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Ian F A Bell

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Ian F A Bell

‘Work Unbartered’: Labour and Time in Pound’s Cantos of the Late 1930s

Documents testify to a particular labour of textuality—to the poetic work of a transmission and transformation of history and value. Pound’s Cantos of the late 1930s *The Fifth Decad of Cantos* (1937) and *Cantos LII–LXXI* (1940) explore such labour through the founding of a bank, the Monte dei Paschi in sixteenth-century Siena, the reforms instigated in Tuscany during the eighteenth century by the Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo and his son Ferdinando, the history of China through to the eighteenth century, and the career of John Adams. The documentarist urgencies of these Cantos sustain their general predilection for a stability based upon natural abundance and correct forms of government, a predilection which seeks authority from linguistic precision: in Canto *LXVIII*, for example, shortly after rendering Adams’s view on depreciation, Pound adds the Ching Ming ideogram to Adams’s sense of ‘the importance of an early attention to language/for ascertaining the language’ (*LXVIII/4W*).¹

In a sequence that is so alive to the factual colouring of documents as its principal procedure, it is not surprising to find Adams insisting upon linguistic reciprocities in 1780, the same year as the letter from which Pound quotes above:

It is not to be disputed that the form of government has an influence upon language, and language in its turn influences not only the form of government, but the temper, the sentiments, and manners of the people.²

What is surprising is that Pound makes no use of this passage. Even more surprisingly, he omits Adams’s views on the ‘latitude’ for differences of definition in legislative language which ‘allows a scope for politicians to speculate, like merchants with false weights, artificial credit, or base money, and to deceive the

¹ All references to the Cantos are from *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1972). I follow the convention of giving the Canto number followed by the page number.

² John Adams, *The Works*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850–56), VII, 249.