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Radical East? : Some Notes on Pound's "Ignorant" Translations from the Chinese

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One of the consequences of the postcolonial turn in literary studies, initiated by the publication of Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (1978), has been the proliferation of critical writings about Anglophone literature's fascination with non-European cultures. Modernist poetry's relationship with the Orient has been examined, among other critics, by Zhaoming Qian, the author of the monograph *Orientalism and Modernism* (1995) and the editor of a recent collection of essays *Modernism and the Orient* (2013).¹ Since no other modern poet, or perhaps no other 20th century literary figure, had such an intense relationship with Chinese culture as Ezra Pound, it is hardly surprising that this new trend has contributed to a renewed interest in his work. In his introduction to *Ezra Pound and China*, the most comprehensive study of this issue that has appeared to date, Qian states that "to address Pound's relation to China is to address one of the knottiest issues in poetic modernism" (1). In 2008 Pound's letters to his Chinese friends were published (also edited by Qian), which made a lot of new source material available and opened up new paths for discussion. Indeed, "Pound's China" continues to fascinate – and puzzle – his scholars.²

Summarizing the history of Pound's ties with the East and the controversies provoked by his translation practices is a task by far exceeding the scope of the present article as it would require at least a book-length study. Instead, I am going to concentrate on one aspect of the problem, that is, on Pound's encounter with the notebooks left by the sinologist Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), which led to the publication of *Cathay* and, subsequently, to the transformation of Pound's poetics which found its mature expression in *The Cantos*. After presenting the literary circumstances at the time of Pound's first contact with the Chinese language and briefly pondering the question of fidelity (or lack thereof) of his translations, I am going to shift the terms of discussion to a different plane. Rather than trying to determine whether Pound's translations do or do not convey an accurate image of China, I am going to look at Pound's practice of translation as a starting point for an aesthetic revolution whose consequences are also political in nature in a sense which reaches far beyond Pound's often misguided political opinions. The practice of translation reaches a new meaning in Pound's work, gradually becoming the principle of his poetic composition and, more radically, of human communication as such. I am going to attempt to put Pound's poetic project in conversation with Jacques Rancière's politics of esthetics, focusing on the notion heterology, understood as "the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed" (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 63), making room for the

1 Another book-length study of this topic worth noting is: Sabine Sielke and Christian Kleckner, eds., *Orient and Orientalisms in US-American Poetry and Poetics* (2009).

2 See, for example, Zhaoming Qian, ed., *Ezra Pound's Chinese Friends: Stories in Letters* (2008); Zhaoming Qian, ed., *Ezra Pound and China* (2003). Other notable studies include: Feng Lan, *Ezra Pound and Confucianism* (2004); Josephine Park, *Apparitions of Asia* (2008).

intrusion of politics. For Rancière, politics is equated with the exercise of freedom. It is therefore always the antinome of "the police." In my view, Pound's work involves both the totalitarian tendency to "police" the sensible *and* the subversive impulse to open up the sphere of the political. I would like to suggest that the latter impulse is linked, precisely, with the practice of translation. According to Rancière, one always "translates" because in order to communicate one has to be able "to say what one thinks in the words of others" (Rancière, "Politics" 10). Rancière uses this observation as the starting point for an elaboration of a radically democratic model of education, where the relationship between the "master" and the "disciple" is not one of power but of equality (of intelligences).³ Taking into consideration Pound's didactic zeal, I believe it is possible to look at his work through the prism of Rancière's theory and to observe, in the author of *The Cantos*, at least some features of "the ignorant schoolmaster" who invites his students (readers) to perform the work of emancipation, that is to say, "the exercise of [their] freedom" (23).

It should be emphasized right at the start that Pound's fascination with China began in early childhood. According to Ira B. Nadel, the first Chinese object encountered by Pound was a Ming dynasty vase owned by the family (12). His parents took interest in the work of Christian missionaries in the East, and outside of his family home the boy was exposed to "Philadelphia's continuing attraction to the material culture of China" (12). These early encounters, accompanied by a vision of the Orient he absorbed from literature,⁴ awoke Pound's curiosity. When the young poet, by a sheer stroke of luck, found himself the editor of Ernest Fenollosa's notebooks, he had already had a strong image of China as an exotic, mystical and idyllic land. Even though that image may have been largely phantasmatic, the fascination it exerted made Pound genuinely responsive to all things "Oriental" (Nadel 16).

Fenollosa's notebooks proved to be a treasure-trove. They provided the materials for an edition of Noh plays, for the influential essay *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1919) and, most famously, for *Cathay* (1915), whose publication marked one of the pivotal moments in Anglophone modernism. There can be no doubt that *Cathay*, in addition to constituting a breakthrough in Pound's own poetic career, helped to modernize English-language poetry, ushering in a new aesthetic characterized by simplicity, directness, and condensation. But on the other hand, the book immediately stirred controversies, as it was not clear whether the poems should be treated as

3 In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Jacques Rancière presents a meditation on an experiment conducted by Joseph Jacotot (1770–1840). Jacotot was a French professor who found himself in a situation of having to instruct a group of Flemish students, while he had no knowledge of Flemish. He decided to use a bilingual edition of Fénelon's novel *Télémaque* in order to establish some common ground between himself and his students. They were supposed to compare the two versions of the text and, using the French they acquire in this way, to write their responses to the novel. To Jacotot's surprise, the responses were written in perfect French. This experience changed Jacotot's understanding of the pedagogical act. He came to believe that the students had no need for an "explicator" who would dominate their intelligence with his own; what they needed instead was a relationship of equality, where the only form of subordination concerns the will of the student and not his or her intelligence (11–18).

4 The 19th century saw the growing popularity of the so-called "Oriental tale." Perhaps the first example of this genre had been the best-selling novel *Zenobia* by William Ware. Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne both used Ware's novel as a source of inspiration (Nadel 24–26).

original work, as translations, or as mixture of the two.⁵ It must be remembered that at the time of *Cathay* Pound had no knowledge of Chinese. What is more, he treated the material of the notebooks rather freely, sometimes misreading Fenollosa – accidentally or purposefully – and the sinologist himself, as it is now generally recognized, also made mistakes.⁶ Nevertheless, the poems collected in *Cathay* felt not only new and attractive but somehow also *right*. Attempting perhaps to account for this “reality-effect” of what, if judged by strictly academic standards, ought to be considered as inaccurate translations, T. S. Eliot, in his introduction to Ezra Pound’s *Selected Poems* (1928), famously described Pound as “the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time” (14). This might actually be the most frequently quoted sentence that has ever been written about Pound, and certainly it is the most influential one when it comes to the reception of his work as a translator. Often taken out of its context, it has been used to argue that China was not really the gist of Pound’s endeavor since *Cathay*, in Robert Kern’s pointed formulation, was “largely an event within Anglo-American literature” (4).

If Kern were right, then Pound’s production of China could easily be criticized from the viewpoint of postcolonial theory, since his work could then be seen as contributing to the vision of the Far East as an imaginary source of aesthetic pleasure for the Occident.⁷ However, as demonstrated by Eric Hayot, there are at least two reasons why any such conclusion would be an oversimplification. First of all, one should read Eliot’s verdict in its proper context. The praise for *Cathay* was not unqualified. Claiming that Pound “invented” Chinese poetry for his readers Eliot underscored “the degree to which the sheer force of Pound’s language [made] its China believable” (514). He thus simultaneously suggested that *Cathay* was “not Chinese poetry” and that it was “great poetry.” It is hard not to agree with Hayot that “the effect of the second of these points [was] to make the first difficult to hear” (514). Moreover, it needs to be pointed out that Eliot may have simply been wrong in his judgment that China was effectively absent from Pound’s translations. As argued,

5 Controversies continue to this day. For a very critical discussion of Pound’s work as a translator see, for instance, Christie Stuart, “Usurious Translation: From Chinese Character to Western Ideology in Pound’s Confucian ‘Terminology’” (2012). A useful brief introduction into the controversies around *Cathay*, presenting both critical and supportive voices, is provided by Eric Hayot in “Critical Dreams: Orientalism, Modernism, and the Meaning of Pound’s China” (1999). From a different angle, Steven G. Yao considers the impact of Pound’s work on contemporary Chinese-American poets. Yao claims that despite Pound’s “active participation in the long and troubling history of dominant Anglo-American Orientalism,” his work, through its “sheer magnitude,” had had an important influence on Chinese-American writing, especially since the 1980s, when there was a marked renaissance of interest in Pound’s work (130–158).

6 See, for instance, Hugh Kenner, “The Poetics of Error.”

7 As argued by Edward Said, the Orient has been “one of [the West’s] deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (1). While it is mostly the Islamic countries and India that have fulfilled this function for the Europeans, Americans have identified the idea of the Orient primarily with China and Japan. In both cases the construction of the Orient as Other has served the purpose of silencing the people actually inhabiting the “Oriental” countries, as if they had no reality of their own outside of the Western imagination. This silencing is part and parcel of the West’s colonizing practices. In the words of Said, “the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (5). Eliot’s sentence, if read as a complement, might suggest that Pound’s work contributed to the “orientalization” of China.

among others, by Qian, to say that *Cathay* is *English* poetry is to repress the reality that China did as a matter of fact exert influence on Anglophone modernism (65–88). That reality is not at all mitigated by the incompleteness of the western poets' understanding of Chinese culture.

Paradoxically, the inaccuracies of Pound's translations might be read as a result of his greater fidelity to the otherness of the originals, to those aspects of the Chinese poems which could not be contained within the current modes of writing in English. In fact, Hugh Kenner and other critics have claimed that Pound's errors were not necessarily a weakness but, on the contrary, a strength of his poetics. Where he lacked knowledge, Pound allowed himself to be guided by intuition. That practice, though risky, opened up the way for a new vision of poetic language and a new understanding of poetry's relationship with experience (Kenner, "Poetics" 744). It has to be emphasized that this last issue was absolutely central for Pound, as it was for other modernist poets, concerned with what they perceived as a deep crisis of English-language poetry at the time. Verse written at the end of the Victorian era felt trivial, almost purely decorative. The poetry found in Fenollosa's notebooks was not only appealing because of its "Oriental" allure but also because it seemed to contain solutions English poetry lacked.

In "A Retrospect," a group of essays first printed in 1918, Pound formulated his first diagnosis of turn-of-the-century verse and began to suggest possible remedies. The main problem was that poetry became unstuck from reality. Infected with *Symbolisme*, it lost itself in abstractions, "not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol" (5). "Dim lands of peace," a phrase from a poem by Ford Maddox Hueffer (later Ford), served Pound as an example of the misguided tendencies in the writing of that period. To oppose those tendencies, Pound formulated his credo: "I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use 'symbols,' he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk" (9). The passage reflects the poet's belief in the possibility of poetry which is not mere artifice but an extension of nature. In Kenner's formulation: "[Pound's] life work was to restore a poetics of meaning, of poems to be completed by experience, not poems cutting themselves off from experience in order to survive among clamor" ("Poetics" 745). Pound's greatest ambition was to reconnect poetry with life. Like Walt Whitman before him, he insisted that the art of poetry must be rejuvenated. Formal experimentation served that very aim. Furthermore, the rejuvenation of poetry could not be achieved once and for all. In order to stay alive, poetry had to be "made new" over and over again.

However, novelty was not for Pound the end in itself. The truly important thing was to keep the level of energy in a poem as high as possible. Therefore, "a man feeling the divorce of life and his art may naturally try to resurrect a forgotten mode if he finds in that mode some leaven, or if he thinks he sees in it some element lacking in contemporary art which might unite that art again to its sustenance, life" (11). "Life" might be the single most important concept in Pound's theoretical writings. In his view, the main illness of English-language poetry at the close of the Victorian era was that it was no longer alive – it had lost its vitality. The gap between language and life had been

widening for decades or even for centuries. Poetry had lost sight of its true calling and lost ground, in Hugh Kenner's expression, to "the contrivance of self-contained sterilities" ("Poetics" 745). Sterile art was bad art and bad art was, in Pound's view, morally wrong. As he put it in "The Serious Artist": "The arts give us a great percentage of the lasting and unassailable data regarding the nature of man, of immaterial man, of man considered as a thinking and sentient creature. They begin where the science of medicine leaves off or rather they overlap that science" (42). Given that the arts are bestowed with such an important function, it is not surprising that bad art deserves to be condemned. "Bad art is inaccurate art" – Pound further explained. "It is the art that makes false reports" (43). In doing so, it commits an offense against life. Vitality equals accuracy, and accuracy requires discipline.

The desire to reconnect poetry with life is certainly not unique to Pound's work or to any specific epoch. Some theorists see it as one of the defining features of the avant-garde. For example, in his now classical study of early twentieth century artistic movements *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), Peter Bürger argues that the essential impulse of the avant-garde was to oppose the autonomy of art or the status of the work of art as an autonomous aesthetic object. The avant-garde desires to reconnect artistic practices with the real lives of ordinary people, and as such it is opposed to aestheticism. Whereas late nineteenth-century aestheticism, or Pound's detested *symbolisme*, insists on the "intensification of artistic autonomy," the avant-garde attempts "to lead art back into social practice" (xiv). A further important aspect of the avant-garde is that it constitutes a self-criticism of art addressed to "art as an institution." Its main target is the status of art in bourgeois society "as defined by the concept of autonomy" (22). The avant-garde's project of reconnecting art with life is therefore always implicitly political.

The political dimension of Pound's critique of aestheticism is not immediately obvious. However, two points must be made about this issue. First of all, the term "political" can be understood in a number of ways. In the case of the literary text, politics is not limited to the contents of the work or its ostensible engagement in social issues. If one accepts Jacques Rancière's association of politics with "the redistribution of the sensible," then it becomes possible to see Pound's innovative poetics as political. Rancière opposes politics to "the police" understood as "an organizational system of coordinates that establishes a distribution of the sensible or a law that divides the community into groups, social positions and functions" (Rockhill 3). This "system of coordinates" separates the sphere of the visible/audible/thinkable from that which has no representation. Its principle of operation is therefore an aesthetic one. The political, as the meeting ground between the police (the existing regime of the sensible) and politics (the events disrupting this regime) always involves aesthetics. Pound's desire to change the relationship between poetic language and life can be understood as an attempted intervention into the regime of the sensible and, therefore, as political.

Secondly, when we consider the evolution of Pound's work, from *Cathay*, through the vorticist period, to the monumental project of *The Cantos*, it is easy to see that "leading art back into social practice" is by no means an alien idea to Pound. In Pound's view, the task of the artist is to present a deeper understanding of a given point in time than the one offered by a historian. Combining knowledge of disciplines such as history, economy,

aesthetics, and religion, the artist is supposed to present a spiritual synthesis of the forces which had produced a given moment in the history of humanity. This understanding is by no means abstract, but, quite on the contrary, it is supposed to be *useful*. It was Pound's hope that *The Cantos* would become the "handbook for the Princes," contributing in this way to the transformation of the world. Whereas in Bürger's view, the artistic autonomy of aestheticism is coupled with its political and existential meaninglessness, for Pound, the first step leading to the delivery of poetry from the impasse of Symbolism is to find a new language, both accurate and "charged with energy."

It is well known that the impact Fenollosa's notes had on American poetry through Pound's assimilation of them was partly a result of a misunderstanding. Fenollosa mistook the Chinese written character for a pictogram (a graphic sign whose shape bears a non-arbitrary relationship to what it represents). That error was further corroborated by Pound's omission of Fenollosa's comments about the *sound* of Chinese poetry. However, the importance of Fenollosa's notes to Pound consisted not in how accurately the sinologist presented the origins of the Chinese written character, but in the implications his intuitions had for a new kind of poetics.⁸ Fenollosa's writings contain very radical claims about the nature of the Chinese language and, by extension, about the possibilities of language as such. The most fundamental distinction made by the scientist is that between a philosophical solipsism characteristic of the West and the idea of language as an extension of nature, supposedly embodied in Chinese poetry. According to Fenollosa, Western grammarians have turned language into "a little private juggling between our right and left hands" (11). The sources of the Western disregard for the facts of nature lie in the medieval conviction that thought deals with abstraction. Fenollosa considers this tendency of Western thought as wrong as if "Botany should reason from the leaf-patterns woven into our table-cloths" (12). In contrast, the close reading of Chinese poems makes it possible to think about sentences as "attributes of nature" (11). Every event in nature, claims the sinologist, is a transference of power. In his view, the same rule applies to linguistic events. Nature is a network of energy flowing among multiple agents, and language continues these processes without a rupture. If the Western understanding of language has been *metaphysical* (as exposed by the poststructuralist critique of the Logos), the understanding proposed by Fenollosa on the basis of what he found in or read into the Chinese written character is *physical*. Fenollosa is a naturalist. It is that aspect of his work that Pound finds most attractive in his search "the possibility of an 'organic' poem, arising from its subject like a picture from a landscape" (Kenner, "Poetics" 741). The ambition

8 Interestingly, the nature of the Chinese written character continues to preoccupy American linguists and poets even today. In her lecture "Cracks in the Oracle Bone: Teaching Certain Contemporary Poems" (2006), Brenda Hillman presents David Keightley's theory concerning the origin of the Chinese written character and uses it as a starting point for the formulation of a poetics. According to Keightley, the shapes of the Chinese written characters originate, at least partly, in the practice of pyromancy, or the practice of divination by fire. The oracles interpreted the messages from exhumed bones – the cracks produced by fire – and the sound of their prophecies was then carved deeply into the bones and marked with ink. Hillman underscores the fact that the messages "came directly from the ancestors whose power was considered to be of an abstract and collective nature," combining "mystery and abstraction." She compares them to "the tracks of small animals surrounding their own absence" (online).

to produce poetry coextensive with nature is not of course exclusive to Pound. Jennifer Ashton suggests that Anglophone modernism performed “the critique of metaphor by way of a more generalized critique of analogy” (121). Fenollosa’s theory rejects analogy in favor of a more “natural” idea of homology. In fact, his work can be read as a critique of the idea of representation in poetry. Poetry, as he imagines it, does not re-present anything, rather, it *presents* or makes things happen in the realm of the imagination. The imagination, by no means abstract or escapist, is the sense through which human beings understand one another as well as their place in their environments (natural, cultural, historical). It is a creative ability to translate experience into expression. It disrupts the process of the policing of reality performed by the dominant esthetic regimes, resulting in the redistribution of the sensible and making it possible for human subjects to communicate. The imagination thus has both esthetic and political dimensions.

It is very easy to demonstrate that the premises on which Fenollosa and then Pound base their theory of poetic language are largely idealizations (both writers’ affinities with Emerson must have played a part). The Chinese language is no more “natural” than English, nor is Far-Eastern poetry necessarily more “organic” than European poetry. However, it is unquestionably true that Chinese poetry comes from a very different philosophical, linguistic, and spiritual tradition. Even if, at the time of *Cathay*, Pound was not acquainted with that tradition, his intuition did not in the end mislead him. It is curious to see how Fenollosa’s notes illuminate the weaknesses of Western theories of language. Today, almost exactly a hundred years after Pound’s first contact with the notebooks, Fenollosa’s essay still poses a challenge to the Western fixation on the arbitrariness and artifice in language, and the poems collected in *Cathay* continue to fascinate the readers.

Though every strong fascination inevitably contains an element of narcissism, to say that Chinese provided the solutions lacking in English poetry of the time is not to suggest that China served Fenollosa and Pound merely as a mirror in which they could see the reflection of their own desire for a greater poetic effectiveness of language. As Qian argues in *Orientalism and Modernism* (1995), Pound’s choice concrete words, parallelism, and the economy of his poetic language really are approximations of the Chinese originals (66). These features become the new qualities of American poetry, but this does not mean that the Eastern sources of Pound’s inspirations are completely lost. Pound found in Chinese poetry a difference which he introduced into the poetry of his native language. That difference was perceived as something very positive, an opening, a possibility of self-criticism for Western art. In “A Retrospect,” the poet writes of a necessity of finding “a leaven” that might revitalize the poet’s search for a new poetics. This is how Pound used Chinese poetry in *Cathay*: as a *leaven* for a new poetics. Though it was not Pound’s ambition to re-create Chinese poetry in English, to claim that *Cathay* contains no China is an injustice. Qian maintains that Pound’s intuitive feel of Chinese poetry remains true even if the arguments he uses to defend his intuitions are misguided (34). Chinese, even if misunderstood, remains an irreducible living source from which the new poetics of American modernism is taking at least some of its energy.⁹

9 The present tense here is not accidental. I agree with the diagnosis presented, for instance, by Marjorie Perloff, that early 21st century witnesses the return of modernism in experimental poetry (*21st Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics*, 2002).

Wondering about the status of China in Pound's work, Eric Hayot juxtaposes Pound's translation of the poem titled "The Beautiful Toilet" with the earlier rendition of the same poem by Herbert Giles, who, having served as a British administrator in China, was an important figure in turn-of-the-century sinology. This is the opening of Giles's version:

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. (qtd. in Hayot 518)

Strong rhymes (bank/lank, gown/down) and iambic meter characteristic of late nineteenth-century poetry in English make the poem sound familiar and tame. "Willow-shoots" and "a lady in a glistening gown" serve as elements of oriental décor. The lady's action, however, (opening the casement, looking down) is incomprehensible; it does not evoke any reality, only prettiness.

By contrast, this is Pound's version of the same fragment:

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. (*Personae* 128)

Anyone familiar with Pound's style will immediately spot his mannerisms (the repetitions of "blue" and "white"; "and" as a favorite conjunction). Nevertheless, this clearly is a more interesting poem than the version proposed by Giles. Free verse allows Pound "to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase" (Pound, *Literary Essays* 3). The image has acquired the quality of a vivid painting. The colors are strong, and the willows "overflowing" the garden evoke a slightly melancholy mood, though simultaneously they produce the effect of abundance. The alliteration ("willows," "overflowed," "close") contributes to the melodious sound of the phrase, as opposed to Giles's oddly march-like "willow-shoots are long and lank." The image of the garden prepares us for the appearance of the mistress, who, though "in the midmost of her youth," is nevertheless not happy. There is something slightly enigmatic about her (the mannered repetition of the adjective "white" notwithstanding) which makes the poem intriguing: one would like to know why she "hesitates" when passing the door. Abundance and melancholy, youth and sadness, ideas, moods and images combine to form a poetic event whose validity is greater than in the case of Giles's more conventional translation. In spite of Pound's free verse, the poem feels as if it was driven by some hidden force, as if its form (the length of the lines, for instance) was dictated by a deeper kind of necessity than prosodic conventions. The lines have elegance but also simplicity – and precision. What the poem reflects with absolute accuracy is not the Chinese original but the integrity of the moment captured in the ancient text. The same might be said of other poems in *Cathay*. Pound's lines unfold slowly, like meticulous brushstrokes, adding up to form poems which sometimes explode with condensed energy. Sometimes this energy spills over and off the pages of the book, into the real world, as when Pound's young sculptor friend Henri Gaudier-Brzeska read *Cathay* to his brothers

in arms in the trenches of World War I (one might add that *Cathay* can also be read a book of poems about the war).

The intensity and precision were to remain Pound's trademark, and there is no doubt that he acquired those virtues partly through his study of Fenollosa's notebooks (later also through his readings of Confucius). But there is another crucial way in which that early encounter influenced Pound's style. The fact that he learned to write through translating from a language so unlike English, a language he did not at the time understand, had an important impact on his later work. Translating means speaking on behalf of another, lending one's voice to someone else's message, the imperfections of translation notwithstanding. In an important sense, that is exactly what Pound was doing, for most of his life, when working on *The Cantos*: translating, ventriloquizing, allowing different voices (sometimes different languages) to resound. Rancière observed that "an activity of thinking is primarily an activity of translation" and that "[u]nderpinning this capacity for translation is the efficacy of equality, that is to say, the efficacy of humanity" ("Politics" 63).

Nothing less than "the efficacy of humanity" was at stake in Pound's poetic project, leading the poet to find strikingly beautiful new ways to write as well as to make disastrous political choices. Pound's support for Mussolini during World War II is a fact difficult to assimilate for his sympathetic readers. But it must be stated that, as frequently happens, Pound's poems are "wiser" than the poet who made them. *The Cantos*, in some ways simply a stunning record of a failure of Pound's politico-poetic ambitions, can still be read for the radically subversive energy generated, not by Pound's explicit ideological choices, but by his new poetics, that is to say, the poetics deriving its strength from the practice of translation.¹⁰ The radical potential of *The Cantos* is the poem's hospitality to a number of heterogenous voices and presences. Various "others" encounter one another in Pound's epic poem. Confucius is put in conversation with Dante, the poet's literary friends appear side by side with a fellow-prisoner from the DTC at Pisa or the kindhearted guard who presented the poet with a makeshift writing table. This immense openness of the poem, its hospitality to life – present, past and future – is at least partly a consequence of his encounter with the East: with the idea of language as a witness to how "*things* work out their own fate" (Fenollosa and Pound 9, italics in the original). The many-voicedness of *The Cantos*, ceaselessly undercutting the position of the speaker, can be linked with Rancière's notion of heterology. Rancière defines heterology as "the verification of the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being" (63). Heterology is opposed to identity, and it demands that the subject act in the gaps between identities. Politics is "being together to the extent that we are in between – between names, identities, cultures and so on" (66). *The Cantos*, in going further and further away from aestheticism, fulfills an ethical project envisaged by the poet, though it does so partly through the undercutting of his own intentions. Over and over again the readers are confronted with difficult and

10 Pound started to think about translation as a model for poetry as early as 1911. He first formulated his theory of translation in a book on Arnaut Daniel, which was never published in its entirety. Fragments of this work were printed in the weekly *New Age* as a series of articles titled "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" (Gentzler 20).

tedious passages, for instance, those explicating Major Douglas's economic doctrines. It is true that Pound's dream was that all these fragments would ultimately form an organic whole. But the poem's radically open-ended structure does not allow for a consolidation of disparate fragments, precipitating the failure of Pound's ambition but also securing the work's heterologic character. Kenner spoke about the poem's "rigorous morality" (430), but *The Cantos* is at least as rigorous in the undoing of its own authoritarian ambitions.

As a result, the poem places the reader in a situation where he or she is demanded to perform some of the work of "translation," as when we are forced to look up the meanings of fragments in languages other than English or to make connections between disparate images or phrases. Regardless of Pound's ostensible intentions, there is no choice but to become "emancipated" readers in the sense Rancière gives to this word. We can learn from *The Cantos* on the condition that we treat their author as "ignorant," that is to say, not in the position to judge the correctness of our understanding. Commenting on the multi-linguistic character of the poem Pound said, "I admit there are a couple of Greek quotes [. . .], but *if* I can drive the reader to learning at least that much Greek, she or he will indubitably be filled with durable gratitude. And if not, what harm? I can't conceal the fact that the Greek language existed" (qtd. in Cookson xviii). This slightly humorous comment expresses Pound's desire that the readers learn but also that they practice their freedom. The same can be said about the gradual introduction of Chinese characters into the fabric of the poem. The poet does not explain but presents them for his audience to look at, to contemplate, or to learn. Pound's work, in all of its aspects, is very consistent, and it results from the understanding of the nature of language and, by extension, of communication, he derived from Fenollosa's notebooks. This is what Rancière wrote about Jacotot's teaching practice: "The book prevents escape. The route the student will take is unknown. But we know what he cannot escape: the exercise of his liberty" (*The Ignorant Schoolmaster* 23). *The Cantos* is a demanding book, one that requires a lot of work on the part of its readers. But the work it invites us to do is that of emancipation. The assumption behind Pound's poetic project is the equality of intelligences. The poet does indeed take up the position of the master, but the only form of submission in this "pedagogical relationship" concerns will. In my view, the most radical aspect of Pound's poetics, which perhaps began to germinate as early as in his childhood, when he encountered his first "Oriental" objects, is the invitation it extends to the readers to read on and become free.

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Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest przeanalizowanie wpływu badań sinologa Ernesta Fenollosy (1853–1908) na styl poetycki Ezry Pounda. Notatki pozostawione przez Fenollosę w chwili jego śmierci zawierały teorię języka poetyckiego wywiedzioną z jego częściowo nieprawidłowego rozumienia natury języka chińskiego. Chociaż zarówno Pound jak i Fenollosa czytali chińską poezję z perspektywy zachodu, to jednak nie zgadzam się ze zdaniem niektórych krytyków, że przekłady Pounda nie mają nic wspólnego z Chinami. Podążając za argumentami Zhaominga Qiana twierdząc, że Chiny wywarły istotny wpływ na Pounda i innych amerykańskich poetów. Ten wpływ pomógł Poundowi stworzyć poetykę, której polityczne konsekwencje wybiegają daleko poza szaloną agitację uprawianą przez poetę podczas drugiej wojny światowej. Takie odczytanie jest możliwe dzięki spojrzeniu na poetykę *Pieśni* przez pryzmat tekstów Jacques'a Rancière'a i wprowadzono w nich pojęcia "heterologii" oraz koncepcji "emancypacji" (*The Ignorant Schoolmaster*).