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# EZRA POUND'S *CATHAY*

by Kazuhito Hayashi

Ezra Pound's *Cathay* is a collection of poems translated from the Chinese, based on Fenollosa's notes. I should like to examine in this paper what Pound has actually done in *Cathay* by comparing his translations with the original.<sup>(1)</sup> As Wai-lim Yip suggests in his *Ezra Pound's Cathay* (p. 7), I must consider the following points: first, Pound translated from Fenollosa's notes without sufficient knowledge of Chinese; next, Fenollosa made the annotations under the instruction of Japanese (not Chinese) teachers; third, Pound in translating the Chinese poems, consciously or unconsciously changed the original passages.

Fenollosa's notes are sometimes misleading. For example, a line from "Ku Feng No. 14" (Pound's "Lament of the Frontier Guard") goes:

	不	見	征	戍	兒
Fenollosa's	not	see	to make an	defend	child
notes:			expedition,		
			attack		

They who go on the expedition of defence will not come back to see their children.

Yip: Without seeing the frontier men

Pound: And no children of warfare upon them [i.e. desolate fields]

No longer the men for offence and defence.

As Yip's standard version shows, Fenollosa's annotation is incorrect. Fenollosa and his instructors did not know that the last three characters 征戍兒 mean as a compound "man (not child) for expedition and

defence." It is interesting to note that Pound retains the original meaning despite the misleading annotation—especially since he knew extremely little Chinese when he made *Cathay*.

Since Fenollosa's notes are hand-written, Pound makes several mistakes in copying—particularly when he deals with proper nouns. For example, a place name 西上陽 which should read "Sei-jo-yo" in Japanese pronunciation becomes "Sei-go-yo" in Pound's translation. Similarly, 仙城 "Sen-jo" reads "Sen-go" in Pound's version. Yip says, "Pound ... has turned 'Yang Pass' (Yo kan) into the almost anonymous 'gates of Go,' subjecting everything to the platonic form of estrangement in the last line..." (p. 140) It is hard to tell whether Pound changed "Yo kan" into "gates of Go" for the purpose of the "platonic form" or whether he simply misread the annotation "gates of Yo" (Yo kan) as "gates of Go" since the letters g, y, and j often look alike in Fenollosa's notes (as seen in the illustration on page 168 in Yip's book.)

As Japanese pronunciation of Chinese characters differs from Chinese pronunciation, so some words differ in meaning in Japanese and in Chinese. For example, the character 鶯 means "oriole" in Chinese and "(Japanese) nightingale" in Japanese. As for "Poem composed at the command of the Emperor..." (The River Song), Yip says, "using 'nightingales' instead of 'orioles' certainly adds a tragic tone to the general atmosphere." (p. 152 note) But I think that Pound has simply followed the annotation by the Japanese instructor who must have translated 鶯 as "nightingale".

The Chinese language may seem ambiguous to the Englishman who is accustomed to the grammar of European languages. There is no clear distinction between the parts of speech. Chinese sentences often omit subjects. The relation between a modifier and its object is not always definite. Take the last line of "Yü Chieh Yüan" (The Jewel Stairs'

Grievance) for instance ; it is hard to tell what the characters 玲瓏 modify in the sentence :

玲 瓏 望 秋 月  
glass-clear watch autumn moon

Y : To watch, glass-clear, the autumn moon.

P : And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

One Chinese scholar remarks that the words indicate the clearness of the protagonist's face. Another says that it is the moonlight that is glass-clear. Yip's translation retains the ambiguity of the original sentence, sacrificing the clear syntax in English. Pound's line is clear in meaning but gives only one interpretation of many possible interpretations.

The cultural difference between the East and the West is another obstacle in translation. For example, the Chinese character 青 is the color that "covers the spectrum from green, blue, to dark blue." (Yip, p.137 note) In other words, people did not distinguish blue and green in old China and Japan. Even now, the same word 青 expresses the color of such different things as the sea, the sky, the grass, the unripe fruit, etc. Therefore anyone who tries to render it into English must decide whether it signifies the color green or blue. Pound's inappropriate phrases, like "blue is the grass" and "the willow-tips are half-blue," are probably due to the careless annotations by Japanese instructors who mechanically translated 青 as "blue."

Levels of translation are also significant. It is difficult to determine how far the original elements should be reserved in English. For example, the twelfth line of "Song of Ch'ang-kan" (The River-Merchant's Wife : A Letter) goes :

願 同 塵 興 灰  
wish same dust and ash

Y : We wished to stay together like dust and ash.

P : I desired my dust to be mingled with yours.

The line is based upon a common Chinese simile, "mixed as thoroughly (undividably) as dust and ash." Yip's faithful translation is a little puzzling to an English reader. Pound's version with biblical association may appeal to the western mind, although it brings in an entirely different connotation of dust from the original sense. Pound picks up the essence of the sentence, "wife's love for her husband," and recasts it in the western context. In other instances, however, he does the opposite thing as in a line from "Taking Leave of a Friend :

揮 手 自 茲 去

wave hand from here leave

Y : We wave hands, you go from here.

P : Who bow over their clasped hands at a distance.

The original line presents, as in Yip's translation, a universal scene of departure, but Pound adopts the westerner's conventional image of Chinese custom. In the same way, a phrase from "Poem composed at the command of the Emperor" (The River Song) shows Pound's western mind working less successfully.

看 舞 鶴

see dance crane

Y : see cranes-dance

P : look at the wing-flapping storks

Pound's naturalistic, unimaginative picture of the birds spoils the gay, fantastic atmosphere of the original.

The discussion above is chiefly concerned with the circumstances under which Pound translated Chinese poems. In the following, I should like to compare three versions of a poem, "Ku Feng No. 18" (Poem by the Bridge at Ten-shin) : the original, Yip's standard translation, and

Pound's, in order to see what Pound has achieved in terms of poetic effect.

The title, "Poem by the Bridge at Ten-Shin", is Pounds invention. The original title "Ku Feng No. 18", means "the eighteenth verse written in the style of ancient poems." Pound's title is quite appropriate. It gives a specific place as a frame. Ten-Shin (T'ien Tsin) is a city at the river-mouth famous for its huge bridge. The title also suggests indirectly water flowing under the bridge, and the water is the leading symbol in the poem which begins with the scene of petals drifting away on the water and ends with an image of a man rowing away on a small boat.

Pound adds a word, "petals" in lines 5 and 6 :

前 水 復 後 水 古 今 相 統 流  
before water return after water old now continue flow

Y : Water gone and water coming on,

Flow, flow from ancient days till now.

P : *Petals* are on the gone waters and on the going,

And on the back-swirling eddies, [Italics mine]

The insertion of "petals" here has significant effect. The foregoing lines are about the transient beauty of flowers : In the morning, heart-smiting flowers./In the evening, they drift with eastward water. By mentioning "petals" floating on the water, Pound thus evokes a feeling of continuity in narration in the mind of the reader. Pound often uses this technique of reviving words in the previous lines and using them in later passages. For example, the sixth line of "Poem composed at the command of the Emperor" (The River Song) goes :

上 有 好 鳥 相 和 鳴  
above be good bird each other sing

Y : And above, nice birds sing to each other :

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P : And high over *the willows*, the fine birds

sing to each other, and listen,

[Italics mine]

Pound brings in "the willows" from the third line of the poem. The reader then recalls the gay, colorful scene of spring described in "South of the pool, willows' color is half-green...." Similarly, by adding "petals" to the line in "Ku Feng No. 18," Pound creates a vivid, visual image of flowing water in the reader's mind. This motion picture of drifting flower illustrates the theme of the poem, the impermanence of man, which is more explicitly expressed in the following lines.

Visualization of images is one of Pound's characteristics. He adds color to the lines in "The Song of Ch'ang-kan" (River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter) :

八 月 蝴 蝶 来 雙 飛 西 園 草

eight month butterfly come pair fly west garden grass

Y : In the eighth month, butterflies come

In pairs over the grass in the West Garden.

P : The paired butterflies are *already yellow* with August

Over the grass in the West garden ;

[Italics mine]

Here the heroine looks at the butterflies flying in pairs, and she thinks of the husband far away. Pound expresses her sorrow more intensely by making the colorful visual image of yellow butterflies against (green) grass. A passage from "To See a Friend Off to Shu" (Leave-Taking Near Shoku) shows the extreme example of Pound's visualization. Italicized parts are all Pound's invention :

Clouds grow *out of the hill*

at his horse's bridle.

Sweet trees are on the paved way of the Shin,

*Their trunks burst through the paving,*

*And freshets are bursting their ice*

*in the midst of Shoku, a proud city.*

[Italics mine]

The seventh and eighth lines of "Ku Feng No. 18" go :

新 人 非 舊 人            年 年 橋 上 遊

new man not old man        year year bridge on play

Y : Today's men are not those of yesterday

Year after year they hang around on the bridge.

P : *But* today's men are not the men of the old days,

*Though* they hang in the same way over the bridgerail. [Italics mine]

These conjunctions, "but" and "though," are not in the original. Conjunctions of this kind are often absent in Chinese poetry. The subject matter and images link the lines of a poem. Chinese poetry, as most of oriental poetry, does not emphasize logic in the western sense. The cause-effect thinking is not apparent. For example, lines 8-10 of "Ku Feng No. 18" go in Yip's translation :

Year after year they hang around on the bridge.

Cocks crow. Sea sheen stirs.

At levee, princes spread in order.

There is no causal relation between these lines. This is juxtaposition of independent lines. Pound, however, with his western thinking, often tries to find cause-effect relations where they are absent. Another example is a line in "Ku Feng No.14" (Lament of the Frontier Guard):

安 得 營 農 圃

F : how may work farmer farm

How could the farmer work the farm ?

Y : How are we to farm our fields ?

P : Desolate, desolate fields.



Since Fenollosa gives an accurate crib here, Pound's line is his deliberate choice. Why has he not adopted the farmer's sorrowful interrogation? I think it is due to his cause-effect thinking. Pound, instead of recording the cause, jumps to the result. He prefers to present the visual image of what will happen when the farms are deserted instead of expressing the farmer's cry who worries about his farm after he is gone.

By inserting words and phrases of his own invention, Pound often succeeds in intensifying the poetic effect. In the eighth line of "Ku Feng No. 18" quoted before, he puts in a phrase: "Though they hang *in the same way* over the briderail" [Italics mine]. With this additional phrase, "in the same way," he reinforces the meaning of the line which is about the large cycle of life compared to man's transiency as an individual: people die, but other people repeat what their predecessor did. The fourth line of "The Old Idea of Ch'ang-an" (Old Idea of Choan by Rosoriu) is a similar case:

Y: Gold whips, like unbroken silk, wave toward baron's homes.

P: A glitter of golden saddles, *awaiting the princess*;

They eddy before the gate of the barons. [Italics mine]

The italicized part is Pound's sheer invention. I cannot say whether this is a good translation or not, but I should like to suggest that Pound's additional phrase helps to create the luxurious atmosphere of the prosperous capital of ancient China.

Omission is also one of Pound's techniques. The eighteenth line of "Ku Fend No. 18" goes:

志 氣 橫 嵩 邱

haughty will across high hill

Y: Haughty indeed, these men's will across the highest peak



passage beginning with the line "Haughty their passing" is Pound's improvisation. He has arranged the lines so that they may lead to the climax (which is also his invention) by accumulating regular rhythmic movements. The fact that the starting line is indented makes Pound's deliberate handling of the passage more probable. Therefore I believe that he has omitted the latter part of the first line in order to make it a suitable starting point for the following lines of rising tone.

The last two lines, however, in Pound's translation above raise another problem. The original lines are :

七	十	紫	鸕	鶯	雙	雙	戲	庭	幽
seventy	purple	mandarin	pair	pair	play	garden	dark		
			duck						

Pound treats these lines as if the subjects are men, but they are about mandarin ducks. This is an allusion to an old Chinese verse: "Seventy-two mandarin ducks, when they walk, they form lines in pairs." Since the bird is known for its intimacy between male and female, the dance of these birds may imply the merry-making of young noblemen, but "the mad chase in the garden" is Pound's over-imagination. It is his sensual imagination to see bacchanalia in the world of colorful birds playing in the dark garden. The last two lines of "Ku Feng No. 18" hint the same tendency :

何	如	鷗	夷	子	散	髮	棹	扁	舟
how	like	Han	Rei	Mr.	unbind	hair	pole	small	boat

Y : None can compare to Fan-li

Who loosened his hair and went a-boating

P : Who among them is a man like Han-rei

*Who departed alone with his mistress,*

With *her* hair unbound, and he his own skiffsman ! [Italics mine]

The words 散髮 "to loosen the hair" mean to leave one's position

which is symbolized by the hair style and the cap. Therefore it is apparently Fan-li (Han-rei) himself who unbound his hair and not his mistress. The underlined parts are not in the original. Pound might have utilized the outside information in Fenollosa's notes or in other sources to complement the passage, but Fan-li here is a symbol of man who is free from worldly desires. The noble figure of a man who has resigned his high position and has left for his saintly life is greatly spoiled if he is with his mistress as in Pound's version.

Pound says: "The quality of translations declined in measure as the translators ceased to be absorbed in the subject matter of their original."<sup>(3)</sup> His translation of "Ku Feng No. 18" is a good example of how a western poet assimilates himself to the eastern subject matter. Pound also says: "The meaning of the poem to be translated can not 'wobble'".<sup>(4)</sup> What he calls "the meaning of a poem" in "Ku Feng No. 18" are the picturesque, full-colored emotional life of old China and the spiritual, sometimes moralistic eastern philosophy, and they are well conveyed in Pound's translation. The theme of the poem, the impermanence of man's life expressed by the flowing water in contrast to the luxurious life of noblemen, comes out alive through his style and by means of his vivid images. What Pound has achieved in *Cathay* is not a faithful mirror image of ancient Chinese world. It is a vision of China through the western eyes enriched by his imagination and intensified by his technique.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am greatly indebted for Mr. Wai-lim Yip's *Ezra Pound's Cathay* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969) which has provided me with the text of Pound's translations, extract from Fenollosa's notes, and standard translation of original poems.

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- <sup>2</sup> Ezra Pound, "Early Translators of Homer" in *Ezra Pound* edited by J. P. Sullivan (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1970), p. 88.
- <sup>3</sup> Ezra Pound, "Elizabethan Classicists" in *Ezra Pound*, p. 82.
- <sup>4</sup> Ezra Pound, "Imagisme" in *Ezra Pound*, p. 45.