

## Renderings: a Poundian Reading

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not the verbal definitions in dictionaries*<sup>1</sup>

In her book *Reading Pound Reading*, Katheryne Lindberg remarks: “Ezra Pound radically questioned the discursive boundaries, interpretive conventions, and historical practices that have been canonized under the name of ‘High Modernism’ and ‘Pound and Eliot.’”<sup>2</sup> While Lindberg’s emphasis is on a reading of Pound’s reading procedure, which she scrutinizes thoroughly, my interest centers on Pound’s theory of translation as an emblem of the archaeological method.

Pound’s interest in the then incipient art of the cinema points to his ideal of finding a common locus – which for him is juxtaposition – in the most diverse realms with which he was dealing. Actually this common locus of unusual juxtapositions, as Michel Foucault asserts, may be difficult to determine only if one is searching for it in the epistemological level, or “*scientific consciousness*” to Foucault.

To the contrary, one must learn to lean on the archaeological level (or Foucault’s “*scientific unconsciousness*”), since the diversity of the objects under consideration is ignored by the archaeologist or even by the

biologist, who employ such a procedure to classify extremely diverse elements. It is noteworthy that Foucault contrasts epistemology, the theory of knowledge, or “the science of method and grounds of knowledge” to archaeology, which is the “scientific study of the remains and monuments of the prehistoric period.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that the former is the study of the method, and the latter is the scientific study. No mention is made in this general definition of an archaeological method. Still, as Pound rightly asserts, a method indeed exists which we might call ideogrammic, or the method of the “diggers,” or archaeology.

I contend that Pound’s method is “archaeological,” and I believe that a reading of his work must be archaeological as well, for it mingles the poetical activity with seeing below the layers of the text, in an apparently disorganized manner. In fact, Pound is resistant to systematic generalizations; therefore, a Poundian theory of reading, of translation, or of writing is difficult to pinpoint, for the poet’s criticism hardly presents a coherent aesthetics on which one could base one’s readings of his works.

Pound rigorously, and at times accidentally, challenges the traditional habits (of reading, of writing, of translating) since his notions are often apparently asystematic. In the Introduction to his translation of Guido Cavalcanti’s poems Pound remarked: “I have in my translations tried to bring over the qualities of Guido’s rhythm, not line by line, but to embody in the whole of my English some trace of that power which implies the man.”<sup>3</sup>

In translation Pound searches for the poetic essence in the traces of the text: “[t]ranslating does not, for him, differ in essence from any other poetic job; as the poet begins by seeing, so the translator by reading; but his reading must be a kind of seeing.”<sup>4</sup> Seeing, regressing into the original, and creating poetry are correlated tasks to Pound.

Actually, translation to Pound is not merely the rendering of the codes from one language into another, but it presupposes transformation, re-creation, because it requires “transparency in the sense that one sees through TO the original”<sup>5</sup> Still, the clarity at which Pound aims implies creation by the translator, who must be able to gather all the nuances present in the original and transpose them into the second language. In this sense the expression “*traduttore-traditore*” (translator-traitor) seems to fit this poet in his myriad exercises in translation from the Latin, French, Provençal, Greek and Chinese. As a matter of fact, his knowledge of some of those languages has been disputed by some critics. Yet, the point here is not to discuss whether Pound was fully competent in those languages, but to ponder on his theory of translation, a “*theory*” which is disseminated in sentences here and there, throughout his critical writings. In his poetical practice, Pound may enact his theory, as it is clear in Canto 1 of *The Cantos*; there the poet mentions some translators of Homer by name, while he works with displacements of texts through translation, absorbed in a form of metamorphosis which he terms “identity, persisting through change”.<sup>6</sup> A writer who cherishes transformation, such as Pound, could only – if he chose to – place himself in the category of the metamorphoser, the transformer, a writer who envisaged translation as an act of love, of re-creation. Pound is then the “*traduttore-tessitore*,” the weaver of fragments, the interpreter and manipulator of threads, which he captures as unconnected pieces to be decoded, and reintegrated in his own art.<sup>7</sup> As an example, Pound closes canto 51 with a fragment, a Chinese ideogram, “ch’ing ming,” which he elsewhere translates as “to define the correct terms,” or merely “right name.” The precise translation of this small segment should not actually concern us so much, if we are to heed Ernest Fenollosa’s warning, which Pound follows, that “relations are more real and more important than the things which they relate,” and if we believe that “the purpose of poetic translation is the poetry, not the verbal definitions in dictionaries.”<sup>8</sup>

Translation as a form of Phoenix re-creation involved Pound. The metamorphoses of the text, which is destroyed to be re-created from its ashes, seem to fascinate the poet. Pound's translations are set in a poetics where the multifaceted meeting of a web of discourses is to be resolved in the concealment and discovery of a palimpsest. The modernist poetics demands that the reader find the fragments, the traces in the air, in short, the writings that have been previously woven into the text in order to re-create the text. One example in *The Cantos* is Baudelaire's expression "Les paradis artificiels" which is woven into the poem, referred to as a palimpsest by Derrida.<sup>9</sup> The point is that, in each environment the expression surfaces, it acquires a diverse meaning, and Pound joyfully plays with the several possibilities of describing the "paradis artificiels" in his *Cantos*, now asserting its existence, now denying its likelihood. Though Pound chose to enact, rather than to "philosophize", as he put it, about any point, he attempted to discuss two sorts of translation in his *Literary Essays*, the interpretative one, and the creative one: "In the long run the translator is in all probability impotent to do all of the work for the linguistically lazy reader. He can show where the treasure lies, he can guide the reader in choice of what tongue is to be studied, and he can very materially assist the hurried student who has a smattering of the language and the energy to read the original text alongside the metrical gloze. [sic]."<sup>10</sup>

This refers to 'interpretative translation.' The 'other sort.' I mean the cases where the 'translator' [sic] is definitely making a new poem, falls simply in the domain of original writing, or if it does not it must be censured according to equal standards, and praised with some sort of just deduction, assessable only in the particular case."<sup>11</sup>

Suffice it to be said that the "infinite regress" of meanings might have blurred some of Pound's readings, since he sometimes translated, say, a French version of a Greek or a Chinese text, and he then re-created the text through his own knowledge of the target language. Recurrently

the poet's intuition guided his hand and the result, a creative translation, may result in Pound's distancing himself from the text and assuming the pose of a reader/writer of a palimpsest. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term palimpsest as "writing material (as a parchment or tablet) used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased." In this form of writing a cascade of meanings springs from the rewriting over somebody else's translation of a text, as though veil after veil were removed only to reveal another veil, *ad infinitum*; the veil is the trace which each past translator left, as his own remnant, his mark, on the translations he produced. Of course such a notion of the traces of texts in literature is not the same thing as influence of an author or style upon another. Most precisely what is involved is the palimpsestic style of writing, which may be regarded as a form of intertextuality, in Julia Kristeva's contention.<sup>12</sup> Another form of re-creation is metamorphosis, a motif which recurs in the poem; "beyond the form" (meta+phorme), the poet-translator is supposed to discover the possibilities of recombining and creating the text again, of enabling the reader to search for the fragments that compose the text.

Ian Bell asserts that the "activity of reinscription" of the interaction of many texts is "the programme of the palimpsest." To Bell the hope of connecting the "traces' will make the 'fragmentary coherent, even if momentarily'."<sup>13</sup> Stephen Fender contends that in the discovery of the texts which meet to form the network of the text, "the reader constructs his own closure".<sup>14</sup> The archeologist of course produces his closure in the same fashion, and that is the reason why I insist on calling Pound's method "archaeological," in the sense that Michel Foucault sees it, as diggings in the various historical epochs.<sup>15</sup>

Of course Pound wished to discover motives in layers of dead facts, and his montage of "shored fragments" proves this point. The connection of those fragments is effected through the juxtaposition, or the ideogrammic method.

I contend that Pound is a true representative of the modern temper, but that he becomes a weaver, a precursor of the Postmodern era, as his text is fragmentary, highly allusive, non-closural, palimpsestic and so unstable that the poet himself is unable to stop weaving his web. The translator thus turns into the tessitore, the poetry reader into the poet-writer, the theorist into the archaeologist.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Fenollosa, Ernest. The Chinese Written Character as a Medium For Poetry, in *Instigations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Ezra Pound. (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), pp. 357-388.
- <sup>2</sup> Lindberg, Katheryne V. *Reading Pound Reading: Modernism After Nietzsche* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 15.
- <sup>3</sup> Pound, Ezra. *Translations* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p.34. Guido Cavalcanti is the Italian poet Pound admired for his poetic talent and for being what Pound terms "a master".
- <sup>4</sup> Kenner, Hugh. Introduction to *Ezra Pound: Translations* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 10.
- <sup>5</sup> Pound, Ezra. *Literary Essays*, (New Directions: New York, 1954), p.209.
- <sup>6</sup> Kenner, Hugh. *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1971), p. 290.
- <sup>7</sup> The expression "traduttore-tessitore" is my own invention, in a reversal of the well-known *traduttore-traditore*.
- <sup>8</sup> Fenollosa, Ernest. The Chinese Written Characters as a Medium for Poetry, in *Instigations of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1920), p. 377.
- <sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida refers to this example in *The Double Session, Disseminations* trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 248-252.
- <sup>10</sup> "Gloze" is the term employed by Pound in his text; it serves as an example of his notorious "creations".
- <sup>11</sup> Pound, Ezra. *Literary Essays*, (New Directions: New York, 1954), p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> What Julia Kristeva calls "intertextuality" is more clearly explained by Bakhtin as "the absorption and transformation of another text." See P. N. Medvedev/M. M. Bakhtin, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), p. 161. For Kristeva see Word, Dialogue, and Novel, in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 64-91. Quotation on p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Bell, Ian F. A. *Critic as Scientist: The Modernist Poetics of Ezra Pound* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), p. 242. The enclosed quotation, Bell explains, comes from Fred Moramarco, Concluding an Epic: The Drafts and Fragments of the Cantos, *American Literature*, XLIX, 3 (November 1977), p. 323.

<sup>14</sup> Fender, Stephen. *The American Long Poem* (1977), p. 10, as quoted by Bell, p. 323.

<sup>15</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon, 1972).