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The New Ezra Pound

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Ezra Pound, *Poems & Translations*

Ed. Richard Sieburth

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Richard Sieburth's new edition of Ezra Pound's *Poems and Translations* is not just a brilliantly assembled and meticulously edited volume in the Library of America series that has already given us excellent one-volume editions of Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost, but also--though not overtly, since the Library of America format excludes editorial commentary-- a work of strong revisionary criticism. For here, minus *The Cantos* and the critical prose, is an Ezra Pound who is not primarily the advocate of Imagist doctrine and "constatation of fact," nor the ideologue whose eccentric Douglasite economics, Fascist sympathies, and anti-Semitic rhetoric continue to shadow the poet's reputation. Rather, Sieburth's Pound is, above all, a passionate maker of lyric poems. A confirmed aesthete, dedicated scholar, collector of great poetry of other cultures, and obsessive translator, Pound emerges from this volume as Eliot's *il miglior fabbro*, learnedly and single-handedly transforming the map of Anglo-American poetry so as to include the Troubadours and Guido Cavalcanti, Sophocles and Sextus Propertius, the Japanese Noh and the Confucian *Ta Hsiao*, *The Great Digest*. Indeed, what astonishes the reader—at least this reader—of the 1300-page Library of America volume is the sheer amount of work Pound put into his poems and translations. He worked on and for poetry as others might work on a major scientific discovery or a long drawn-out military mission. Thus, as Sieburth reminds us in his Introduction to *The Pisan Cantos*, when, on 3 May 1945, Pound was arrested at his home in the hills above Rapallo, he immediately put a small Chinese dictionary and a copy of the

Confucian Classics in his pocket. Working as he then was on his Confucian translations, he knew that, wherever the military police were taking him, he would need these books.

In putting such stress on Pound's poetic craft, whether in his early Troubadour translations—in 1917 he wrote to John Quinn that he had been "working ten and twelve hours a day on my Arnaut Daniel"—or on the 1956 adaptation of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, translated while he was confined at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C., Sieburth's edition subtly challenges the usual narrative of Pound's poetic development, a narrative put forward by the poet himself during his London years and developed by Hugh Kenner in his early and brilliant *Poetry of Ezra Pound* (1950), which set the stage for such related studies as Donald Davie's *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (1964), Herbert Schneidau's *Ezra Pound: the Image and the Real* (1969), and Kenner's own later definitive *The Pound Era* (1971).

According to this narrative, Pound's early poetry, collected in *A Lume Spento* (1908), *Personae* (1909), and *Exultations* (1909), was written under the sign of pre-Raphaelite lyric, especially that of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, with an influx of colloquialism and "natural" speech derived from the Browning dramatic monologue. This poetry used traditional meters and stanza forms and "high," sometimes archaicizing diction but turned for its inspiration to such Provençal troubadours as Arnaut Daniel and to Italian medieval poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*, thus injecting a note unfamiliar to English and American readers.

By 1913, the story continues, Pound, now part of a London circle that included Ford Madox Ford and T. E. Hulme, had made his breakthrough into Modernism. The three famous Imagist principles—(1) Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective, (2) To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation, and (3) As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of metronome¹—signaled the invention of a New Poetics. Such prescriptions as "Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something," and "Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of peace'. It dulls the image," coupled with the matter-of-fact assertion that "the natural object is always the adequate symbol," were like a breath of fresh air, given the fuzzy diction, conventional phrasing, circumlocution, pseudo-classical cliché, and lofty sentiment of normative British and American poetry in the pre-War years. "As for twentieth-century poetry, Pound declared at the conclusion of "A Retrospect" (1918), "it will be harder and saner . . . 'nearing the bone.' It will be as much like granite as it can be" (LE 12)—a prescription that gave Donald Davie his subtitle *Poet as Sculptor*. And further: Pound's prescription, "Do not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done

in good prose," reminded poets and their readers that even the freest free verse must justify its rhythms and line breaks, whereas "good prose," is itself an art form.

But 1913 initiated a further breakthrough. Pound met Mary Fenollosa, widow of the American Orientalist Ernest Fenollosa, who entrusted the poet with her husband's unpublished notebooks containing transliterations and translations of Chinese poetry as well as drafts of Japanese Noh plays. So began what Kenner was to call Pound's "Invention of China." In Chinese, according to Fenollosa, there is a direct relationship between word and thing. Whereas English is a language filled with abstractions and function words, in Chinese, the ideogrammic rendering of the simple declarative sentence (Agent-Act-Object) "Farmer pounds rice" actually *shows* the event happening: we see first the farmer, then the pounding, then the rice itself. Such ideogrammic "shorthand" was reinforced for Pound by the *parole in libertà* of the Italian Futurists, repackaged, with the help of Wyndham Lewis, as a new movement called Vorticism. The Image, defined a few years earlier as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," was now reborn as the Vortex, "a radiant node or cluster . . . from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing."² The first issue (June 1914) of Lewis's blasphemous and typographically innovative journal *Blast*, printed Pound's "Vortex. Gaudier-Brzeska," honoring the young sculptor who was to die at the front the following year, as well as such racy new Pound poems as "Come, my Cantilations" (see LOA 570).

By 1916, accordingly, the Pound lexicon, with its key terms --*precision, luminous detail, phalanx of particulars, image, vortex, and ideogram*--was firmly in place. Indeed, *Cathay* (1915) and *Lustra* (1916) marked the fusion of "Direct treatment of the thing," image as vortex, and Fenollosa's theory of the ideogram. When an expanded edition of *Lustra* was published in the United States in 1917, it included "Three Cantos of a Poem of Some Length" (see LOA 318-330), the first draft of what was to be Pound's magnum opus, *The Cantos*. The stage was thus set for the ideogrammic method to come into its own, the complication being the elaborate collage structure of Pound's "poem containing history," with its brilliant use of found text in the form of citation, its radical fragmentation and increasingly intricate juxtapositions.

Here, then, was Modernist doctrine par excellence. In "How to Read" (1927), the program was enlarged with further distinctions, for example, the one between three kinds of poetry: *melopoeia*, "wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning"; *phanopoeia*, the "casting of images upon the visual imagination", and *logopoeia*, "the dance of the intellect among words" (LE 25). This tripartite scheme—the musical, the visual, the

conceptual—reappears in the *ABC of Reading* (1934) which contains such famous aphorisms as “Literature is news that STAYS news,” “Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree,” and “Poetry is the most concentrated form of verbal expression.”³

The impact of these poetic theorems on subsequent poets and on later poetic theory cannot be overestimated. There is only one problem—a problem that Sieburth’s edition underscores—and that is the curious disparity between Pound’s theory and practice. “Chinese ideogram,” declared Pound in *ABC of Reading*, is “the picture of a thing in a given position or relation,” and thus the ideogram “sun tangled in the tree’s branches, as at sunrise” means “East” (ABC 21). But Pound’s own poetry contains little of such concrete thing-language and a great deal of verse that looks like this:

Dark eyed,
O woman of my dreams,
Ivory sandaled,
There is none like thee among dancers,
None with swift feet. (LOA 270)

This is the opening stanza of “Dance Figure,” which appears, not as we might suppose, in one of the poet’s early volumes, but in the post-*Cathay*, post-Vorticism volume, *Lustra*. Indeed, such aggressively “modern” epigrams as “The Bath Tub” or “Papyrus,” together with those great “Vorticist” poems—“The Game of Chess,” “The Coming of War: Acteon,” and “Provincia Deserta”—occupy relatively little space in an edition that includes the whole corpus of Pound’s poems and translations. After 1917, Pound’s lyric production, most of it translation or adaption, whether of the *Noh* drama, Cavalcanti, Confucius, or Sophocles, oddly becomes less rather than more imagistic, Vorticist, or ideogrammic. And this corpus takes up approximately three-quarters of the Library of America volume.

Of course these were the years when Pound was writing his *Cantos*—the first installment *A Draft of XVI Cantos* was published in 1925—and so, it can be argued, his ideogrammic method and “phalanx of particulars” are to be found there. Still, it remains fascinating—and surprising—that after *Cathay* and the *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, after *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, after the documentary realism and slang of the Malatesta Cantos, Pound was as engaged as ever with the production of a formal, melopoeic, ritualistic poetic language.

This is especially true of the volume called *Guido Cavalcanti, Rime*, written during the later twenties and published, at Pound’s own expense, in 1932. Consider the famous sonnet VII, which begins with the lines “*Chi è questa che vien, ch’ogni uom la mira, / Che fa*

di clarità l'aer tremare?"⁴ In his first (1911) version, Pound resorted to a rose metaphor to render the lady's spell: "Who is she coming, that the roses bend / their shameless heads to do her passing honour?" In the second (1912), the image is discarded, but the abstract nouns "gaze" and "clarity" are treated animistically: "Who is she coming, drawing all men's gaze, / Who makes the air one trembling clarity?" But twenty years later, the opening quatrain reads:

Who is she that comes, makyng turn every man's eye
 And makyng the air to tremble with a bright clearenesse
 That leadeth with her Love, in such nearness
 No man may proffer of speech more than a sigh? (575)

Direct treatment of the thing?" "Go in fear of abstractions?" Hardly. Or again, "A rhyme must have in it some slight element of surprise if it is to give pleasure"? Not here, where "eye" rhymes with "sigh," "clearenesse" with "nearness." Indeed, the diction of the 1932 version is more conventional than that of the first two, and such phrases as "maying the air to tremble," "leadeth with her love," and "proffer of speech" archaicize the *clarità* of the original. What has happened to the lessons of Imagism and Fenollosa?

In his essay "Cavalcanti," Pound explained that in Englishing Cavalcanti's sonnets, he had to remove "not the Italian but the crust of dead English, the sediment present in my own available vocabulary. . . . it takes six or eight years to get educated in one's art, and another ten to get rid of that education." (Anderson 243). His solution, for "Chi è questa" was evidently to "reach back to pre-Elizabethan English, of a period when the writers were still intent on clarity and explicitness." (see Anderson 250). As for the sonnet's rhythm, Pound avoids the iambic pentameter he formerly used to render Cavalcanti's hendecasyllables (11-syllable lines carrying three or four primary stresses) and invents a looser line that breaks down into separate units, as in line 1, with its seven-stresses:

Whó is shé that cómes, || mákyng túrn || évery man's éye

And further: Pound tries to convey the sound of the Italian original using comparable vocalic sounds, the *iy* diphthong of "she," "clearness," "leadeth," "nearness," "speech," conveying the *feel* of Cavalcanti's open musically charged vowels, as in "*Che fa di clarità l'aer tremare*"? Pound's is, in other words, a move toward homophonic rather than literal translation.

How do we square this translation practice with Pound's "Make It New"? "Much depends," Richard Sieburth remarks in an essay on Pound's Cavalcanti, "on how one chooses to interpret archaism as a poetic practice":

Is it simply a vestige of the pseudo-historicist Wardour Street diction of the Victorians, an elitist desire, as Marxist critics might claim, to steep the commodity in nostalgia, to fetishize or glamorize the cultural capital of the past? Or are we to understand archaism as a more modernist strategy, that is, as an attempt to violently estrange language from its current linguistic norms by displacing it into an anachronistic—or indeed an a-chronistic—dialect . . . untimely, out of date, and which thereby calls into question what exactly it might mean to speak as a “contemporary”? “ ‘All ages are contemporary,’ Pound observed in 1910. To which one might add Mallarmé’s more post-modernist insight: ‘No age is ever contemporary with itself’.⁵

The estrangement of language from current linguistic norms relates Pound to such later phenomena as the “mongrelisme” of Language poets like Joan Retallack and the homophonic translations of Steve McCaffery or Charles Bernstein. Sieburth’s reading also implies that, for all Pound’s talk of image and “radiant cluster,” *phanopoeia* is not this poet’s métier—at least not in his translations. Indeed, Pound’s Noh versions and especially his later Confucian Odes are characterized by their avoidance of his own Imagist precepts and their movement, instead, in the direction of what he called, in his 1912 essay “Psychology and Troubadours,” the *phantastikon*.

This essay is usually cited for its definition of Greek myth as a form that “arose when someone having passed through delightful psychic experience tried to communicate it to others and found it necessary to screen himself from persecution.” But not only does Pound insist that myths are “real” for “those people to whom they occur”; he regards them as part of the “vital universe,” the “universe of fluid force”:

Man is—the sensitive physical part of him—a mechanism . . . rather like an electric appliance, switches, wires, etc. Chemically speaking, he is *ut credo*, a few buckets of water, tied up in a complicated sort of fig-leaf. As to his consciousness, the consciousness of some seems to rest, or to have its center more properly, in what the Greek psychologists called the *phantastikon*. Their minds are, that is, circumvolved about them like soap-bubbles reflecting sundry patches of the macrocosmos. And with certain others their consciousness is “germinal.” Their thoughts are in them as the thought of the tree is in the seed, or in the grass, or grain, or the blossom. And these minds are the more poetic.⁶

Pound obviously takes himself to be one of the latter: "the brain itself," he posited elsewhere, "is in its origin and development, only a sort of great clot of genital fluid held in suspense or reserve."⁷ And Cavalcanti was to become for Pound such another—a "natural philosopher" who "would find this modern world full of enchantments; not only the light in the electric bulb, but the thought of the current hidden in air and in wire would give him a mind full of forms" ("Cavalcanti," 209).

The brain as electric bulb, as "great clot of genital fluid": in his critical prose, Pound was given to such graphic metaphors, but, oddly, in his poetry his treatment of sex is nothing if not circumspect. Hence his predilection—whether in lyric or dramatic poetry—for an anti-mimetic poetry. *'Noh' or Accomplishment*, printed in its entirety in Sieburth's edition, not only recreates, using Fenollosa, an elaborate world of mask and ritual, but does so by means of a language, whether in prose or verse, largely detached from everyday life. "Tangled," says the Shite or ghost of the lover to Tsure, his beloved's ghost in *Nishikigi*, "we are entangled. Whose fault was it, dear? Tangled up as the grass patterns are tangled in this coarse cloth, or as the little Mushi that lives on and chirrups in dried seaweed. We do not know where are to-day our tears in the undergrowth of the eternal wilderness" (LOA 406-07). And in *Kinuta*, the chorus answers the wife's lament:

The love of a god with a goddess
Is but for the one night in passing,
So thin are the summer cloths! (LOA 422)

Eroticized ritual expressed in Pound's unique vocalic patterns: the third line above, for example, takes the *o* and *th* of the heavily stressed "Só thín" and repeats them in reverse, in the word "clóths." Indeed, throughout *Poems and Translations*, *melopoeia* is the dominant poetic mode—a *melopoeia* in the service of eros, but an eros that is highly sublimated: this is perhaps the chief glory of Pound's non-Canto poetry. In Pound's later years, this erotic lyric is offset by the Confucian translations, which mark Pound's bid to present us with a man's world, a world of ethical precept and practical action:

Tze-chang asked about conduct.

1. He said: Speak from the plumb centre of your mind, and keep your word; bamboo-horse your acts (*that is*, have this quality of surface hardness, and suppleness] with reverence for the vegetative powers. . . .
(*Analects*, Book XV, v, LOA 726)

In *The Cantos*, these modes, largely separate in the shorter poems and translations, come together—a *melopoeia* fused with an intricate *logopoeia*. *The Pisan Cantos*, newly

edited as a separate paperback for New Directions, again by Richard Sieburth, is the perfect complement to the Library of America volume, its detailed annotations making it the ideal book for classroom use. The Introduction is one of the best short essays I have read on the *Pisans*: here the tragic story of Pound's imprisonment at the American military detention center near Pisa, his removal to stand trial for treason in Washington, and the resulting thirteen years (1945-58) he spent in St. Elizabeth's, is recounted economically and movingly, as is the notorious Bollingen Prize controversy of 1948.

Half a century after the publication of *The Pisan Cantos*, I think most critics would agree that, whatever else the sequence was or wasn't, it was certainly the best book of poems published in 1948 and hence well deserved the much disputed prize. Even Williams's *Paterson, Book 2*, evidently a close contender, cannot match the range, depth, rich intricacy, and sharp wit of the *Pisans*. My one caveat about this, the finest section of *The Cantos*, has to do with Pound's depiction of eros, his "universe of fluid force." Take the figure of "Cythera," thus named, Sieburth reminds us in the Introduction, "for the island where Aphrodite first stepped ashore from her foam-borne shell" (xxxix). And he adds:

"As the goddess of beauty, she appears early in the sequence in her traditional aesthetic guises, now painted by Botticelli, now by the Pre-Raphaelites, now glimpsed in a snapshot memory of Olga Rudge:

she did her hair in small ringlets, à la 1880 it might have been,
red, and the dress she wore Drecol or Lanvin

a great goddess, Aeneas knew her forthwith

(74. 363-65)⁸

Most frequently, however, she visits the poet as a fluid, diaphanous body whose crystalline ethereality offers a Dantescan promise of redemption through the power of love—a realization only fully achieved at the outset of Canto 80: "Amo ergo sum, and in just that proportion"(xxxix).

Sieburth then traces Cythera's reappearance in Canto 81 as "Venus the morning star, the consort of Mt. Taishan," and her fusion with the "archaic earth-mothers Gea and Tellus, with the figures of Demeter and Persephone, and finally her reappearance as the poet's initiator into the "great Eleusinian fertility rites" (xxxix).

But how does Pound's "fluid, diaphanous body" of "crystalline ethereality," this mysterious Eleusinian goddess, familiar to us from Pound's *Cavalcanti* and other translations, accord with the witty and realistic snapshots of Pound's male friends in these *Cantos*? The "she" who "did her hair in small ringlets" is never mentioned by name, and

neither are the other women in Pound's life, beginning with H.D., known in Pound's poetry as "Dryad." Tellingly, the men who designed Olga's dresses—"Decrol or Lanvin" may be named, but Olga herself can only appear in the guise Cythera or Gea, the earth mother. "Under her influence," writes Sieburth, "the entire Pisan landscape is eroticized into a soft focus projection of her giant body" (xxxii).

Soft focus indeed! In the world of the *Pisans*, men are allowed to be men—absurd, charming, endearing, like "Mr. James shielding himself with Mrs. Hawkesby / as it were a bowl shielding itself with a walking stick" (74.297) or "Uncle William" (Yeats) "dawdling around Notre Dame / in search of whatever" (83.23), or "Mr. Joyce" who "requested sample menus from the leading hotels" (77.279). Possum (Eliot), Fordie (Ford Madox Ford), Bill Carlos (William Carlos Williams): these populate the great memory poem which is the *Pisan Cantos*, arrested in characteristic poses so as to evoke magic moments and recognition scenes. So too, the actual places cited in the *Pisans*, from Venice's "jewel box, Santa Maria Dei Miracoli" (76.271) to "Bros Watson's store in Clinton N.Y." (76. 19) to the "WIENER CAFÉ" on the Edgeware Road in London (80.472) and the "cake shops in the Nevsky" (77.42), are designated by proper names that display the precision he first called for in the Imagist manifesto of 1912.

The collage cuts that take us from these actual places to the world of Greek mythology and Eleusinian mysteries, to Mt. Taishan and the "branch of Juanon" are what make the *Cantos* unique: it is the very contrast between the everyday world and the mythopoeic one that is so engaging. But the coy invocation of Cythera /Tella/Persephone becomes tedious: how do Fordie and Uncle William and Possum actually function in this "soft focus" universe of idealized female presences? Indeed, the *ménage à trois* of the war years, when Pound, Dorothy, and Olga were forced to live together at close quarters, much to the irritation and pain of all three, is mentioned only in the single oblique line, "Some cook, some do not" (81.63). which refers to Dorothy's refusal to make dinner. And even here the two women are designated only as "Some."

Poems and Translations gives us the basis for the curious sublimation of *The Cantos*. It suggests that, however advanced Pound was in his critical prose—a prose that provides us with us with one of the cornerstones of Modernist poetics—and however advanced Pound's Canto technique came to be, with its intricate fusion of ideogram, documentary, mythography, and citation—his erotic "science" looked to a past that had never, of course existed. It thus became part of the "Pound problem," along with his pet theories of economics and politics.

Yet it is “to have done instead of not doing” (81.166) that makes Pound’s poetry, both the *Poems and Translations* collected in the Library of America volume and *The Cantos*, so unique. What other twentieth-century poet has had so ambitious a project? What other poet of the time would refer to himself, as Pound did in the first of *The Pisan Cantos*, as **OY TIE--** no man— “A man on whom the sun has gone down,” only to go on, later in the same Canto, to immortalize the words of such poet friends as Basil Bunting or of such Paris émigrés as the Russian military attaché , Colonel Golevsky (“Kokka”), Pound reveling in the verbal play these names and so many others evoked. A man on whom the sun has gone down? Hardly. As these new volumes remind us, Pound was one of the few Modernist poets with whom the twenty-first century must come to terms.

Footnotes

¹ "A Retrospect" *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), 3. This volume is subsequently cited as LE. Sieburth lists these Imagist principles, first published in the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*, in his Chronology: see p. 1212.

² Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Bzeska* (1916; New York: New Directions, 1970), 92.

³ *ABC of Reading* (1934; New York: New Directions, 1960), 28, 30, 36.

⁴ For the original Italian sonnet and Pound's successive translations of it, see David Anderson (ed.), *Pound's Cavalcanti. An Edition of the Translations, Notes, and Essays*, 42-46. Anderson includes a manuscript draft of Sonnet VII, written in 1910, prior to the first published version. His book also contains "Cavalcanti," from *How to Read*; see 203-51.

⁵ See Richard Sieburth, "Channeling Guido: Ezra Pound's Cavalcanti Translations," in *Guido Cavalcanti Tra I Suoi Lettori* (Florence, Edizioni Cadmo, 2003), p. 264.

⁶ Pound, *Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 1991), 92.

⁷ Ezra Pound, "Traslator's Preface," Remy de Gourmont, *The Natural Philosophy of Love*, trans. Ezra Pound (New York: Collier, 1972), p. 149.

⁸ The reference is to Canto number, followed by the line number.