PART ONE  TOWARD THE VORTEX

For the nobleness of the populace brooks nothing below its own altitude.

One must have resonance, resonance and sonority, ... like a goose.

My little mouth shall gobble in such great fountains

Such lines, applying devices learned from James, locate their subject in a mode of thought habitual with him: the steady generosity of response to things happening, alert with its epithet when the happening veers toward unsatisfactoriness. The Homage to Sextus Propertius (1917) was achieved by a mind filled with James's prose, the entire canon of which Pound reread between the Master's death (January 1916) and The Little Review memorial issue (August 1918). Not only the ghost of the Latin elegiac couplet presides over its way of dividing discourse, but the great ghost also, "phantom with weighted motion," that drank (he wrote thenabouts) "the tone of things," and spaced its discourse with suspenseful deliberateness.

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They say, among the many things they say, that some thousand years before Trojans founded Rome a scholar named Tsang-kié was commanded by his emperor to invent Writing, and took his inspiration from bird tracks in the fluvial sand, by whose print we know what songs were heard here. Whence men write today all birds' feet do, in little clustered lines. And a man may write I, which means doing things properly and looks as if it ought to, and may draw the sleeves of the shamaness dancing in a ritual to summon the spirits to descend, and combine the two signs to mean ritual or witchcraft, as you will, though the sign of propriety ensures that it will be acceptable witchcraft. This is called wu. And we may draw the rain falling from clouds, the top horizontal stroke being heaven from which the clouds hang, and set underneath three rain-drops, thus denoting the word ling, which means fall as the big drops fall on a parched day. Then set wu under ling, and out of all the lings that chime through Chinese speech, and mean in different tones and contexts a multitude of unrelated things, you have designated the ling which means the spirit or energy of a being, in harmony with the invisible and by ritual drawing down benefice: we may say, sensibility. It is used of the work of poets, denoting their reach into the realm of the natural (and the drops look like mouths; hence Pound's "under the cloud / the three voices" 104/740:766); and is used in the History Classic of the Emperors of Chou, whose virtue, an attunement with the invisible, won them their commission to execute heaven's decree. "Our dynasty came in because of a great sensibility" (85/543:579) ran Pound's gloss on this context, meditating the History Classic in the Chestnut Ward of St. Elizabeths Hospital. China had lost hold of ling and fallen to barbarian ideologies, Chiang's western or Mao's Stalinist, according to your system of disapprovals. The military governor of Sinkiang province had (1949) jumped to the winning side; such things had happened before; one lives through them. At first he thought the poet Mao possessed ling, but before long Mao's men were harassing Confucians. In the State Department a few miles from the poet's cell the winning side had persuasive American spokesmen. Like the I Ching's divining sticks, the ideogram, being part of a system of archetypes, should govern such bewildering facts had we but the wit to apply it. For 30 years it had been Pound's Sisyphean lot to read and misread newspaper facts in the light of the archetypes with which his mind vibrated, never willing to concede a shift of dimension between crystalline myth and the polymorphous immediate. In St. Elizabeths he continued this habit.

Meanwhile another part of his mind ran back on James, whose effort to constate, in every nuance, the present ("...where we have, in a manner of speaking, got to") is juxtaposed on the last page of Canto 87 with the sign for the Point of Rest; thence (by association) with the great ling, its propriety, its spirits, its clouds and celestial voices. James knew much of spirits, James celebrated rituals, James's great sensibility brought in a generation.

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