

EMBROIDERED SONG: JOHN PECK'S CANTILENA

John Peck. *Cantilena*. Shearsman Books, 2016.

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1.

Canto III.19 of *Cantilena* begins with a moment in the boyhood of Peck's poetic self and leaps almost immediately to later reflection; this canto ends where it started in memory:

Chocolate jellybean deer scat, fifteen or twenty
in a tight offering, confirm Thucydides—
migrations, wars, sheer bread he dubs as the shapers
of our condition, not high breakouts in thinking
along the cliff walk of words.
[...]
Young, blinkered, I poked at the primordial—
one edge of it
poking through from the unknowing without end.

For a boy poking around alone in the woods—perhaps somewhere near Peck's childhood and youth, Pittsburgh—"jelly-bean deer scat" is an analogy perfectly in character. The poem puts a push-pin in jokey adolescent analogy-making—so everyday and trivial, for lack of wide knowledge and deep understanding—then it leaps and puts another in an ancient, hallowed perspective on human violence: "migrations, wars, sheer bread he dubs as the shapers / of our condition." The poem leaps from Thucydides twice again—to Walter Benjamin:

not high breakouts in thinking
along the cliff walk of words.
First, uprooted Benjamin: *the immense labor*
set us by fading things, their heap of secret resistances!

And

then unblinking Robert Moses
on his Mississippi Summer, '64:
You're working your way through levels of opposition (in them, in us),
linked mentors of shock-drift then shock-shift:

Two more push-pins, at a distance from each other: those “secret resistances” in “fading things” are analogous to the “levels of opposition” we encounter in a “them” and, crucially, in ourselves too.

Such ideas are deep in the weave of the whole of *Cantilena*. The par-enthetical “(in them, in us)” enacts on a small scale the creation of great “spans” of situating human experience in history (social, political, military, and of art and architecture) while at the same time repeatedly engaging in thinking by bringing opposites together. These opposites are not only of the type we sketch with such words as reason and folly; violence and peace; hatred and compassion; human technology and what we call nature. Peck’s polarities are also psychic opposites which only when wrestled into relation to each other create an emotional path that can at least somewhat remake our fatigued sense of everyday life. This is how “linked mentors of shock-drift” then may lead us through a “shock-shift” to a sense of a new, most truthful, configuration of what we try to learn to live by. Peck’s canto continues:

so is it irrelevance to secure a clearing
admitting wind and rain on even terms
and the next soul coming, and the event?

If we could do that, then

Wintry tussle then Summer struggle
already stand answerable
in the limitless expanse of psukhē—
neither fool nor plebe to whatever forces.

I think that the last line above suggests one might—one must—be neither unprepared and easily deceived, nor a warrior prepared for violence, but something in between... The poem returns us to the woods in which the boy finds deer-scat, but now it becomes a metaphor (another push-pin, on a different plane):

Storm-tossed pines
tossing the clearing, a green swaying scarp
through hours, work toward neither innocence
nor complicity but mime those sieves
that would sort me out.

Natural presences and places “work toward neither innocence nor complicity” (the fool and the plebe) but instead are another analogy—for the “sieves” of history and art and thought and feeling “that would sort me out.”

This canto suggests the necessity of seeking to make sense in some way of the chaotic and the tragic, without yielding to despair or terror:

So down the levels, through heaps: not flailing, not crying out.

Perhaps that's a push-pin in yet another plane of the poem, as it is of existence. And then the end of the canto, which pushes another marker-pin in a spot far from these others, and then returns to the opening moment—the boy's jokey metaphor, when we are asked by the poem to recall it, now seems to signify with its antitheses (jelly beans; shit) a glimpse at the self-contradicting, even self-canceling, yet self-renewing, "primordial." Death and despair, grief and violence, Gandhi believes, can be survived, perhaps overcome:

In Gandhi's fast to near-death
during the Calcutta troubles, to a father who killed
a boy to avenge the murder of his own son,
he whispered hoarsely: *I know a way out of hell.*
Young, blinkered, I poked at the primordial—
one edge of it
poking through from the unknowing without end.

2.

The range of reference in *Cantilena* is enormous. One can easily identify many persons, places, events, on line. Few readers are likely to have Peck's encyclopedic knowledge, but the point is not to identify everything but to sense, to experience as a reader, the leaps from point to point. The leap, the connecting, the mental and emotional effects of the juxtapositions, contrasts and congruences—this is the experience that the book makes available for the reader.

Cantilena is a work of immense size and scope, structured not only sequentially in "four spans" of page-long numbered cantos but also, more intricately by far, in layers ("So down the levels, through heaps") of memory, image, episode, and allusion, and in multiple interweavings of implicit narrative lines. *Cantilena* situates what it depicts—it gives everything a local place, and at the same time a historical and even mythic one. It treats of both individual and large-scale experiences and events; it characterizes and invests with symbolic value certain emblematic geographical spaces; it evokes works of thought, poetry and art, and also real events; it speaks in a voice by turns intimate, privately and publicly memorious, and from a very long historical perspective regarding human actions both small and large. It

explores and enacts the extraordinary mobile linkages of which the human psyche is capable, moving among knowledge and affect, memory and image, experience and study, history and thought.

Perhaps one should say that these linkages are what the human psyche, if we allow it to move fully, is incapable of *not* seeking and enacting. *Cantilena* moves not only in a spirit of discovery but also with a motion very nearly compelled by ethics and by the desire, the attempt, to understand the sense of things as existing or happening within individual, social, political, cultural, historical contexts and linkages.

One of the ways I myself think of poetry is as a longitudinal account of all that human beings have experienced, thought, created, and articulated. What distinguishes poetry from other forms of inquiry and articulation is the richness and power of its articulating, and its astonishingly long history, beginning prehistorically with language itself, and in those early cultures that invented writing systems, surviving somewhat in historical times in the form of remembered and recorded remnants of oral cultures. Poetry is by nature omni-absorbent or omni-creative. Like language itself in this way, it also preserves and uses histories and forms of earlier articulation within itself—it concocts from its materials. Poetry still so often utilizes an alchemical alembic for its experiments rather than the table of elements, and deploys an art of the keen ear, the vivid verbal image, and calisthenic syntax (even as some computer programmers seem to wish to replace the direct human choice with algorithmic generation of poetic lines).

Poetry has had an unceasing energy and appetite for new articulations for their own sake, and for experience and circumstances, whether these are refashioned from the past or address unprecedented aspects of life and reality. Wonders and horrors, lingos and stutterings of one kind or another, rituals and innovations, triumphs and catastrophes, details and practices as well as theories, arguments and theologies, all come into poetry. John Peck's *Cantilena* is an elaborate and amazingly wide-ranging book-length poem that weaves together instances of our sensate, social, physical and psychological powers and vulnerabilities, our remembering and our appetite for connections between, and collections of, what we live and have and know.

Poetry itself—its powers, its history, and all its capacity for meaning-making—seems to call on Peck to think about ultimate resonances and residues of the human. In *Cantilena*, poetry *is* the power of memory and imagination and a mode of associative thinking; in this book poetry attains one of its apotheoses. In its textures, and line by line, the poem is a unique combination of lyric and public poetry. It is a palimpsest in which, however much has been erased, much else has not. Its layers in time are also the lay-

ers in us of human experience, thought, and feeling—of instances of what Edwin Muir simply and modestly called “true images of life.” In part, the poem shows that we are an echoing of the psyches and life trajectories of others. Our inner spaces resound with many forms of the articulations and effects of human purposes—philosophy, science, art, myth, war, politics, religious belief, love...

The structural scale of the poem organizes its great scope. Four “spans,” each of from about 60 to about 120 one-page cantos, carry the reader from the beginning to conclusion, from entering the poem to exiting its suspension bridge. A “cantilena” is a melodic line. The word is Latin but exists in English usage, in which it resounds with church music associations—specifically with a *choral* melodic line without accompanying harmonies or counterpoint. The word has associations that are phonetic—a chief poetic resource, after all—and so I think of the word “catenary,” from Latin *catena*, “chain.” “Catenary” is the shape of the curve—shallow or deep—in which a chain or rope or wire or even one side of an orb-weaver’s web hangs between two points.

From the scale of the single canto to that of the full book, *Cantilena* is also a combinatorial composition, relating its materials to each other locally and across a single span, and from one span to another. Some of the cantos are narrative; some narratives appear in fragments throughout the book; some cantos continue immediately into a second or even third canto—small groupings within the large spans. The texture of the book is vividly imagistic, allusive, and connective—all tissue in this body, one comes to understand, is connective tissue.

I have found that I not only read this poem. I have traveled through it, explored it, doubled back to pick up things here and there that I had left behind when I later discovered that I needed to keep them with me, till the things I carried with me for my own reasons became another sort of structure that the poem allowed me to create for myself. A bag of shells, coins, leaves, words, feathers, images, bones, mental images, talismans. (“Talisman” could be a key word for *Cantilena*, although I do not think it appears in the poem: the lost, reconstructed, extraordinarily ancient form of this word suggests movement and sojourns, and when the word found its way to a later form in ancient Greek, *telein* (related to *telos*), it was a verb meaning to fulfill; to consecrate; to endow with magic power. By this I mean to suggest that *Cantilena* is indeed both a movement through time and history and language, and also many moments of dwelling within a story, a myth, an idea, an image. *Cantilena* is a tapestry of symbols and images that have accrued strong symbolic value, whether positive or negative. The poem does

not lyricize or, except in local or dispersed ways, narrate, yet its language can be lyrical and its connections, over the whole book, form narratives; it is a complex structure of innumerable links; while the links are in some way like those in a chain, they also reticulate their substance into sculptural shapes. At the same time, the poem is a web in which one can travel different routes, from node to node to node (comparison or allusion or analogy or image). Composers, writers, scientists, painters, doctors, politicians, historians, musicians, philosophers, an engineer, and many others populate the poem.

Filled with cameos rather than anecdotes, it is a Dantean collage, but its judgments are not based on Dante's architecture of religious faith. Instead, it seems to have two judges: history... and poetry itself. The reader will also notice that in a Poundian fashion—by juxtaposition, association, and chronological leaping—Peck has created a vast imagined “spatial form” (a literary term coined by Joseph Frank long ago). We might even see it as a group of mosaics, but rather than forming complex framed scenes, the ceaselessly interrelated tesserae—glittering, rescued—of hundreds of scenes constitute traces and evocations of experience, thought, creation and destruction. I thought while reading *Cantilena* of Ezra Pound's early sense of the Greek gods as permanent aspects of the human (one of his very most sensible and perceptive ideas, among the other stuff, his intellectual dreck). In Peck's case these powers are not the figures of Artemis, Aphrodite, Apollo, Hephaistos, and the others, but rather pairs of opposed energies: perhaps they are creation—destruction; achievement of the beautiful—error, loss and tragedy; heroic inquiry into the human—self-willed ignorance and violence triumphant.

3.

Cantilena depicts by situating—it gives many things a local and at the same time a historical and even mythic place. Its body incorporates both individual and large-scale experiences and events; it characterizes and invests with symbolic value certain emblematic geographical spaces. The poem enacts how incredibly multi-layered the weaving of an individual life and psyche may be (in this case John Peck's own life and the lives of many persons who appear in the poem). One is ceaselessly reminded, when reading *Cantilena*, of how inextricable one's life is from the web of circumstances large and small, achievements great and trivial, blunders individual and political, joys inner and shared, and horrors, that have already been prepared for it, and through which it must find its way. The poem, like history itself, is an embroidery—both an activity and the thing woven. But in some sense,

because it is a poem, it is also a singing. Peck has embroidered or woven, or stitched or linked together, in a modernist-epic way, a great cloth, which in ancient Greece was related to the idea and the practice of performing an epic.

Some metaphors for ancient Greece oral narrative performance gendered the making of poetry as feminine, in that it was within the female realm, the household, and among the arts of women, that weaving, embroidering, and sewing were done. Both to weave, *hupháinein*, and to embroider, *poikilō*, were associated metaphorically with composing poetry; sewing or stitching was associated with performing episodes from Greek epic—stitching together the verses and episodes that were chanted. (Each performance could be different, depending on the occasion at which it was offered, and where, and by which rhapsode.) Peck's weaving of threads and stitching together of themes, narratives, allusions through the length of *Cantilena* is a kind of epic performance. His use of lustrous moments, episodes, images, metaphors, quotations, and so on, is a kind of embroidery—the ancient Greek verb *poikilō* implies bright colors and a variety of elements. The adjectival form is *poikilos*; regarding cloth, it means “made of many colors,” and metaphorically, of Greek song, it meant a melody with pleasing changes in it. Greek weaving as a metaphor for poetry suggests artful sequencing of verses and narrative moments; Greek embroidery as a metaphor for poetry, as in Pindar, implies a beautiful panoply of elements and colors, an intricate working of the materials, something elaborately wrought (“wrought” is the old past tense English form of “work,” i.e. “worked”). In these senses, too, Peck's modernist epic answers and in effect rebuts Pound's.

On the unfolding or unscrolling cloth of *Cantilena*, all the myriad events, persons, experiences and objects (in the psychoanalytic sense too) from different times and different places, in different voices and lingos, are both sequenced in time and ultimately *as if* present simultaneously (“spatial form”). Peck's lived experience includes astounding depth and range of study. His later years in the USA, his work and life in Switzerland, his deep study of Jung, his lifelong devotion to studying the patterns of human weal and woe, and his travels, are the substance out of which he has built his four spans. Peck, born in 1941 in Pittsburgh, grew up there when the city was an industrial and technological power. His father, an engineer, worked on the Manhattan Project, the top-secret scientific and engineering endeavor that produced the atomic bomb. (J. Robert Oppenheimer's quote from the *Bhagavad Gita* seems to perch atop one of the pylons of Peck's spans: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” Add to the happenstance of his individual history Peck's immense learning and his continuing practice

as a student of the processes of the unconscious, and one grasps how the scale and scope of *Cantilena* present, document, and synthesize a binary opposition of technological reason and despoliation against empathy, mercy and humane reason. Also the dialectic between lived experience and the hard-won psychoanalytical understanding and processing of it.

During Peck's twenties, the time of his formation as a poet, he had already drawn into his poems the word-work—the use of speech stresses and meter, phonemes and morphemes, etymologies and semantic resonances—of Ezra Pound's inventiveness in creating verbal visual imagery, verbal rhythm, and “the dance of the intellect among words.” That the numbered poems of *Cantilena* are “cantos” unambiguously points to Pound as the predecessor poet. Peck gives back peck for pound, showing that Pound's tremendously fruitful, and for a long time productive, revolutionizing of poetic technique and omnium-gatherum use of materials can be redeemed from Pound's own errors of head and heart, and that Pound's repellent sense of history can be answered with the humility of Pound's own *Pisan Cantos* and with Peck's counter-cantos. (Pound's offenses included his nasty anti-Semitism and the lack of any civic decency or fellow-feeling in his political views, affiliations and actions. On a lesser scale, somewhat mollified by the element of absurdity, his literary errors were his artistic prejudices, his pretensions, his faking, and his exaggerated self-regard—his performances of literary swagger.)

Yet in Pound there was a positive and invaluable artistic lesson, beyond the revolutionizing of poetic technique and possibilities: his demonstrating—as did artists in other media, and as artists continue to do—how an exciting and liberating artistic change could be made from techniques and possibilities of the past and of other traditions and cultures. Pound drew on Greek and Latin epic and myth and tragedy, on Old English, on Renaissance poetry in English and Italian, on (his approximate sense of) Tang Dynasty poetry, and so on. Peck's *Cantilena* is a great riposte with its own sources.

Pound died in 1972 (T. S. Eliot in 1965). The living presence of the much earlier major works of these two poets, like the poets themselves, lasted a very long time. It was one strong spice in the rich mix of available poetic traditions, sources and examples for young poets during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In California, where Peck took his PhD at Stanford, there was an early sense of the value and fragility of our ecosphere. And after Modernists who, dispirited and gleaning, had taken to recreating something from the wreckage of World War I, late 20th-century poets of the U.S. gazed on the calamity and grief wreaked by World War II and the Korean War.

On many consciences lay Vietnam, also, and its neighboring countries, poisoned, massacred and destabilized by our country. They—we—perceived the already visible environmental stresses that were wrecking watersheds and coasts. There is so much more that one could list—great damage and partial repair—but one simply cannot catalogue everything in prose without producing merely a pointless, huge bill of lading of what is to be carried from the past and the present into the future. But in a poem one can betoken much.

And this is how it happens (although not *why* it happens) that as recently as 2016 John Peck publishes a book-length poem, a lyric-epic that “includes history”—a vigorous, intricately detailed, magnum opus. This is also how it happens that in 2017 I bring my own somewhat Pound-inflected ear to this *Cantilena* and listening to it, I listen and listen.

4.

Cantilena cannot be characterized as a whole in anything less than a book-length analysis. It is a kind of study-text in which one cannot enter solely, and probably never with complete success (any more than in the *Cantos*), for the purpose of *interpreting* everything in it. Instead, one moves through it for the sake of the sense of its uniqueness as a poetic landscape, web, tapestry, chain of links both startling and subtle, and for its songline. One reads for the interweavings and the bright knots of spirit and body, for the many opportunities to seize historical markers of one’s world and to sense one’s desire to understand where one is in history and to acknowledge one’s futile wish to be spared from history. *Cantilena* could well be the most ambitious and remarkable public poem of our era—the most astonishing concatenation of word, image and idea. But it is an intimate book, also. This is yet another polarity that it seeks both to exemplify and to defeat.

I will limit my reading mostly to the first of the four spans, “Cedars of Liban” (70-some pages), but will reach further into the book for a few other passages. Peck seeks to enact in words the way perception is an experience not only of the thing (or whatever) that we “perceive,” but also of its layers of meaning, reference, and allusion—literary, of course, and mythological and religious, scientific and philosophical, historical and theological, and also personal, emotional, even organismal, in the context of our lived experience. Meanwhile, hovering somewhere, validating perhaps all of this human interiority prompted by perception, is “You who would elude and invade and escape and empty / nomination” (I.30), whom I take (spelling it as it might well be spelled here) G-d. Rome, a city Peck knows well, is a capital city of the Christian God, and because of its extraordinary depth

of literal historical layers and the ancient air that still fills its oldest spaces, Rome itself is often called a palimpsest. Peck's *Cantilena* is in this way his written Rome. As in Rome, so in *Cantilena* as a whole: there are ways of walking the paths of history, personal memory, architecture and art for the sake of the larger orientation one gains toward the infinity of human experience into which one is born and which one merely continues in one's small way. Meanwhile the giants of human force, past and present—the inventors, visionaries, generals, tyrants, and heroes, the mythical figures, the saints and monsters, produce their enormous disturbances, and we breathe the air of consequence.

Simultaneities of thought and feeling, awareness and association, can be experienced but cannot be mapped in any art form that exists in the dimension of time, such as music or poetry. Yet they can be evoked, suggested. Among the simultaneities, there is always evil, the Sodom, the folly and horror, but we have our “flotation device[s],” as Peck writes, and the movement of the human spirit must be ceaseless and always seeking if it is to sustain itself against social and political insanity and evil. “And I let my mind's motion / in a signing spiral” touch evil but also everyday beauty: “the potter swopped up scorched oxide, his pigment, / and with the arrogance of Apelles, / swirled a blue overlapping / on the inner crown of my brown crock” (I.7) (Apelles was an ancient Greek painter). It's thus that the whole book moves in a “signing spiral” (in both senses of “signing”—work artistically “signed” by the poet by name and filled with the *gesture* of offering its “signs” (words, metaphors, allusions) of feeling and thought.

The experience of reading *Cantilena* is rich. Maybe of this textual Rome I should say, “of walking it.” Peck feels his “indentured shame / in belonging to this time” (I.12)—that is, our time. But “There is no poetics without ethos, / no alley wall fountain that does not babble of forgiveness or annihilation / because I seek it, trembling replenished” (I.19). Therefore to make oneself fully aware of the duality of good and evil is “the only fight worth the game” (I.14). *Cantilena* repeatedly brings together images and episodes that produce the simultaneity of good and evil within which we construct our lives out of awareness and examples, compassion and resistance or rebellion. History itself churns with horrible creativity in the way that “the real / unrolls the stream beds [that] it also swims” (I.33)—the river of human time creates itself as it goes. No channel has been prepared for it. Yet the innumerable historical channels that time creates is definitive—until again they swerve or stagnate, they flood out of their banks, and always they carry us willingly or unwillingly forward to what is next that we could not as individuals control. Any individual course among those waters may be terribly

complicated.

Cantilena begins with the words, “My paper-covered half-pillar.” Whatever its autobiographical referent, this can and must also mean this book itself. On this half-pillar lies the day’s mail, and in the darkness of the hall the pillar seems to shrink from the alchemist’s alembic that may be concocting a catastrophe that the human being cannot help being fascinated by and even wanting, with a fascination for the cataclysmic:

My paper-covered half-pillar
near the door to hold letters, in shutter-louvred
storm light sinks deeper away, as if
to retreat from that not-yet-tipped
beaker whose powers fizz, eldest primes,
fit disturbers whom the mind loathes
yet down through its girderwork
of unrealized ends may crave.

Not for nothing did the Greeks have an adjective, *deinos*, for something that simultaneously was terrible and filled one with admiring awe. Sophocles used this word to describe human beings.

In these few lines, much of *Cantilena*’s nature is implied. “Near the door”: just inside a house or apartment stands a half, not a whole, pillar: a token of the remains of ancient spaces, and of modern spaces as well. Then “to hold letters”—in the sense of communications both everyday and literary, “letters” meaning also “literature.” Can one ignore, in the phrase “in shutter-louvred,” the Louvre that shutters (shelters) all its astonishing holdings, all those preserved works of art, design and architecture that we still possess? “In shutter-louvred,” that is, “shadowed”; “in shutter-louvred / storm light [the pillar] sinks deeper away”—the natural light but also of the historical storms of human life both broadly framed and in our everyday struggles to live, to survive, amidst oppressions and denials and exclusions. It’s “as if / to retreat from that not-yet-tipped / beaker whose powers fizz, eldest primes”—here the alchemical and modern chemical/atomic powers of destruction are evoked, as they are “fit disturbers whom the mind [in fact] loathes.” And “yet down through its girderwork”—a metonym of bridges, and of the gantries holding aloft the test A-bombs, perhaps; “of unrealized ends”—the purposes that remain to be fulfilled, the destructive endings that so far have been held in abeyance, which the mind “may [in fact] crave.”

A few lines later the poem names the Norse god Odin, who further into the book seems to become a personification of Robert Oppenheimer, and even a personification of the atomic bomb itself. And after several other

allusions, one of them points to a decisive battle between Romans and Germanic peoples, in which the latter so decisively defeated the Roman army that the Romans never again invaded. Thus are evoked echoes of scientific technology (the metaphorical “girders” of technological progress; in *Cantile-na* they would be made of Pittsburgh steel), the creation of uncontrollable weaponry (the beaker), of the wrath of a mythological god, of the inventor of the atomic bomb, and of an early German (we may call it) victory in war. As the last line of this first canto says, “again you are here, all unsent for”—which is to say that allusion in a poem is not necessarily something *put in*, but rather, to a mind grounded in sources lived and studied, something that *appears where it must*.

Having evoked ancient Germanic runes (Odin was believed to have invented runic script) and both ancient and modern warfare, Peck moves right away in the opening of the second canto to link these with Pleiku, an important city during the wars in Vietnam, and with ancient Sumer. And only a few lines away are also Melville, Emerson and other nineteenth-century Americans who evoked the polarity of good and evil; poetry; the Italian revolution of the nineteenth century against occupying powers, which produced the modern nation; the nineteenth-century Polish revolutionary poet Juliusz Slowacki; and the American painter Marsden Hartley. Standing before what we should call Hartley’s portrait of “Mount Katahdin,” a twelve-year-old girl seems to be allowing the evoked presence of this dark, looming, seemingly eternal presence to come into her psyche and disturb and yet broaden her affective range. In a way, what enters her from the portrait of the inhuman mountain is the whole personal span of her own life, most of it as yet un-lived, from this moment till her death. Of the way the painted image, and all that it portends, makes itself present within oneself, Peck writes, “Nothing can stop this, nothing makes any of it / either plunge on or hold back” (canto I.2). Sumer itself returns in I.9 and then in I.21, where it brings Gilgamesh, who was implied but not mentioned in I.9.

In such ways as these, Peck’s cantos set many pushpins marking items, ideas, images, and evoking fears, triumphs, avatars of human qualities and purposes; to an amazing number of these the whole poem will return repeatedly, weaving itself, even as more are added in almost every canto. Canto I.4 begins, “My station café early, the same faces / but the threads run back now to their points of departure.” Yes, exactly: so many images (“in a station of the metro,” “[t]he apparition of these faces in the crowd”) are points of departure or arrival—the beginnings or ends of threads that interweave the work, running forward and also “back now to their points of departure.”

4.

A poem of this size, scope and structure cannot achieve its purposes, cannot be realized, if every passage or canto must be self-sufficient, and in that sense must be “lyric.” However, lyric poetic technique is utilized throughout, in another sense: intensity of language, density of image, simultaneities of meanings at different levels. Images, ideas, scenes, events, key words, and other icons of the poem’s preoccupations and explorations are linked to each other, from point or node to node or point. Often the reader may recall Peck’s lines, “I let move my mind’s motion / in a signing spiral.” Such “signing” clearly has the several senses I mentioned above, to which we might add the gestures of the hand, as if moving the pen or paintbrush, lifting the brick or setting the cobble, swinging the sword or aiming the automatic rifle, holding a child’s hand, and so on, were all as specifically expressive as sign language. Such “signature” poetic effects as these are many; they culminate the artistic trajectory of Peck’s entire body of work.

Throughout *Cantilena*, the atomic bomb returns often, as in a mention in I.5 of the 1980 accident in a missile silo in Arkansas when a rocket stage exploded but the bomb itself, thrown out of the silo, did not. The bomb is an ultimate object of the human capacity for what we might think of as our amoral, Faustian passion for knowledge no matter the use to which it will be put. The engineering work of Peck’s father in WWII returns as the nuclear “sub reactor sheath” in the Nautilus, the first nuclear submarine—work that exempted him from personal risk, for he was “spared out from Bataan, Guadalcanal, for the Bomb sheath” (I.13).

The Pacific evokes—surprisingly—Melville again, as a prodigal son leaving New England, and happening to stay for a while not far from what, well beyond his own future, would become the World War II site of the immense suffering and many deaths of captured American and Filipino soldiers, Bataan, already mentioned in canto I.8. Peck’s tapestry of apparent coincidence turns out to signify almost inevitable connections—threads between things that merely appear to signify nothing in common. Here’s another metaphor: *Cantilena* is a presentation, through ancient artistic means (poetry), of a historical, literary, ethical and spiritual quantum “entanglement,” which produces “spooky action at a distance.” Let’s consider the extra dimension of “spooky” here, in that across time the living and the dead (spooks) are entangled, each affecting the other (since retrospect is so often reevaluation): Melville and Bataan, Odin and the atomic bomb, and so on. (Melville’s Billy Budd will appear repeatedly in the last span.)

Again Melville appears in I.10, talking with his close friend Hawthorne.

Thoreau, too—introduced in I.5, at a moment when he is lying prone on the ground to observe closely the take-off of a queen ant—reappears in I.8; Mount Katahdin returns as the mountain from which Moses brought down the tablets of the Law (I.11). The battle of Teutoborg Forest—those Roman and Germanic warriors in I.1—appears again in I.18 because of its geographical proximity to Chernobyl, the site of the Soviet nuclear disaster. Thus again and again—a mode of thinking signed in spirals—the poetic figure of rhyme becomes the rhyme of figures. Peck rediscovers and re-deploys key images and objects, persons and places, creating new patterns of relation among them—patterns that are Peck’s articulation and insight—his sight into them and into himself (the weaver of all). The great scope of *Cantilena* implies the infinitude that cannot be included, in so many languages, cultures, and histories, yet it enacts the gesture of synthesis. Pound’s own often quoted phrase, in *Guide to Kulchur*, was that “what we know we know by ripples and spirals eddying out from us and from our own time.”

I’ll repeat a quotation from above: “There is no poetics without ethos, / no alley wall fountain / that does not bubble forgiveness or annihilation / because I seek it, trembling / replenished” (I.19). Replenished with *meaning*—which is to say, “forgiveness or annihilation, *because I seek it.*” Meaning—like the ant queen that Thoreau studies as it take flight—will only become present if it is sought, can only be grasped if it is faced, can be integrated into oneself, even if only fragmentarily, by our attempts to articulate it. Not only in discursive phrases but also in the discovery of verbally evoked images and in the juxtaposition or “spiraling” patterning of them for the sake of what their interaction suggests. One might not, in the end, call it only coincidence that one of Melville’s stops in his book *Typee* is not so far from Bataan—because empires are (always?) “grinding their expansions through each other” (I.8) both in space and in time. *Cantilena* represents presences thrown into view by this grinding.

In I.19, Jung is named—but in the most paradoxical light, blurting out as if to acknowledge the worst in us all, “I want evil!” In I.40 Peck writes, “The bushel ingathering of all lives, / apo kata stasis, restoration / of all the poured-out blood and sap variations.” *Apokatastasis* developed many meanings over the centuries, beginning with Aristotle, generally signifying “re-establishment, reinstatement, restoration, return to original state” (*Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*). In Jung, it means a resurrection or restoration of the whole of oneself, and keeping that wholeness with one as an awareness of one’s every aspect. Elsewhere Peck himself has called it “one’s entire kit, light and dark, good and awful,” and has quoted the Syrian Thomas gospel for the sake of its analogous “If you bring forth what is in you, it will

save you, but if you do not bring it forth, it will kill you.” In the lines from *Cantilena*, above, the blood and sap that have poured from our destructions may be no more alive in us than is some imagined (and theologized) wholeness for which we long, and which would restore all that has bled out its life-blood and life-sap, literally and figuratively. But crucial is the acknowledgment of both, within us. One sees how *apokatastasis* could come to be the wish, the desire, that which is prayed for, that can never be fulfilled except as we human beings have imagined it *might* be, as we try to keep the “entire kit, light and dark, good and awful,” with us. Peck’s vision, I believe, is that origins are still awake in everything in which they much later issue or resonate verbally, subliminally, historically, visually, or in some other way. The painful accomplishments of the human must pay a “sludge debt... to the last penny” (I.40). One thinks of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, on the Civil War: “Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword...”

But might Peck’s *Cantilena* evoke, and argue for, a restorative acknowledgment, a psychological reparation, an internal “truth and reconciliation” that we can evoke within ourselves by means of historical memory, works of art, and acts of justice? Also in this canto, he writes:

All this whispers root to the topmost leaf, pulled
cell-wide up the mash capillaries, out
each leaf-thick channel end: green to you,
blue or black to the ant, but in esse
cognitio matutina, sun as the moonface
of rising. [...]

From bottom to top of the tree or weed, drawn up through the plant capillaries, out to the tip of each leaf, comes the color that creatures see differently. A metaphor, then for how angels (figures of greater understanding than we—although the angels of the Abrahamic religions can also be violent) see with “morning knowledge.” This term from Augustine means—if I understand it correctly—seeing from a divine perspective, in which the place of each thing in the divine creation is understood fully. We human beings see only with “evening knowledge,” which limits our sight to things as we think they are, and as we experience them. (Or think we experience them?—so much of our thinking cancels experience and substitutes something else for it, such as framing concepts, ideological filters, failures of attention.) *Cantilena* urges us to make connections between ourselves and the

ant, ourselves and the leaf, to *see*, with what little morning knowledge we can summon. But also, in Peck's thinking by opposites and contradictions, we have to resist thinking we can achieve morning knowledge (IV.85):

There is every chance
that I must learn erasure, amnesia even,
to reach the coppery imagos of rinsed
testimony: get behind myself
with the curiosity of the pre-dawn
while not hankering after morning knowledge,
an anthropology through and beyond tears

(If I understand correctly, those “imagos” are the Jungian mental images that are connected—as in a web? a thread? an allusion or analogy?—to realities that belong to collective unconscious landscapes of images. “Testimony” in the sense of articulated witness or evocation is what fills these cantos.)

Yet we must also preserve the impulse to risk ourselves in action and in the action of thought and feeling. This too is contradictory, and Peck sees it as arising from the tension within us that is both for ourselves (and others) and against others (and ourselves). He evokes that here, again focusing on what we mostly fail to acknowledge in ourselves, the darkness we choose not to meet. With subtle sound-and-sense links (“parapet... unmet,” “heaves us... ourselves”) he honors (IV.86)

the altruism that heaves us across the parapet
when we have not yet killed something in ourselves.
Not unknowable, simply unmet: in everyone
it turns and takes aim.

5.

Peck's great ear—evident even in his first book, *Shagbark*—leads his thinking into connections we do not expect (I.40):

[...] Seed to cedar ramifying
up through racks of cloud ruckled by light
frames morning knowledge irresistibly crowning
from dark eld—against irreversibles
clouding that churn we drank from, a daimon
cranking the lithe line out of Chauvet,
haunch and mane one wire,
thus Plato's horde gulp from that river, shales bouncing,
lightning striking birth sparks upward through smoke.

“Seed...cedar” evokes the cedars of Lebanon—trees that title one of the spans; “racks of clouds ruckled”—piled and heaped up together, like the debris of history itself; “eld” is Old English for “fire,” but the same word, from a different root, suggests old age—the poet’s and the world’s, and a late stage of reflection on human existence; “crowning,” while it links knowledge (ambiguously) to nobility, also connects phonetically to an opposite, the “clouding” of “that churn we drank from.” That is, morning knowledge works against all that is done by historical and perhaps psychic “irreversibles” that contaminate our spiritual nourishment. And in any case there is at work in us something more than what we are. A “daimon” “cranks” the “lithe” lines of the prehistoric cave paintings of Chauvet (discovered only in 1994)—the bisons, lions, wild cattle, bears and other beautiful megafauna of what was once the wildernesses of prehistoric Europe.

And in Plato’s *Republic*, the dead must drink from Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness, and this obliterates their knowledge of their experience. “Thus”? I am uncertain. “Shales bouncing”? I am unsure. But here again is an image of a cycle or restoration: “lightning,” in this context of the dead, “striking birth sparks upward through smoke,” the smoke of Hades, perhaps, but more likely smoke from the fire in Plato’s allegorical cave—the fire that casts the shadows onto the cave wall that mere human beings look at, thinking that those shadows are reality. This passage of *Cantilena* is in the phonemic keys of |k|, which is sonically sharp-edged and percussive, and ||, which is soft and liquid, lulling. Even in the sounds of his words, Peck produces two phonemic poles, so to speak, two acoustic threads of these lines, between which there’s a songline or the shape of a thought-chain suspended between them.

In *Cantilena*’s great ingathering of events, things, and images, the words themselves almost seem to call out to each other. Some Russian poets regard rhyme as a kind of love that similar-sounding words or parts of words feel for each other. Peck’s ear seems to attend not only to word sound but also to the talismanic evoking power of analogies and thought-echoes and historical repetitions of a place-name, an object, a human encounter or deed. Such words love each other too, in a broader way. There are many instances of “the elusively linking thing” (I.55). Some images are also a metaphor for the book itself: “the supervening, meant-to-be / crossroads that we are” (I.56); the image that arises from the “stop-action in my inner theater” (I.58); the smoke-rings of Peck’s grandfather (I believe) “revolving inward traveling, traveling by unfolding” (I.59); “drilling / into the core layers” of a tree trunk “for corollaries / makes for dense allusions” (I.64). Life offers a “fresh mind-map for waylessness” (I.62), for the way through is a way without straight

way. Distant from Peck's method and mind, an interesting analogy appears in Marina Tsvetaeva's poem "Poets):

By planetary ways and superstition paths,
 Along the alleyways of allegories...
 Between "to be" and "not," even heaving himself off
 a bell-tower, he'll veer up in a detour...
 For the way of the comet is the poet's way.

6.

Reading *Cantilena*, I also thought (as I often do) of Osip Mandelshtam's pun and figure of the cicada. Because the Russian words for cicada and for citation or quotation sound alike, Mandelshtam wrote that cicadas are buzzing throughout the canon of Russian poetry, which is noted for its citational richness: successive Russian poets have frequently acknowledged and elaborated on the poems of their predecessors. Peck's *Cantilena* is a grove in which cicadas not only of poetry but of all that I have mentioned, above, and more, are still singing. The book surrounds the reader. In a sense, it sings as a chorus of voices following the melodic line of analogy, connection, discovery.

One might even think of *Cantilena* as an epic weaving song that is also the form of its own woven fabric. It may have been the case in ancient weaving that some weaving songs were an encoding within themselves—perhaps rhythmically as well as topically—of the complicated use of yarns of different colors on different shuttles, and pattern changes as the shuttle made its passage through different adjustments of the strings of the warp.

In a way, I felt as if I myself were a shuttle impelled—propelled?—by the movements of the poet's weaving as I read this densely figured work of profound meaning and weighty heft, intricately arranged. The figures, narratives, allusions, and trains of thought accumulate as simultaneously colorful threads. They are interrelated by their sequencing and by the book's structure—its cantos in four "spans." A reader cannot see all the threads of the weave individually, nor hold all of them in mind together. But quickly after beginning to read one is keeping in mind perhaps a dozen of them at any one time—a grouping that changes as one continues. The ancient Greeks considered the sound of the cicada (cicadas of their time and ecozone) to be sweet and inspiring to singers. (Also, the ancient Greeks ate them.) Never, even by Mandelshtam himself, I would guess, could more cicadas have been gathered into a chorus than in Peck's *Cantilena*. The poem seems in an inimitable way to encompass hundreds upon hundreds of talismans of the past for the sake of acknowledging the truth of the present. Some are figures

of precariousness, danger, insensibility, heedlessness, and destruction, and others are emblematic instances of beauty and sense, reverence and insight, justice and artistic triumph, also. And some are *deinos*: combining terror and a sense of positive wonder. Here (IV.56) is a late episode, in which a few more push-pins—nodes of Peck’s web—are linked to each other. Striving to do the good thing, trapped by the encompassing bad thing, we seek our “breakout”:

The war in Florence is ending. Rossellini
 deploys Sicilian, Neapolitan, Italian, German, Brit and Yank English,
 as Tolstoy wove French, court Russian, Little Russian, and German—
 a wounded Florentine doctor and American nurse (who sounds British)
 thread through ruckus to reach
 a wounded partisan leader in the hills. Against advice
 they run the passage over the Uffizi
 ducking its oblong openings. No crossfire comes,
 sun angling parallelograms down the floor.
 Gliding in front of them and carrying us, all still naive—
 (she loves the *Lupo*; secretly his objective is family)
 and they not knowing that a partisan will die because the doctor
 will suddenly bolt for home—
 the big Tolstoyan camera dolleys backward
 into hazard, drawing the half-met pair
 through the corridor where Thucydides and Jefferson
 wedged democracy into oligarchy
 and stranded it, out among statuary in tall crates
 where the man and woman pause to scout their costly desires.
 Which is where my accounting halts them,
 though it will come. Everyone’s breakout. But not now.