



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 20, 2021

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



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A Comparative Study of Ezra Pound's Cantos on the domain of symbolism and W. B. Yeats's occultism through A Vision

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Abstract. *The Cantos* by Ezra Pound serves in a quintessential way to focus on the Modernist idea of literature. By defining the Modernist movement, it is emphasized in what aspects this movement penetrates the monumental poem, *The Cantos*. Alongside showing a sequence as to how modernism was formed and developed in time, the research provides a deeper understanding through Ezra Pound's modernist perception and W. B. Yeats's occultism over his work of art, *A Vision*. Pound's epic poem, *The Cantos* and Yeats's unique work, *A Vision* fulfill the need of a literary satiation in The Modernist period. By juxtaposing *The Cantos* and Yeats's occultist perspective, the research probes the extent that the two works create a literary escapism, which attempts to balance the sanctity of human sanity. In the Modernist period, the period of picturing the frustration of the First World War, the interrelation of these works of art turns out a reflection of a literary recuperation from the cataclysm led by The Modernist world.

Keywords. Modernism, occultism, symbolism, history, mysticism.

Introduction

As 19th and 20th centuries witnessed great catastrophes, disasters, and wars, the literature these centuries became a mirror in which the desperate and fallen men's dreams vanished. As a matter of fact, both centuries displayed access of symmetry whereby humanity sought an asylum or shelter to protect themselves from the atrocities of those times. Therefore, the literary tendency towards those eras paved the way for a literary escape from the disillusionments of the late 19th and 20th centuries. The ultimate purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and W. B. Yeats's *A Vision* fill the void left by the Modernist world. In presenting the Modernist period, the research also provides an answer why occultism is crucial to Yeats's poetry and *The Cantos*.

Modernism began to be cultivated shortly after the First World War in the late 1920s. After the First World War, people began to question the reasons of the turmoil and major upheavals of the day. People's faith in authority fade into oblivion and in this point, modernism turned out a reaction to the chaos of the period, which created a breaking point in the way of people grasped the period. The era was labelled as a predicted break with the conventional point of view. According to Pericles Lewis (2007), considering the fact that Modernism come out as a reaction to the frustration of the First World War, it continually sought a new angle of literary history to rescue civilization in the chaotic period. As Modernism became a label for ideas that struggled with the challenges of the day, the expression of history was demarcated by the Modernists including T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme and W. B. Yeats.

Towards the end of the era, the effects of the First World War left considerable marks on politics, society and financial regulation of the era which inevitably affected Modernist poetry in terms of breaking with past. Furthermore, Peter Howarth (2011) addressed that the change in perspective paved the way for the fact that people of the era showed tendency to search for inner self. In this sense, For Patrick Deane (2015), catastrophic consequences of the First World War led those who left behind into a mystical circle in the hope of relief. By presenting this mystical relation and even deeper understanding of occultism in which Yeats's *A Vision* is surrounded by, the research focused on the link of similitudes and differences between Yeats's perception of occultism and Pound's Modernist approach.

According to Pericles Lewis (2007) the term Modernism describes a way of seeking a new frame of art that had the capability to rescue civilization from the First World War's cataclysm. The internal before the First World War foreshadowed a time of profound changes in literature. The roots of Modernism are based upon the representation of drastic changes towards the end of 19th century, and through the whole period of the war. The perception of Modernism raised in Europe shortly after the First World War spread to American literature by the late 1920s.

Since the wars (including Balkan and the 1st World War) shook the faith of people and led them fall into an ambiguity, in the periods of the pre- and post- First World War, both Pound and Yeats were involved in the issues of the era. On the basis of the consequences of the First World War, Easter Rebellion and Irish Civil War, Yeats initiated a search for a way to render the cataclysm of the period in his poetry. Following a good deal of research, he directed his attention to spiritual history. With regard to politics of the period and his unrequited love affair with Maud Gonne, the disillusionments inclined him to an internal quest. Yeats's occult knowledge subsequently was uncovered in his poetry. The perception of occultism is the fundamental impetus in Yeats's attitude to poetry whereas the Modernist approach is an inseparable part of Ezra Pound. Pound responds to the upheavals of the period in his own way. His harsh politics over the era are identified with his monumental work, *The Cantos*. His epic poem embraces a kind of anthology of the Modernist period by intertwining philosophical, mythical, ancient and political history.

The role of *The Cantos*' and *A Vision* in The Modernist Period

According to Pericles Lewis (2007), Pound's monumental 1917 poem, *The Cantos* is one of the most significant poems in Modernist literature and it describes Pound's principal social and economic concerns. About the Modernist period, *The Cantos* embodies the themes of economics, society and history in which Pound sought to fulfill the void in life throughout his literary career. In the poem, Ezra Pound conveys how all these principals could be intertwined with one another. In representing Modernist notions, Pound reflects the early view of the twentieth century which was shaped as Modernism. To give an example, *Canto XLV* of Ezra Pound is about usury that is simply defined as lending money at unreasonable interest rates and how it corrupts society and art. "With usura hath no man a house of good stone, each block cut smooth and well fitting that design might cover their face, with usura hath no man a painted paradise on his church wall". These lines, written in free verse, mean that the concept of 'the house' employs more than a concrete one. On the surface, people found it difficult to afford what they were involved in as economic situation, but on a deeper layer, this economic disruption caused the degeneration of moral codes. Historically, Pound's *Cantos* is accepted as being primarily a text uses an economic interpretation of historical processes. For example, reflected by Ezra Pound (1996) *Canto XXXI-XLI* is known as *Eleven New Cantos* including such lines, "No slaves north of Maryland district ...", "flower found in Connecticut that

vegetates when suspended in air”, Excellency Mr. Adams. Excellency Dr. Franklin. And thus Mr. Jefferson (president) to Tom Paine: You express a wish to get a passage to this country in a public vessel”. Throughout *Canto XXXI*, Pound utilizes many quotes from the writings of American politicians to show the historical process of United States as well as the banking system from *Canto XXXIII* such as “but to keep in countenance the funding and the banking system ... orations, prayers, sermons .../ not that loved General Washington, but merely to disgrace the old Whigs”. The beginning of *Eleven New Cantos* focuses on historical background system leads to social deterioration through the course of the history. Christine Froula (2018) states that *Usury* in *Canto XLV* nullifies social rights, fine houses, fine art and fundamental needs. That’s to say, the right of living with dignity every human being has turns to a feeling of deprivation. *Canto XLV* is a kind of literary warning to forthcoming the fall off moral values over *Usura* Pound portrays. Considering the fact that the causes of the First World War include political, economic and national issues, this economical disturbance creates a sense of impending doom pictured by the poem. The disillusionments of the late 19th and early 20th centuries paved the way for humanity to seek an asylum spiritually in order to protect themselves from those chaotic times. In parallel to how Ezra Pound depicts a vivid picture of the atrocities of the era, W. B. Yeats reflects his own depiction of the modernist world in the way which incorporated in having the state of being accountable for his poetry. In the 1920s, surrounded Easter Rising and the Irish Civil War, Yeats sought for a response to the chaos through the mystical theories of history in his work, *A Vision*. Yeats deeply held the belief that it was possible to establish a connection with his mystical portrayal of literature world. In this point, Yeats got closer for the fallen men’s dream to fulfill the void caused by the First World War. According to Peter Howarth (2011), the appearance of *A Vision* is attributed to his wife George Yeats by spiritual ‘instructors’ in instinctive writing meetings, George Yeats claims writing visions without conscious through a kind of trance, mirroring his own fright that it was but an imagination. “Some will ask if I believe all that this book contains, and I will not know how to answer” Yeats had tendency to overthink on the extent that the occult knowledge fills his poetry.

Peter Howarth (2011) restates Alex Owen’s idea of that most people had the tendency towards the occult between the 1880s and 1930s because this spiritual world was offering a better warranty to fill the void, and a sort of spiritual power to endure the circumstances of the Modern world.

Yeats’s Occultism and Pound’s perspective to symbolism

The term, Occultism, in its simplest form, means a belief or influence of supernatural things. Leon Surette (1994) mentions that the term had risen against materialistic points of view and scientific disciplines, and a kind of questioning over the institution of Christianity. The term ‘occult’ is profoundly associated with black magic, wizardry, voodoo and shamanism embodied with supernatural creatures like ghosts and devils. For Yoko Chiba (2004), all sorts of occultism are attributed to traditions dating back to the antiquity. Yeats dedicated much of his literary career to the survey of the tradition and Yeats became an inseparable part of every single angle of *The Theosophical Society and MacGregor Mother’s Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* which enabled him to form the mystical methods of *A Vision*.

Leon Surette (1994) clarifies that occultism defines itself as the inheritor of the wisdom of antiquity by tapping into a history of mysticism from master to master, or as reinvented in each different generation by the way of mystical insight. The occult, in a sense, is considered as a belief that human beings, distinctive ones, had a kind of connection with the divide and from this touch had acquired divine knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, which they sought

to protect in documents maintained by secret societies. In addition, the oral traditions of communities contributed to spread the revelation of transcendental initiation with the divine.

As for W. B. Yeats's literary link to the term, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* was considered as a milestone for his literary career because it was a sort of retrospection into how his numerous spiritual notions had given him inspiration to go down that road. *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* is regarded as the best starting point for Yeats's esoteric doctrines and the revelation of those doctrines through poetry written between 1914 and 1939. In this work, Yeats's poetry is associated with a magical substructure due to its content. In *Per Amica*, Yeats (2014) declares that his poetry is intertwined with the occult by defining his formalized Jewish tradition, however its focal point turns into an esoteric, occult approach to emphasize the esoteric perception of his poetry. This work paves the way for Yeats to make a part of his own inner being.

Pericles Lewis (2007) conveys when it comes to the fact that the occult perception in *A Vision*, it is a unique metahistorical masterpiece and has been a label for critical and imagistic connotations in Madame Blavatsky's (a Russian occultist) and Yeats substantially was influenced by her viewpoints reflected in *Secret Doctrine*, which is embodied in a collected work of The Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus, the scientist and the philosopher Swedenborg, French author, poet and composer Fabre d'Olivet and so on. This notable work is the synthesis of science, religion and philosophy which holds a magnificent historical background. Both Yeats's literary progress on his poetry and the process of creation of *The Cantos* by Ezra Pound embrace with a deep-rooted historical background in parallel.

For Leon Surette (1994), since the occult can be regarded as a religion on account of the fact that it is a synthesis of the doctrines regarding the divine or the noumenon which shows 'theosophy' as 'god-wisdom'. The occult, then, becomes integrated with the sense of 'god-wisdom', which is identified in doctrines about the mysterious world, metaphysical world and the noumenal; above all else, doctrines are declared as intertwining the philosophical systems of all world religious and straight-forwardly focusing on knowledge and "privileged access" to wisdom. Blavatsky's understanding of the spirits of the deceased, Koot Hoom and Master Morya, one of the heads is Koot Hoom: consulted by Blavatsky and co-founder of Theosophical Society and the other master is Master Morya who gave an inspiration for the foundation of it. The way the appearance of *A Vision* is an example of "privileged access" as it was revealed through George Yeats's automatic writing where W. B. Yeats attempted to ask questions and her wife's hand wrote the answers. Obviously, there had been communication with metaphysical world which make *A Vision* unique. Considering the fact that luminary ones have an edge on communicating over the unenlightened, the occult assumes that divine revelation can be reached only by luminary ones. David Anderson (1938) declares that Pound's translation of *Cavalcanti's Dona mi prega* -dated to the late 13th century- appeared and reissued by *Make it New in the Literary Essay*, and *Canto 36* is obviously attributed to enlightened. Moreover, Leon Surette (1994) gives a quotation written by English author Aldous Huxley:

If one is not oneself a sage or saint, the best thing one can do, in the field of metaphysics, is to study the works of those who were and who, because they had modified their merely human, mode of being, were capable of more than merely humankind and amount of knowledge.

Yeats is one of them who had already reached mastery by having quality of the occult aspect in *A Vision*. In similar way, Ezra Pound's *Cantos* mirrors the representative parts of occultism. *The Cantos* is a trigger to the world of mystery. It can be conveyed that it is imbibed with an esoteric knowledge. The revelation of *The Cantos* is considered as predecessor of the

new historic period. The occult approach of the poem is rendered through the secrecy of the world history. *The Cantos* is a quintessential Modernist work which has the occult roots with the secrecy of history. Leon Surette (1994) demonstrates that even if the transcendental angles of the occult unknowingly disregarded by scholars of the ancient world at first glance, the occult, in fact, had been an inseparable part of ancient doctrines of history. This bond, for Modernists, was exactly the same in which the two (the ancient doctrines and occult) had been become integrated with political, cultural and historical background. To give an example, the Italian Renaissance was triggered by the appearance of enlightened Greek people from the ruined Byzantine empire, which is the epitome of the cultural historical process. In the same way, much of the essence of W. B. Yeats's *Vision* apparently sprang from the history of occultism. This kinship between Yeats's *A Vision* and Pound's *Cantos* draws attention to Yeats's preface with "*A Packet for Ezra Pound*" goes beyond shallow knowledge of historical literature, and mirrors Pound's own universal history. In this point, Leon Surette shows (1994) an approach regarding an occult angle is reflected in *The Cantos*:

How is it possible to ignore the existence of an Occult Power at work in the world? Individuals, sects or races fired with the desire of world domination, have provided the fighting forces of destruction, but behind them are the veritable powers of darkness in eternal conflict with the powers of light.

Pound emphasizes that every moment hides a stimulation. In other words, he conveys that angles of an occult power are inseparable parts of everything. With regard to the essence of Pound's monumental poem, *The Cantos* are deeply attached to every part of an occult power. Leon Surette (1994) holds the idea of that *The Cantos* expose the esoteric approach of his history both as benignant and as malefic, and they are intertwined with the roots of history and the sentiments of the Modernist idea of literature. Ezra Pound starts his poem with a lineage, or nekuaia -with a conjuring of the deceased. Odysseus is the protagonist who conjures up the spirits of the deceased and it shows its own magical rite, and the guidance for the rite come from Circe, who is characterized as a sorcerer. In the frame of *The Cantos*, the beginning symbolizes Odysseus' voyage, which shed lights on Pound's political journey, the integrity of different literary backgrounds, the grand perspective of historical and cultural knowledge, and Pound's tendency towards occult knowledge. Considering resurrection and faith, the poem paves the way for self-consciousness and traveling through the self in the light of the occult. It pursues a kind of traveling through the self by seeking the embodiment of existence in the form of rebirth. In this point, *The Cantos* are "an epic including history", and offer a new way of thinking on how to find a new self in the Modernist world.

Peter Howarth (2011) depicts that *The Preface to A Vision* holds the process of the principal presentations of occult history with the support of his wife George, by using spiritual instructional method of automatic writing sessions. This is a kind of writing that occurs to the writer without being consciously aware of what is written. It could be believed that communication happens by dint of a metaphysical power. In this process, George sought to find a way which would lead Yeats to make sense of his literary career by giving significant messages through spiritual communications. Yeats finally makes clear the fundamental question of "why occultism was essential to his concept of poetry". "Does the word belief, used as they will use it, belong to our age, can I think of the world as there and I here judging it" he questions. In this point, he seeks for an answer upon the chain of being. Peter Howarth (2011) gives quoted lines, "For intellectual no longer knows/ from *the Ought*, or *Knower* from *the Known*". This quotation from *A Dialogue of Self and Soul* illuminates the difference between the inability of earthly life and the magnitude of the competence of poetry to recuperate from

the incompetence reflected by self. These lines are associated with an intense form of becoming self-aware. In this way, Yeats, devoted his literary career to constructing an occult pattern by dint of spiritual messages, which seemed like offering a philosophical way to make an investment in poetry. What Yeats sought to prove was that a transcendental approach to poetry would clarify its influence on the emotions by way of spiritual impetus and reveal the fundamental role of the spiritual world. It is inseparable whole of the association of self-awareness with the spiritual world.

The spiritual search of the period unveils the dark side of the time and has the ability to compensate for the remembrance of a better past. Simultaneously, it would help people of the era recuperate from destroyed and disillusioned emotions reflected by the Modernist world. In this period, seances, astrological approaches and ritual musing seemed an escapism for people who were disenchanted owing to the consequences of the 1st World War. In other words, people needed to find their own self and hold on something that made sense to live up. That's why the concept of self-awareness had to rise in an occult way.

Considering the fact that *The Cantos* is a living repertory of ancient history, the search for self and self-awareness dates back to the genesis of humankind. It is a lifelong search. That's to say, *The Cantos* signifies the literary space that Pound breathes, which is the representation of Pound's beliefs, and the space in which he looks to find his own self-image. Peter Howarth (2011) indicates that even the sea he has to cross stands for his exile from his home, roaming with no purpose, engaging with foreign cultures, even transforming into a psychic and participating in some rituals. Each experience is linked to a sole aim, which is the search for his own self. With the beginning of the 1st World War, the frustration of the war foreshadowed the cataclysm of the Modernist period. To show awareness of the last values of the Modernist period, Yeats and Pound share a common standpoint, which is reunited occultism only by means of their works of art.

The notion of occultism gives wide coverage to Yeats's work, *A vision* whilst a Modernist approach has a unique authority on Ezra Pound's poem, *The Cantos* through the synthesis of symbolism and the modernist movement. In spite of refusing emotional aspect of symbolism, including Ezra Pound, no modern poets can stay away from natural symbolism. As nature creates an imaginative world in one's mind, someone living by this truth only changes his point of view, not the frame of mind itself. To get better understanding of this point of view, Mirko Frollona (2018) shares these lines of Jung's description of an archetype makes sense:

The term 'archetype' is often misunderstood as meaning certain definite mythological images or motifs, but these are nothing more than conscious representations. Such variable representations cannot be inherited. The archetype is a tendency to form such representations of a motif—representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern.

In relation to natural symbolism with an archetype, Pound's creation of images through *The Cantos*, in spite of revealing a risk to be symbolic, does not seem like it's something that he could stay away from. In face of writing through a set of symbols Pound questions this writing style to reflect symbolic approach. In this point, if the poet keeps his point of view to its intended perspective of symbol, he is able to hold his initial perspective without losing the principal tenets. Mirko Frollona (2018) shows that Pound maintained only one way to hold symbolism by taking it as the natural object:

I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man uses 'symbols' he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those

who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk.

As in the quotation is mentioned, Pound conveys that his initial perspective remains unaffected if symbolism holds to the natural object as the basis pattern. Apparently, the bending of creation of images with Pound's approach of the natural object reveals a linkage in peculiar way. To give an example, Ezra Pound (1996) reflects in *The Pisan Cantos LXXIV*:

but the twice crucified
where in history will you find it?
yet say this to the Possum: a bang, not a whimper,
with a bang, not a whimper,
To build the city Dioce whose terraces are the colour of stars.

Carrol F. Terrel (1993) mentions that the city was built by King Deioces. Here Pound uses a natural object such as the city which reveals a symbolist perception to reflect Deioces' desire in order to create a paradisal city. In this point, it makes sense to say that Pound utilizes symbolism by using such images which hold his initial perception.

In parallel to natural symbolism, Herbert Schneidau (1965) claims that Ezra Pound reflects the idea of 'suggestiveness' for the exactness and 'association' of the meaning. It makes sense that Pound made a significant effort to reconcile the contrariety between his initial perception and symbolist approach. Considering its association with occult knowledge, *The Cantos* is a quintessential expression of the Modernist world steeped in the sentiments of symbolism. This means that Pound, along the way of his literary career, had done a good deal of efforts to construct his initial principles. To put into place his perspective, Herbert Schneidau (1965) depicts that Pound had drawn from the oldest times, ancient times, by way of touching Yeats's symbolist aesthetic. In order to reflect the correct meaning of *The Cantos*, Pound pushed the limits of his own modernist principles as, in a way, it was supposed to touch on symbolist approach by describing 'suggestiveness' of the images. Ezra Pound had labored to describe his poem, *The Cantos* by the correct expression through the instrumentality of 'suggestiveness' of symbolism. To give an example, Ezra Pound (1996) states these lines from *The Pisan Cantos*:

"I have not done unnecessary manual labor"
says the R.C. chaplain's field book
(preparation before confession)
squawky as larks over the death cells.

In these lines, it is a kind of ironical reflection about the Catholic church's idleness. Pound here criticizes churchmen to show their worthless efforts by way of utilizing the figure of meaning. Churchmen's words seem like squawk and their efforts are like larks by symbolizing the death cells. It fits into the usage of figure of speech as symbolic archetype.

Conclusion

Ezra Pound's and W. B. Yeats's lifelong interests, the disillusionments and upheavals of the time make them permanent as the principal figures of the Modernist era. The endeavors Pound and Yeats showed over their works of art are a sign of literary escapism. As each movement upholds a purpose, Ezra Pound and Yeats unveil the purpose of their works of art by being a part of the period they lived in. *The Cantos* offer Ezra Pound's personal perspective of politics by clutching onto a profound history whilst *A Vision* reveals the subsequent progression of Yeats's occult knowledge in the sense of poetry. On a deeper scale, it can be pointed out that the disillusionments, frustration and the cataclysm of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries paved the way poetry's purpose to express self-realization and recuperate the nature of human being. Susan Johnston Graf (2000) clearly states that Yeats accepted that art was an instrument

to express spiritual thoughts. For him, by way of art, the author would have the capability to compensate for the things with which people struggled. It answers to what extent art fulfills a literary search. Similarly, shuttling back and forth between ancient times and the late 19th and early 20th centuries, *The Cantos* reveals magnitude of its purpose on the art of poetry. Its purpose is to enlighten the nature of humanity. With Modernist patterns, *The Cantos* unleashes the authenticity of historical background by intertwining occult knowledge on a deeper understanding. What Yeats systemizes runs through a philosophical system that penetrates his work, *A Vision*. It forms the subsequent layers of spiritualism in how it comes to light and its procession in time provides a better understanding of occultism. The occult fulfills the expectations that Yeats seeks for in the same way as Modernist poetic discourse provides a lifelong path for Pound whose system constitutes a unification of the reflections of art of life. The ultimate purpose of *The Cantos* and *A Vision* is to create a literary escapism for humanity from the devastation of the period. This connection between Yeats's *Vision* and Pound's *Cantos* answers the question of why Yeats created a preface of his own occult history through *A Packet for Ezra Pound*. Both Yeats and Pound enable the reader to comprehend the quintessence of human nature from the earliest times to present.

To this end, what makes them unforgettable is that the two significant figures of literature are living parts of the works of art they created. Their art of poetry aims to keep the balance of human nature in the middle of the Modernist period. Their art of poetry occupies a place for a literary escapism from the chaotic modernist world and the insanity of the First World War. They also occupy a kind of recuperation for the ruins of the humanity left behind after the damage of the 1st World War.

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