I would like to take as my starting point the words of W. B. Yeats in the consummately peridious text he wrote for *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936: in *The Cantos* “Ezra Pound has made flux his theme […] He hopes to give the impression that all is living, that there are no edges, no convexities, nothing to check the flow”; however, despite this intention, the style of the poem “is constantly interrupted, broken, twisted into nothing by its direct opposite, nervous obsession, nightmare, stammering confusion […]”. Even where there is no interruption [Pound] is often content, if certain verses and lines have style, to leave unbridged transitions, unexplained ejaculations, that make his meaning unintelligible” (Yeats 9). Yeats is anything but laudatory in his appraisal, but he does have a point: the dynamics of flux and rupture, *cut* and *flow* are indeed at the very heart of Pound’s poetics in *The Cantos*. One need go no further than the first word of the poem, the conjunction of coordination *AND* which, by supposedly connecting what comes before with what comes after, suppresses all possibility of an origin (the poem begins *in medias res*) — despite the fact that it introduces a version of what is perhaps the oldest surviving text of the Western literary tradition, Homer’s account of Odysseus’s journey to the Land of the Dead.

The way Ezra Pound uses *AND* here and in the following Cantos is very intriguing. Placed at the beginning of the verse-line, *AND* very often introduces a new subject, a new situation, a new sequence, as in Canto 2: “And the wave runs […] And by the beach-run, Tyro […] And by Scios […] And of a later year […] And So-shu churned [...] And we have heard […] And…”. The conjunction thereby introduces a disjunction, the connector both connects and disconnects; at one and the same time, it maintains the flow and cuts the flow. In standard grammatical use, the conjunction of coordination assures continuity between two or more *homogenous* series. Here, *AND* provokes a rupture, a gap between blocks of *heterogeneous* subject-matter. As a result, *AND* does not belong to either block. In topology, this kind of cut is called “irrational” because it belongs to none of the sets which it divides; it is no more the end of one than the beginning of another. *AND* here is in-between; it serves as an interstice which, in a sense, is prior to the association-dissociation, conjunction-disjunction of heterogeneous elements which it effectuates. In the words of Ernest Fenollosa, “Relations are more real and more important than the things which they relate” (Fenollosa 54). The *AND*-method becomes particularly complex in the post-war cantos. The textual elements are not linked together or enchanged using rational cuts, but are divided up and re-enchanged using irrational ones. Pound does not give us an empirical sequence of facts or events; he composes series, and series of series — a generalised serialism — through which are created “free indirect” relations, contacts independent of spatiotemporal distance, the word *AND* representing in each case the broken ring of their conjunction.

The very terms *cut* and *flow* are key-words in the Cantos. The sharpness of the intaglio contrasts with the formlessness of water in all its aspects. But we would be wrong to see the contrast between *cut* and *flow* in terms of opposition or, worse, contradiction. Each idea invokes the other, as in the following examples: “the celestial Nile, blue deep./cutting low barren land” (5/17); “And the water there in the cut/ Between the two lower meadows” (20/90); “with a sky wet as ocean/ flowing with liquid slate […] the red and white stripes/ cut clearer against the slate/ than against any other distance” (80/514). This last extract continues as follows, “the blue field melts with the cloud-flow/ To communicate and then stop, this is the law of discourse”, where the quotation from the Confucian *Analects* transposes the idea of *flow* and *cut* from weather to writing. Likewise, the dynamism of flux and rupture is at the heart of Pound’s conception of melody and rhythm: “Rhythm is a form cut into TIME, as a design is determined SPACE” (*ABC of Reading* 198); “The performing musician cuts his form in the air and in the time flow. He writes it as in less stable water” (*Guide to Kulchur* 170).

The rhetorical hydraulics of the vorticist may seem a far cry from the aesthetics of incision typical of the imagist. However, in *ABC of Reading*, Pound warns us that: “If you can’t think of imagism or phanopoiea as including the moving image, you will have to make a really needless division of fixed image and praxis or action” (*ABC*, 52). *Needless* because, in the words of Fenollosa, “Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snap-shots” (Fenollosa 46). That is why Pound elects the Chinese written character as a medium for poetry: “Like nature, the Chinese words are alive and plastic, because *thing and action* are not formally separated” (*GK* 50). The essence of the bamboo is not its shape, but the way it grows: the Chinese “have this in their sign for bamboo, all designs of bamboo proceed from it” (Pound, *GK* 59). In our Indo-European languages, however, a noun designates “a thing arbitrarily cut off from its power of action” (Pound, *GK* 51). Given that nothing in Nature is thus cut off, “nounising” constitutes an abstraction.

Now it so happens that the French philosopher Henri Bergson had reached the same conclusions a few years earlier. The vorticists were familiar with Bergson’s writings: Wyndham Lewis followed his lectures at the Collège de France, and T.E. Hulme translated his *Introduction to Metaphysics*. According to Bergson, all bodies change
their form from one moment to the next, or rather “there is no form, since form is static and reality is movement. What is real is the continuous changing of form: form is only a snap-shot taken of a transition” (Bergson, L’Évolution créatrice 302). The Chinese translate thing — for Westerners an individualising notion — by “east-west” (dong-xi); and landscape — for us a unifying notion — by “high and low”, “mountains-waters.” According to Fenollosa, the majority of Indo-European roots are not nouns but verbs: “The verb must be the primary fact of nature, since motion and change are all that we can recognize in her” (Fenollosa 51). As for adjectives, the qualities they designate are also powers of action: “Green is only a certain rapidity of vibration, hardiness a degree of tenseness in cohering” (Fenollosa 52). Likewise, just as “our actual and seemingly instantaneous perception divides matter up into independent objects, so does our memory solidify into perceptible qualities the continuous flow of things” (Bergson, Matière et Mémoire 236). A single perception-image concentrates within its apparent simplicity an incommensurable number of electromagnetic vibrations. Human perception is less a question of pictures in motion than of picturing movement. Whatever he might have felt about the philosophy of Bergson, Pound certainly adopts his vision of Nature as a heterogeneous multiplicity of interpenetrating elements evolving in time, rather than a homogenous multiplicity of solid objects arranged in space. We need look no further than Canto 2 in order to understand the consequences of such a shift in the way we apprehend the physical world.

The middle section of Canto 2 begins with a topographical observation: “And by Scios, / to left of the Naxos passage. / Naviform rock overgrown” (2/7). As we read the Canto we come to realise that the adjective “naviform” is more than just a comparison: the rock was once a boat. We are not told so directly, but are led to deduce this, in accordance with the allusive method dear to Confucius: “I hold up one corner (of a subject), if he [the student] cannot turn the other three, I do not repeat (come back to the matter)” (Confucius 219). Despite its proverbial solidity, then, the rock is the product of a metamorphosis, in fact the last in a whole series of metamorphoses. As in Chinese aesthetics or contemporary physics, a substantial state (thing) appears as the moment of an operation (action), even if the operation in this case is supernatural, being due to the “bust thru” of a god. The episode referred to here is commonly taken to be that in which Poseidon turns the Phaiakian ship into a rock as she enters her home port (Odyssey 13/163). However, Homer does not situate the city of the Phaiakians “by Scios” to left of the Naxos passage” in the Cycloades. If, then, the rock is more than just a static element in a seascape, if it is indeed a “lieu de mémoire” (a site of memory), the narrative that appertains to it — and which explains the shift from present to past tense — does not concern Odysseus but Acoetes and his admonitory tale to King Pentheus, taken from Book 3 of Ovid’s Metamorphoses.

While stopping off at the isle of Scios for fresh water, the vessel piloted by Acoetes picks up “a young boy loggy with vine-must” who wants to go to Naxos. The rest of the crew decide to sell the passenger at the nearby slave-market, knock Acoetes into the fore-stays and take the boat off its course. The boy comes to: “God-sleight then, god-sleight”. All at a sudden the ship, and with the ship the verse-line, stop moving: the heavily stressed monosyllables and repeated sibilants of “Ship stock fast in sea-swirl” underline the difficulty in which the boat finds itself. However, according to Bergson and Fenollosa, reality is movement: if one type of movement is hampered, another inevitably takes its place. From extensive (kata topon), the ship’s movement becomes intensive (kata poiion): the previous locomotion — motion from one locus to another — is converted into élan vital. Sap circulates once again within the wooden planks of the vessel; tendrils and creepers, leaves and fruit encumber the deck: “Ivy upon the oars, King Pentheus./ grapes with no seed but sea-foam./ Ivy in scupper-hole.” The locomotive force was not lost, it has been transformed into morphogenesis.

Whereas Ovid simply wrote: “Around [the boy-god] lay phantom shapes of wild beasts, tigers and lynxes and panthers with dappled skins” (Ovid 91), Pound develops the “magic moment” of divine “bust thru” so as to stress its dynamism and reconstitute the process. All the bodily senses are appealed to, touch and smell even more so than hearing and sight. Ex nihilo, “out of nothing,” the touch of hot breath enwraps Acoetes’ ankles. Then, little by little, panthers, lynxes and leopards emerge from black air “like shadows in glass” — another Biblical echo: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face” (1 Corinthians 13. 12). Acoetes hears the sniffing and purring of the big cats, their soft “pad-foot”, long before he can perceive their forms: in fact he sees little more than “a furred tail upon nothingness” or the glitter of their eyes in the black air. “[W]here tar-smell had been”, he now senses the “heathery smell of beasts,” and looks in amazement upon “void air taking pelt” (2/8). It is at this precise moment that a further metamorphosis takes place: the members of the crew turn into fish and porpoises, while Dionysus press-gangs Acoetes into his priesthood.

In keeping with the fugal structure of the poem, Pound introduces the metamorphosis theme in counterpoint to that of “Live man goes down into world of Dead” (Selected Letters 210), which was the subject of the previous canto. Whereas Odysseus, the principal narrator of Canto I, places the onus on what he did, Acoetes relates what he saw and felt. Pound thereby opposes the actions of the former with the passions of the latter, but behind this opposition lies a second, more fundamental one, and which explains the overwhelming presence of Confucian thought in the Cantos: the difference between a poetics of action — epic and heroic — and an aesthetics of transformation. As François Jullien points out in Dialogue sur la morale, action belongs to an autonomous and voluntary agent, whereas transformation, for as much as it affects the milieu in its entirety, cannot be assigned to a single subject. An action can always be located in time and space whereas a process stretches out into duration. An action is by nature spectacular; a transformation is often discreet, even imperceptible, at least at its
beginning. An action is in part arbitrary and transcendent; it intervenes in the course of things; transformation is none other than the course of things itself (Jullien 131). That is why metamorphosis is the action of nobody; it proceeds from the situation, as its natural consequence. Admittedly, we have discovered the traits of a god in those of the boy passenger, but is it true to say that Dionysus acts in the same way as Odysseus, for example? His simple presence is enough to spark off the process of transformation. What is Dionysus after all, but the mythological objectification of the process itself, the god of chaos and metamorphosis?

Acoetes does not act any more than Dionysus. On the contrary, he is subjected to the actions of those who surround him: the mutineers beat him up, Dionysos makes him a priest without giving him a say in the matter, and Penetheus throws him into prison. Far from initiating an action of which he would be the agent, Acoetes assumes the role of witness or martyr, repeating the claim, “I have seen what I have seen.” By placing the onus not on what he did but on what happened to him and to the rest of the crew, Acoetes underlines the “eventful” nature of the event, that part of any event which escapes the will of human beings and brushes aside all their vain attempts to foresee and master it. An event has its own laws and its own constants to which we would be well advised to pay attention. No event, were it purely historical, is devoid of “internal articulations”; “There are critical points in events,” writes Charles Péguy in Clío (230-231), “just as there are critical points in temperature, points of fusion, of freezing; of boiling, of condensation; of coagulation; of crystallisation.” Nothing is as mysterious “as those profound points of conversion, as those upheavals, as those renewals, as those profound recommencements. They are the very secret of the event.” For instance, the situation has become critical, you see no way out of it, “And then all of a sudden, it is as if nothing had happened and you are in a new people, in a new world, in a new man” (Péguy 269). This sudden alteration, this “bust thru” to which both Péguy and Pound refer, what is it, if not the principal theme of all true artistic endeavour? Whether it concern narrative fiction, collective myth or historical reality, an event is never simply reported; on the contrary, its artistic elaboration consists in revealing its virtual, untimely and non-empirical dimension. That is why the structure of a literary work can shed light on the deepest workings of an event, its internal articulations espousing those of the event itself.

In his attempt to illustrate the critical moments of any event, Péguy draws his comparisons from the phases of transition which affect water: freezing-point, boiling-point, condensation, coagulation, crystallisation… The event punctuates (cuts) the time-flow, but the cut is a mobile cut: rather than arrest the flow, it brings about a change in its nature. What is more, the change is engendered by the flow itself: the Dionysian “bust thru” is less transcendent than immanent; it does not descend upon the process from above or without, it emerges from within. This becomes particularly clear in the Confucian cantos, where the flow of reality is none other than the tao, or the “water-course way.”

Just as Ulysses “went down to the ship” in the first canto, Confucius makes his entry in The Cantos by proceeding downwards; “KUNG walked/ by the dynastic temple/ and into the cedar grove,/ and then out by the lower river bank, [Confucius] said: it is what passes like [water], indeed, not stopping day, night” (Confucius 231). In consequence, men and women should model their behaviour on that of water: “If human intelligence also followed its natural tendency, it would be all the greater” (Mencius 170).

A similar scene is to be found in Canto 83, preceded by Heraclitus’ dictum, “Everything flows”: "or [panta rhei]/ as he was standing below the altars/ of the spirits of rain/ "When every hollow is full/ it moves forward"/ to the phantom mountain above the cloud” (83:549-550). According to Marcel Conche, the river of Heraclitus and the Chinese Tao are cultural answers to the same cosmic intuition: the Way of all ways is none other than “perpetual mutability itself” (Lao Tseu 42) “Standing on a river-bank, [Confucius] said: it [i.e., everything] is what passes like that [water], indeed, not stopping day, night” (Confucius 231). Mencius develops the analogy: “Water springs from the source, whirling ceaselessly day and night. When every hollow is full, it moves forward until it reaches the four seas […]. Such is the way with those who have depth” (Mencius 166). Pound confounds this scene with his own situation, one September day at the Disciplinary Training Center near Pisa in 1945. Like Confucius on the river-bank, he watches the early morning mist fill the valley of the Arno and rise — instead of descend — towards the phantom mountain above the cloud,” whose summit he equates with Taishan, the “Peak of the East”, Confucian China’s most sacred mountain: “There is September sun on the pools/ Plura dialfana/ Heliads lift the mist from the young willows/ there is no base seen under Taishan/ but the brightness of ‘udor [hudor]/ the poplar tips float in brightness/ only the stockade posts stand” (83:550-551). The swirling of the mist is suggested by the implicit association of the Heliads, the daughters of Helios, and the Greek word helike, “willow”, but also “spiral”. As in Chinese painting, the evaporation of water (hudor) corresponds less to a sharply defined state of things than to the passage from one state to another, between the opposing stages of actualisation and non-differentiation. It is a question of painting the transformation, the transitional phases, “When some of the rain has fallen/ and half remains yet to fall” (83:550).

The following lines of Canto LXXXIII equate the watery mist (hudor) with the cosmic breath (qi) which bathes and nourishes everything in existence. Pound quotes Mencius once again: “And now the ants seem to stagger/ as the
dawn sun has trapped their shadows,/ this breath wholly covers the mountains/ it shines and divides/ it nourishes by its rectitude/ does no injury/ overstanding the earth it fills the nine fields to heaven/ Boon companion to equity/ it joins with the process” (83/551, and Mencius 151). The "process" is none other than the Tao itself, already present in the play of sunlight (yang) and shadow (yin) which affects even the smallest of beings, ants or soldiers in the distant drill-fields. Pound partakes of the process through his absorption in the fluctuations of the landscape ("mountains-water"); the resulting poem actualises the interaction not only between Heaven and Earth — “the sun as a golden eye/ between dark cloud and the mountain” — but also between the poles of inside and outside, between what the poet sees and what he feels, between the landscape (jing) and the emotion (qing) which it inspires in him.

That is how, in the very words of Mencius, “the sense of morality and the Tao are brought into harmony.” What is the lesson that Pound draws from such an experience? “Non combattore” said Giovanna/ meaning, as before stated, don't work so hard” (83/551). There follow three ideograms taken from the Book of Mencius, meaning “Don’t help to grow.” This is a reference to the anecdote about the man of Song who, annoyed that his plants were not growing fast enough, decided to pull on them. Returning home early, he tells his family: “I'm exhausted, I've been helping the shoots to grow.” His son rushes outside to see and finds the plants already withered (Mencius 78). Despite his contempt for the “taosers”, Pound adopts in this canto an ethics of non-intervention, or rather of “acting without acting” (wei wu wei) close to Taoism. One should give time to time and refrain from forcing the processes of nature. The vital energy (qi) that irrigates the “ten thousand beings” must be allowed to unfold at its own rhythm: the desire to “help” will only hinder and stunt it. But if it is left to its own devices, if it is allowed to follow its own course, then it will enjoy its full extension, not only in the world about us, but also in our own hearts, filling “the nine fields to heaven.” In other words, nothing will cut the flow.
Works Cited


