

"THE STONE IS ALIVE IN MY HAND" —
EZRA POUND'S CHINESE TRANSLATIONS

Critical opinions are at variance concerning Ezra Pound's Chinese translations. Those who are familiar with the Chinese language either claim "the English of Pound has loosed itself completely from any Chinese mooring" or that his translations "are based on purely speculative or fictitious, rather than real, etymology."¹ And those of literary repute hail him either as "the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time" or "the first translator of our age."² Before we are readily persuaded to join camp with either, it is necessary that we scrutinize the works in question and formulate our own judgment. Perhaps we may find in the end that the two seemingly opposed opinions are not entirely irreconcilable, but rather fair presentations of the two sides of the same coin.

Pound's *Cathay* (1915) is the first fruitful fusion of Chinese perception and the imagist technique. The material for *Cathay* was drawn "from the notes of the late Ernest Fenollosa, and the decipherings of the professors Mori and Ariga," but the vision and the creative labor which brought it into a poetical reality were Pound's. Despite the Nipponized Chinese names and minor inaccuracies, the poems won unprecedented praise from all quarters. Ford Madox Ford observed: "If these are original verses, then Mr. Pound is the greatest poet of this day." He went on to say:

The poems in "Cathay" are things of a supreme beauty. What poetry should be, that they are. And if a new breath of imagery and handling can do anything for our poetry, that new breath these poems bring³

And T. S. Eliot dubbed Pound the "inventor of Chinese poetry for our time" because the excellence of Chinese poetry *an sich* had not been available to the English world until the publication of

¹ George Kennedy, "Fenollosa, Pound and the Chinese Character," *Yale Literary Magazine*, CXXVI (Dec. 1958), 36; Chen Shih-hsiang, "Review," *Literature East and West*, II (Spring, 1955), 16.

² T. S. Eliot, "Introduction," in *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1928), p. 14; Richard Wilbur, on the blurb of *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius*, tr. by Ezra Pound (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1954).

³ T. S. Eliot, *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry* (New York: Knopf, 1917), p. 26.

Cathay. To be sure there had been other English translators of Chinese poetry long before Pound, but it was Pound who provided new advances demanded by a new age. Indeed, no specific sensibility or perception is needed to detect the natural freshness and the modern temper of one and the outmoded and bustling bad taste of another version of the same poem by Mei Sheng:

Pound's:

Blue, blue is the grass about the river
And the willows have overfilled the close garden.
And within, the mistress, in the midmost of her youth,
White, white of face, hesitates, passing the door.
Slender, she puts forth a slender hand;

And she was a courtesan in the old days,
And she has married a sot,
Who now goes drunkenly out
And leaves her too much alone.⁴

Giles:

Green grows the grass upon the bank,
The willow-shoots are long and lank;
A lady in a glistening gown
Opens the casement and looks down
The roses on her cheek blush bright,
Her rounded arm is dazzling white;
A singing-girl in early life,
And now a careless roué's wife
Ah, if he does not mind his own,
He'll find some day the bird has flown!⁵

The success of *Cathay* gave Pound more courage with which to tackle the more somber Confucian classics, which were often incised upon stone tablets by decree of Chinese rulers. Translation to Pound is not merely "chewing food for others," as described by the great Buddhist translator Kumarajiva (344-413 A.D.); to him it is like grafting from the choice arbor for the sake of a richer cultural fructification. When *Ta Hio* (1928), one of the "Four Books" of Confucius, was ready for the press, Pound urged his editor, Glenn Hughes, to state in the prospectus: "In this brochure (or chapbook)

⁴ *Personae: the Collected Poems of Ezra Pound* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1926), p. 128.

⁵ Herbert Giles, *History of Chinese Literature* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1933), pp. 97-98.

Mr. Pound does for the first of the Confucian classics what he did, in *Cathay*, for *Rihaku*.⁶ Pound's version of the *Ta Hio* in a sense is not merely a translation. Rather it is an eclectic critical evaluation by means of translation. His altruistic motive for the task is clearly stated in a letter to René Taupin:

... et je viens de donner un nouveau version du *Ta Hio* de Confucius, parce que j'y trouve des formulations d'idées que me paraissent utile pour civilizer l'Amérique (tentatif.) (*Letters*, p. 217)

In spite of his great admiration for Guillaume Pauthier, "a magnificent scholar," and James Legge, whose stupendous translation of Confucius is a "monument," Pound feels "no one has brought out the contrasts of style from the magnificence of citation to terseness and lucidity of Kung's statements."⁷ Admittedly he depended upon a poet's intuition and mastery of style to improve upon existing versions of James Legge and Guillaume Pauthier. And he followed "the general principle of not putting in mere words that occur in the original when they contribute nothing to the SENSE of the translation" (*Letter*, p. 214). Although there was initial interest in the concrete images of the "ideograms", it was not fully carried out. He did, however, sacrifice terseness in order to bring out the concrete imagery of light from the ideogram 明 *ming* (translated by Legge as "illustrious"), which is composed of the two celestial bodies, ☉ sun and ☾ moon, by tagging onto the attributives the phrase, "which we received from the sky" in this passage:

....King Wen succeeded in developing the luminous principle of reason which we receive from the sky, and of making it shine with full glory.

....King Tching-thang kept his gaze fixed ceaseless upon this bright gift of intelligence which we receive from the sky.

....Yao was able to develop and to make to shine in all its brilliance the sublime principle of intelligence which we receive from the sky.⁸

Pound's so-called "etymosinology" (coined by Achilles Fang)

⁶ *Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: Harcourt, 1950), p. 214.

⁷ Ezra Pound, "Mang Tze or the Ethics of Mencius," *Criterion* XVII (July 1938), 605.

⁸ *Ta Hio: The Great Learning* (Seattle: Univ. of Wash., 1928), p. 11.

may have been conceived by Fenollosa's essay on the "Written Chinese Character as a Medium of Poetry" (1919), but it took a long period of gestation before it became a method of translation. In his essay "Meng Tsze" (1938) Pound describes how the method evolved:

During August and the first half of September 1937, I isolated myself with the Chinese text of the three books of Confucius, *Ta Hio*, *Analects*, and the *Unwavering Middle* and that of Mencius, together with an enormously learned crib but no dictionary

When I disagreed with the crib or was puzzled by it I had only the book of the characters and the radicals to go on from. And my contention is that the learned have known too much and seen a little too little

Without knowing at least the nature of ideogram I don't think anyone can suspect what is wrong with their current translations. Even with what I have known for some time I did not sufficiently ponder it

I do . . . object to under-translation. I do *not* think that I have a better mind than Confucius . . . When I get a good idea from the ideograms I do not think it is my idea If my views are better than those in the ideograms, pray do accept them, but accept also the burden of proving it.⁹

The above passage is quoted at length, because I believe it serves as a transition for Pound's increasing use of the so-called ideogrammic techniques in translation.

Ta Hsueh or Studio Integrale (1942), a later, Italian version of *Ta Hio*, shows Pound's growing interest in Chinese etymology. The "ideogram" 明 *ming* is explained in a note: "Ideogramma del capitolo: sole + luna = illuminare," the ideogram 靜 *ching* (calm and tranquil) is rendered here as "afferrare l'azzurro" or "afferrato azzurro,"¹⁰ because half of the ideogram is 青 (meaning blue or "azzurro") and the other half is 爭 (originally picture of two hands grappling at each other, and thus "afferrare".) By the

⁹ *Criterion* XVII, 604-5.

¹⁰ *Ta-Hsueh: Ta s'eu dai gaku: studio integrale*. Versione italiana di Ezra Pound et di Alberto Luchini. (Rapallo: Emiliani, 1942), p. 9.

ame process a quotation from the *Shih Ching* which reads in his 1928 version:

The prince whose conduct
is full of equity and wisdom
Will see men in the four corners of
the earth
imitating his rightness

is transformed into

La sua occervanza e la sua pratica
son senza imperfezioni.
Nell'osservar la giustizia
Non devia.
Preciso come il sole su un meridiano,
Fissa e ordina lo stato
Fino ai quattro angoli.¹¹

Besides the difference in length, the major difference in the two versions rests with the varied translation of the ideogram 是 *shih*. In the first version it is given the conventional meaning of a copula "is", whereas in the second it is given the full treatment of etymological analysis in the Poundian fashion, because its top is the symbol of 日 (the sun), and its lower part is 正 (meaning exact or correct). The same ideogram is further explained as "sole sul meridiano = con precisione" in a list of thirteen ideograms appended to the text.

The "etymosinological" experimentation here is yet conducted with restraint when compared with a still later version, *The Great Digest* (1951) in which the same verse quoted above reads:

He practiced equity without
its making him feel
*That a javelin were being
thrust into his heart.*¹²

Special attention is paid now to the ideogram 志 *te* (meaning error or mistake) which is composed of 心 (heart) and 弋 (dart).

Another verse in the same book (p. 41) praising the virtue

¹¹ *Ta Hio*, p. 26; *Ta-Hsueh*, p. 20.

¹² *Confucius: The Unwobbling Pivot and the Great Digest*, tr. Ezra Pound (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1951), p. 65. Italics mine.

of the ruler Wen Wang, contains a unified and sustained imagery of an agrarian scene:

As a field of grain
White-topped in even order,
The little flowing ears of grain
So glorious was King Wan,
Coherent, splendid and reverent
In his comings to rest, in his bournes.

Shi King, III, I, I, 4.

The first three lines of the verse are all derived from a single ideogram 穆 *mu* (glorious, majestic, or profound) which is a composite of 禾 (grain), 白 (white), 小 (small), and 彡 (originally meaning hair or tassel, and by a stretch of imagination, "the little flowing ears"). This imagery of a rich harvest may not be intended in the original ode, but it certainly is a great improvement of the general platitude conveyed in the 1928 version of the same:

Wide and deep was the virtue of Waen-wang
That for all his splendour
Lost not the point of his aim;
Who turned not aside in his mind
Till his deed were brought to the full.¹³

The 1951 edition of *Confucius* offers a more whimsical instance of Pound's etymological interpretation, which is intolerable to most sinologists.

The Odes say:
In our ceremonial plays,
In the ritual dances
with tiger masks and spears
The archtype kings are not forgotten.¹⁴

In this instance, Pound's anthropological finds of the "ceremonial plays," "the ritual dances/ with tiger masks and spears" are imbedded in the ideogram 戲 *hsi* (meaning play or play-acting). However, here it is only part of a binome 於戲, a variation for 嗚呼 *wu hu*, which is an exclamation like "alas." It takes unique poetic vision to re-present a vivid ritualistic scene of a

¹³ *Ta Hio*, p. 14.

¹⁴ *The Great Digest*, p. 45.

primitive society long forgotten by posterity.¹⁵

"*The Analects of Confucius*" (1950) is another of Pound's Confucian translations which climaxed his enthusiasm in the ideogrammic analysis. The book opens with "... study with the seasons winging past, is not this pleasant?" My objection here is not so much his etymologic analysis but rather the lack of thoroughness in his analysis. "Winging past" obviously stems from the upper part of the ideogram 習 *hsi* meaning practice; but if the lower part, 白 or 自 an archaic form of "self", is given consideration, then its full significance can be grasped: "Learn and practice—like the young trying its own wings..." In leaving part of the ideogram out Pound was doing exactly what he objected to in others—"undertranslation."

The last, and most ambitious of Pound's Chinese translations is certainly *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* (1954). Its original, the *Shih Ching*, owing to its archaism and textual corruption, is considered one of the most difficult of the Confucian classics. Yet because of its unsurpassable poetic beauty, its sanction accorded to it by Confucius, and the social, political, and moral implications heaped upon it by centuries of commentaries, this collection of 305 poems has tempted every esteemed sinologist to try his hand.¹⁶ Before he had acquired the Chinese text in 1937, Pound complained, "Translations of the *Odes* are so bare one thinks the translator must have missed something and very annoying not to be able to see *what*." (Letters, p. 292)

Having read Pound's previous Chinese translations, one is surprised with the comparatively less frequent use of quasi-etymology, although he has not completely outgrown this early obsession. Possibly because most of the odes were already laden with concrete, visual imagery and "phalanx of particulars," to add more embellishment would be like adding legs to the body of a snake. Be this as it may, examples of "ideogrammic" analysis still abound. He could not, for instance, resist to translate: 鮒 (a particular type of bream) into "square fish," since the ideogram is composed of 魚 fish and 方 square; 碩鼠 (big rats) into "stone-head rats," since the first ideogram is composed of 石 stone and 頁 head; 桃 (peach-tree) into "omen trees," since this ideogram is composed of

¹⁵ Concerning this "mistranslation" of the exclamatory expression I remonstrated with Pound in 1952, and was gratified to find that it was omitted in Ode 269. I was thoroughly mortified ten years later when I had occasion to see an Italian motion picture, a travelogue of China, in the western region of which identical ceremonies described by Pound are still enacted after a successful tiger hunt.

¹⁶ Among the translators of the *Shih Ching* are: Bernard Karlgren, James Legge, Crammer-Byng, Romilly Allen, S. Couvreur, V. von Strauss, P. Lacharme, and W. Jennings.

木 tree and 兆 signs on oracle-bones used for divination, and thus omen.¹⁷

A subtler interpretation of the ideogram is exemplified in the opening verse of the *Classic Anthology*:

"Hid! Hid!" the fish-hawk saith,
by isle in Ho the fish-hawk saith:
"Dark and clear,
Dark and clear,
So shall be the prince's fare."

(Ode 1)

"Hid! Hid!" no doubt is Pound's onomatopaeic attempt to reproduce the fish-hawk's mating call, which sounded "kuan kuan" to the ancient Chinese poet. Since it is pointless to imitate a sound which is alien and meaningless to his auditory perception, Pound seizes the pictograph 關 *kuan* (a double-door with a cross bar passing through the slots like a shuttle passing through the warp) and brings out its meaning of "close or closed" which by extension becomes "secluded", "hidden" or "hid."

An occasional, unobtrusive use of the ideogrammic deciphering to create a concrete imagery for metaphorical purposes is commendable, provided it does no violence to original intention of the poem. But no poetic licence can justify his rendering the ideogram 服 *fu* into "robe" in the same ode in which it loses its usual meaning of "robe" and serves as a non-functional particle for the purpose of rhyme.

To seek and not find
as a dream in his mind,
thinking how her robe should be,
distantly, to toss and turn,
to toss and turn.

(Ode 1)

Albeit plausible, sustained imagery, it changes the pervading mood and morale of the poem. In the original the "tossing" and "turning" are descriptive of the prince's restlessness; Pound has unwittingly attributed them to the imaginary robe of the "prince's fare".

¹⁷ Odes Nos. 10, 113, 6 in *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius*, tr. Ezra Pound (Cambridge: Harvard Univ., 1954).

Chinese scholars who hold every word in the *Shih Ching* sacred find Pound's "charlatanic" translation an act of desecration—a rehacking of the revered Chinese monument into a Statue of Liberty! Such allegations are justifiable especially in the following verse, in which the forehead of the mythical animal has become its "path", and its horn, "tooth":

Kylin's foot bruise no root,
Ohé, Kylin.

In Kylin's path, no wrath,
Ohé, Kylin.

Kylin's tooth no harm doth,
Ohé, Kylin.

Wan's line
and clan.

(Ode II)

Yet among those who are critical of Pound's Chinese, some are even less equipped with the language than he. Professor L. S. Dembo, for instance, inadvertently betrays his own limitations when he tries to disclose Pound's false etymology. True enough that the word "azure" in "Lady of azure thought" (Ode 42) is part of the ideogram 靜 *ching*, which is composed of 青 *ch'ing* and 爭 *cheng*. But when he informs us that "strictly speaking, *ch'ing* is a phonetic, not a pictograph,"¹⁸ he is trapped in his own ostentation. Indeed, there is a host of compound ideograms in which 青 *ch'ing* functions as a "phonetic and not a signific," (e.g. 清, 晴, 請, 婧, 倩, 靖, etc.) Unfortunately there are a few exceptions in which 青 *ch'ing* is unmistakably a signific. The ideogram 靜 happens to be one of these—靖, 精, 靚, 靚, 靚, and 靜 exhaust the entire repertory.

Incidentally, Dembo shares another weakness of Pound. His explanation of the ideogram 鸞 *luan*, rendered by Pound as "Lady of silken word," in the second stanza of the same poem, illustrates his inattentiveness to detail.

¹⁸ L. S. Dembo, *The Confucian Odes of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: Univ. of California, 1963), p. 28.

The bottom part of the character 女 is indeed the word for lady; the left and right middle 糸 is the root affixed to all words referring to silk, and 言 that affixed to all words associated with speaking—so that with the exception of the top 宀 (meaning roof), the character, pictorially, can be made to come out as Pound says it does, although the sense that he has given it is clearly not that intended in the original.¹⁹

In his eagerness to castigate Pound, he has rashly chopped off the indispensable top of 言 for "roof," which is 宀 and not 一. Without its top the ideograph 言 will be a headless ghost non-existent in the realm of Chinese language.

Language incompetence, however, does not obliterate the usefulness of Dembo's book, which contains some poignant critical insight and sound analyses of many poems in the *Anthology*. His attitude towards Pound is somewhat ambivalent. He seems to believe that Pound, essentially a lyrical poet, is successful so long as he takes advantage of his lyrical talent; that Pound's failure rests in his use of colloquialism, slang, and trite expressions. To me, the apparent discordance in the various modes of expression, as well as the medley of the metrics in the *Anthology* could very well be intentional. After all, the original poems represent a people of various social strata, distantly removed in time and space not only from us but from one another in that vast Chou empire during a period of several hundred years.

Ever since the *Shih Ching* received the sanction of Confucius, it has been studied and interpreted by Chinese scholars like a Bible, in spite of the fact that 10 of the odes originally were folk songs created by simple folk to express the sorrows and joys of their everyday life. Through the passage of time, the language has become archaic, and the original ideas have been fossilized by moral and political interpretations. Pound attempts to bring the petrified beauty into life, and he succeeds by not allowing his own personality to dominate the scene. Instead, he conjures up *personae* within the range of his imagination and creates the characters (and their speech rhythms) to approximate their Chinese counterparts. Thus we hear the southern drawl of a hero-worshiper:

Don't chop that pear tree,
Don't spoil that shade;

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 29.

Thaar's where ole Marse Shao used to sit,
Lord, how I wish he was judgin' yet.

(Ode 16)

Or the uncouth and weary tongue of a hill-billy:

Ole Brer Rabbit watchin' his feet,
Rabbit net's got the pheasant beat;
 When I was young and a-startin' life
 I kept away from trouble an' strife
But then, as life went on,
Did I meet trouble?

 aye, my son;
Wish I could sleep till life was done.

(Ode 70—"Aliter")

Or the unrestrained complaint of the pauper:

North gate, sorrow's edge,
Purse kaput, nothing to pledge.
I'll say I am broke
none knows how, heaven's stroke.

(Ode 40)

Or the speech of a disgusted migrant farm-hand:

Yaller bird, let my corn alone,
Yaller bird, let my crawps alone,
These folks here won't let me eat,
I wanna go back whaar I can meet
The folks I used to know at home,
 I got a home an' I wanna' git goin'.

(Ode 187)

Pound does not depend upon *dramatis personae* alone, with their particular dialects and accents, to capture moments of reality, or the equivalent of reality; he recreates a series of lively visions or aesthetic moments through word magic, music and poetry. Poem 95 gives the quick, jubilant tempo much in keeping with the frolicking young crowd in a pastoral setting:

Chen and Wei
flow thereby
 touching together,
Man and girl, girl and man
to pluck valerian:

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"The play?" says she.

"Seen it," says he.

"If so, let's go

Over Wei

pleasantly."

Playing there, girls and men
Prescribe this mutual medicine.²⁰

And both the auditory and visual imageries of the following poem strike home the forlorn state of mind of a forsaken girl after she has been figuratively scorched:

Dry grass, in vale:

"alas!

"I met a man, I

met

a man

"Scorched, alas, ere it could grow"

A lonely girl pours out her woe.

"Even in water-meadow dry."

Flow her tears abundantly,

Solitude's no remedy.

(Ode 69)

And through the power of metamorphosis the song of a commonplace tryst is clad in rare lyric beauty:

Sun's in the East,
her loveliness
Comes here
To undress.

Twixt door and screen
at moon-rise
I hear
Her departing sighs.

(Ode 99)

Slang and colloquial idiom, and even levity of expression

²⁰ "Mutual medicine" is Pound's own product sprouted out of the ideograms *shao yao*, commonly translated as peony or peonies which, however, is believed to have medicinal value. Some commentators have also discovered that in archaic Chinese the term could mean a species of scented grass symbolizing love and union.

(frequently used in "Folk Songs," and occasionally in "Smaller Odes") are replaced by archaism and solemnity in the "Greater Odes" and, in particular, "Odes of the Temple." Typical is Ode 235, a panegyric which begins:

Bright, aloft, Wen, glitteringly,
Chou, tho' an old regime, get new decree;
Had not Chou been there like the sun's fountainhead
the supernal seals had never caught sun's turn
that King Wen tread
up, down, to stand
with the heavenly veils to left hand and right hand.

And the epic grandeur scintillates in lines such as these:

Mankind began when Kiang Yüan poured wine
to the West sun and circling air
and, against barrenness, trod the Sky's spoor.
Then, as a sudden fragrance funnelled in
and to its due place,
a thunder-bolt took body there to be
and dawn Hou Tsi, whom she bare on his day
and suckled presently.

(Ode 245)

Pound has by now progressed a long way since his initial pilgrimage to "Cathay". When he was translating *Cathay*, he "had no inkling of the technique of sound in Chinese poetry;" by 1937 he was convinced that music "must exist or have existed in Chinese poetry." (Letters, p. 293) Even though it is impossible to reproduce the music of the original odes, Pound finds it possible to approximate the various Chinese metrical patterns with the traditional folk songs, ballads, panegyrics, and hymns, which are familiar to his Western audience.

In his first chapter of *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (1964), Donald Davie draws an interesting comparison of Ode 246 with a sixteenth century English folk song "Back and side go bare, go bare." He points out shrewdly that in translating these Chinese poems, Pound has to search within the Western literary tradition for equivalents to approximate the Chinese sentiment. But when the

21 Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (New York: Oxford Univ., 1964), pp. 12, 8-14 passim.

Chinese sentiment goes beyond the range of Western perception and can no longer be paralleled, Pound deviates from the conventional pattern "so as to jar the reader into attending to what is said."²¹

While agreeing with Davie's keen observation on Pound's technical mastery as a poet, I am mindful of Pound's violation of linguistic niceties, which warrant the righteous indignation of the formidable scholars and sinologists. To vindicate Pound the culprit as a translator, his strongest defense is perhaps that of Mencius (372-289 B.C.), who warned millennia ago against over-literal as well as over-fanciful interpretations of the Odes: "Do not insist on the rhetoric so as to distort the language, nor insist on their language so as to distort their intention (*chy*), but try with your thoughts to comprehend that intention."²² Whatever his inaccuracies in translation, Pound's attempt is to comprehend the poems. To what degree he has succeeded is a matter of opinion. However, one thing is certain. He has put into practice the theory he preached:

The poet, in dealing with his own time, must also see to it that language does not petrify on his hands. He must prepare for new advances along the line of true metaphor, that is interpretive metaphor, or image, as diametrically opposed to untrue, or ornamental metaphor.²³

The best attribute to Pound's Chinese translations is perhaps summed up succinctly in his own words: "The stone is alive in my hand." Without his breathing life into them, the ancient Chinese classics would remain inaccessible to the West, like those stone tablets upon which they were inscribed.

University of Oregon

ANGELA JUNG PALANDRI

22 Quoted by Achilles Fang, "Introduction" in *Classic Anthology*, p. xvi.

23 Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (New York: Square Dollar Series, 1951), p. 73, n.