canto XCII suggests: "Le Paradis n'est pas artificiel / but is jagged, / For a flash, / for an hour. / Then agony, / then an hour, / then agony (640).

7. Canto XC: *Light and Darkness*

In Canto XC in the midst of a paradisaal ascent, illuminated by love, three fragmented citations from *Benjamin Minor* follow an impassioned prayer, a plea for mercy to terrifying Aphrodite, "*Kuthera deina*":

Ubi amor ibi oculus.

Vae qui cogitatis inutile.

quam in nobis similitudine divinae

reperetur imago." (XC/626)

("Where love is, there is the eye. / Woe to those who think uselessly / which the image of divine likeness is restored in us." My translation; the italics in the above and the whole coming paragraph are mine). The last two lines, appearing in the canto in a truncated form, contain a curious mistake: *reperetur*, as far as I can tell,

[1] Kristin Grogan similarly alludes to the function of rituals in her "Canto 79" in *Readings in the Cantos* II, Richard Parker, ed., 241.

does not exist. While the dubious grammar of these lines has been analysed before, what is instantly striking is the odd form of the verb. In the original, the line goes: “bona voluntas ... per quam in nobis divinae similitudinis imago *reparatur*.” (Migne, *Benjamin Minor*: LXV)^[1] In his text, Yankowski rightly translates “good will Through which the image of divine likeness *is restored* in us.” However, among the list of Latin citations Pound chose and translated as an adjunct to the Yankowski book, the lines run differently to the point of changing the meaning: “*Bona voluntatis* per quam in nobis divinae similitudinis imago *reperietur*” / *the good things of the will*, through which an image of the divine likeness *will be found* in us” (Pound 1975, 71).

Is it Pound’s oversight, or did he actually choose to make Richard’s ascent to the divine more uncertain? From the letters he sent Scheiwiller while correcting the drafts of *Rock-Drill*, we know that Pound was both philological and careless about philological accuracy, especially when the sound of a word was involved. Yet here, the inaccuracy utterly changes the meaning. In Richard’s religious view, good will is God’s gift to man, synonymous with grace, necessarily restoring in us the image of divine likeness, and Yankowski translates it as such in his text. But in Pound’s citations *good will* becomes the *good things of the will*, that is our human resources. The emphasis shifts from the divine to the secular, to relying on one’s will, not on divine grace, in the search for Paradise. Pound’s stress on human action is further underlined seeing that he changes not only the tense but also the verb: from *reparare* “restore” to *reperiri* “search for and find in the end”. Did Pound, consciously or unconsciously, choose to suggest an arduous search, an uncertain ascent, whose outcome may be doubtful?

In all this ascending movement and flowing of love’s attraction drawing the soul “Out of Erebus ... Out of heaviness where no mind moves at all” (XC/626–627), an undercurrent, literally a reverse current, seems to contrast and threaten the upward movement towards paradisaic light. As elsewhere in *The Cantos*, where a theme is often accompanied by a counter-theme, moments of bright disclosure are counterbalanced by disquieting hints suggested by words or images, here the ascending surge is offset by a forceful image of descent, intimating a counter-movement, and making the Canto’s hymnal evocation of paradise strangely uncertain. Clarity and fluidity (“and the waters clear with the flowing,” 627), are obscured and made ambiguous by a counter flow of lights, toward darkness. A few lines after Richard’s quotes, an unexpected counter-movement produces a “dissimilarity in similars” by connecting and simultaneously setting apart the attraction of love drawing the soul up from despair, and a quite realistic occurrence, a luminous detail from Pound’s Rapallo experience. Here, he remembers a yearly ritual taking place on the sea coast, in which floating red votive lights are drawn out into darkness, whose forceful alliterations enrich the musicality of the lines:

And they take lights now down to the water
the lamps float from the rowers
the sea’s claw drawing them outward. (XC/ 627)

[1] In “Richard of St. Victor and “Rock-Drill”, *Paideuma*, Vol. 3. No. 2 (Fall 1974): 221–222, D. James Neault first discovered Pound’s misunderstanding, but did not mention the strangeness of “reperetur”.



Although in Pound's view this Ligurian ritual re-enacts the myth of Adonis' sacrificial death and rebirth as it repeatedly appeared in the quite different Canto XLVII^[1]—the stream of red lights, standing for Adonis's blood—what catches the eye here is a marked opposition in color and movement. First, there is a contrast between the visual flow of paradisaic lights, almost a procession of spirits rising upward towards the intensity and clarity of vision, and the flow of hundreds of red votive candles being seized by a rapacious, maritime claw and drawn out into the deep sea darkness. Second, the opposition between ascent and the downward movement of mariners taking the lights down to the water creates an image and rhythm recalling the opening of Canto I, with Odysseus going down to the ships at the start of the *nekuya*, which often recurs in various subject-rhymes of descent, here reinforced by the funereal votive candles. The motif of descent toward darkness is further enhanced by the immediately following line, “De fondo” said Juan Ramon”, a chasm of darkness undergirding all creation, aptly rendered by the allusion to Juan Ramon Jimenez's last verse collection, *Animal de fondo* (1949): the poet is an animal of the depths. Towards the end of the canto, a further counterpoint emerges, when chthonic spirits rise up “out of Erebus” no “shades more”, ascending and delivered by the great ritual of resurgence now taking place. Yet, among the ascending shades, the dark shade of Elektra, “bowed still with the wrongs of Aegisthus” (XC/629) overshadows and seems to resist their transformation into the “lights enkindled”. Elektra reminds us of Pound's translation and may act as a temporary persona of the poet, in spite of his courageous struggle out of despair and the hell of St. Elizabeths.

As elsewhere in *The Cantos*, certain images threaten “the kind of clarity at which the writing seems to aim.” (Nicholls: 541). In *Rock-Drill*'s paradise, the eye and the light have imperceptibly acquired an uncertain hue by the recurring hints at the closeness between light and darkness. As Pound learnt from Boris's *Massime degli antichi Egiziani*, the two principles of good and evil may coexist, as in the invented deity of Ra-Set. In Pound's ideogrammic method, theme and counter-theme go side by side, neither quite canceling the other out, while dissociations and discriminations require a prompt awareness to catch various manners of relations. However, in *Rock-Drill*, the forces of darkness seem to have imperceptibly shifted from outer “enemies of contemplation” to an enemy within, which may subtly surface when the forces of darkness cease to be projected out into usurious menaces. This uncertain, complex, and contradictory approach to “light imagery” takes us back to Cavalcanti's *Canzone* and to Pound's intentional choice of replacing Cavalcanti's darkness with Dantean light, thus effecting a strange proximity between light and darkness. Perhaps Pound did not really ignore the dark side of Cavalcanti's love,^[2] or perhaps, what the mind's eye experiences in human and poetic contemplation may be, not divine ecstasy, but a relation between opposites.

[1] For a more hopeful interpretation of Adonis's ritual death, see Massimo Bacigalupo, “Canto XLVII” in *Readings in the Cantos II*. Actually, the two cantos differ profoundly in that Canto XLVII metaphorically presents Adonis's death and rebirth as part of “ancient rites repeating themselves serenely through the millenia”, while in Canto XC, Adonis's sacrifice offers no compensation.

[2] Agamben, Brenet, *Intelletto d'amore*, 20–21. Agamben explores the *Canzone*'s Averroist leanings, partly subscribing to recent interpretations that deny the connection between visual perception, love and knowledge, placing love exclusively in the sensitive part of the soul and radically separating cognition from sight and the experience of love. Brenet in his turn, adds considerations on “ittisal” —what Pound repeatedly alludes to as a union with the object-maintaining, on the contrary, that union with the whole entails abolishing the image. In his view, “ittisal”, or the conjunction with the object, is a controversial issue in Averroes.

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