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"better gift can no man make to a nation": Pound's Confucian Translations and the Internationalisation of *The Cantos*

There is a remarkable scene in Werner Herzog's film, *Aguirre, The Wrath of God*, that has for some time now struck me as an almost perfect allegory for the expressive dynamics of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. Hopelessly lost in the jungle and floating down the Amazon River on a rapidly deteriorating raft, the mad and tyrannical visionary, Aguirre, and his band of conquistadors encounter an old jungle native, and they ask (actually, they demand) of him the location of El Dorado, the object of a quest for which they have all abandoned their order and thus become traitors against the Spanish crown. In their desire to find and ultimately conquer the mythical lost city of gold, Aguirre and his soldiers force one of their Native American slaves to translate for them as they attempt to communicate with the stranger who, they believe, possesses the knowledge that will both save and redeem them. But instead of Spanish, the slave made to perform this act of linguistic interchange translates the old man's words into crisp and ready German. And all the while, English sub-titles appear at the bottom of the screen to assist those viewers without Herzog's native language.

Each in their own way, all the elements of this cinematic moment appear in the unfolding of the particular epic quest narrative presented by *The Cantos*. From the famous opening lines of the poem – "And then went down to the ship/ Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and/ We set up mast and sail on that swart ship," (I, 3) – to the repeated use in the "Pisan Cantos" of the Greek word "periplum," which Pound earlier on defines as the view "not as the land looks on a map/ but as sea bord seen by men sailing" (LIX, 324), the theme of a journey by water flows throughout *The Cantos*. Similarly, Pound, too, had his El Dorado for which he sacrificed almost everything, though he conceived of its rewards in primarily and expressly political, rather than financial, terms, and called it by several different names, including "Ecbatan" (IV, 16) and "the city of Dioce whose terraces are the color of stars (LXXIV, 425). And, of course, the twin problems of madness and treason have loomed over the late *Cantos* like a pair of dark and

shameful clouds, prompting some readers to dismiss the poem entirely for its polemically articulated (and deeply troubling) political content, and others to try and domesticate it by emphasizing Pound's abundant and indisputable aesthetic and technical triumphs.¹ Finally, and most importantly for my purposes here, *The Cantos*, like *Aguirre*, *The Wrath of God*, effects its narrative through, as well as by means of, several cultural and linguistic layers. In this regard, the modernist epic and the film together attest to the importance of translation in both the reception and production of literary (or filmic) works. Unlike Herzog the director, however, Pound the poet explicitly acknowledges and confronts the task of negotiating between the many expressive codes he employs; and in *The Cantos*, this act of negotiation, or translation if you will, serves as both a means and a theme of the poem itself. In other words, over the course of his attempt to find his own El Dorado by synthesizing the religious, aesthetic and political insights from various different world cultures and languages, Pound not only uses translation as a technique of poetic composition, but he comes to see the practice of converting from one language to another as a model for the process by which to locate, or more accurately, to establish the *paradiso terrestre*. Thus, *The Cantos* serve as a powerful illustration of the way in which translation constitutes not just a transparent linguistic procedure for transferring semantic content from one language to another, but rather a complex mode of literary production in itself. Indeed, Pound's entire development as a poet remains inextricably tied to his efforts as a translator.² In what follows I would like to discuss the various ways in which Pound's practice as a translator of Confucius and Confucian texts helps to explain certain aspects of both his political ideology and the formal articulation of that ideology in his "poem including history."

Confucianism has long been recognized as one of the cornerstones of Pound's complexly syncretic system of belief. It provided him with both a philosophical foundation upon which to structure the heterogeneous mass of religious, political, historical and even economic material he sought to incorporate into his epic, as well as, in the form of Canto XIII and the "Chinese Dynasty Cantos" (Cantos LIII-LXI), a large portion of that material itself. As

Michael Bernstein has written, "one could summarize the Confucian element in *The Cantos* as [Pound's] most determined attempt to show a concrete, historical embodiment of his intuitions, to prove by specific examples that a worthwhile state can be established on the basis of an ethic unencumbered by Judeo-Christian notions of man's innate sinfulness, and the related assumption that life on earth is a pilgrimage to, or preparation for some other, higher existence" (51). In addition to utilizing Confucian wisdom as a support for his own poetic work, Pound also during the course of his career produced several separate translations of various Confucian texts, including versions of the *Da Xue* (大學), usually known as *The Great Learning* (two separate renderings were published in 1928 and 1947 respectively), the *Zhong Yong* (中庸), known as *The Doctrine of the Mean* (1947), the *Lun Yu* (論語), or *The Analects* (1950), and even a complete edition of the *Shi Jing* (詩經), which he gave the rather lengthy title *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* (1954). Through the process of making these translations, Pound came to develop a sense of both the exact political role he could play as a poet and the precise nature of the Confucian wisdom he would continue to espouse throughout his life and work.

The first of Pound's "Confucian translations," which appeared in 1928 as a pamphlet in the University of Washington Chapbook series, was a conventional rendering of the *Da Xue*, or *The Great Learning* as Pound then called it, one of the *Si Shu* (四書), or "Four Books" that comprise the basis of the Confucian canon. Much like "Canto I," this text is actually a translation of a translation, Pound giving in it a straightforward rendering of J. P. G. Pauthier's 1868 French version of the *Da Xue* which he had been reading since at least 1913. According to the sinologist Wing-tsit Chan, the *Da Xue* "gives the Confucian educational, moral and political programs in a nutshell, neatly summarized in the 'three items' and 'eight steps'" (84); and even though he would later come to alter fundamentally his own interpretation of this work (through another act of translation), Pound clearly intended his *Ta Hio: The Great Learning* as an essential guide to governmental reform in his own country. In a letter written in May 1928 to René Taupin, Pound explains, "I have just given a new version of the *Ta Hio* of Confucius, because I find in it formulations of ideas that seem to be useful for civilizing America (tentatively)" (*Letters* 217; translation mine).³ And on the pamphlet's cover, he described his version of the *Da Xue* as "Newly rendered into the *American language*" (emphasis added), thereby indicating the extent to which he specifically aimed his translation at his homeland.

1 For a rejection of Pound because of the political views expressed in *The Cantos* see Casillo 1988. For an aesthetic defense of Pound, see Pearlman 1969. I agree with Michael

Bernstein that neither of these responses adequately addresses the problem, since to eliminate the politics from the poem would be to subscribe to a separation of cultural spheres that Pound himself rejected and which he sought to subvert within *The Cantos* themselves.

2 From his versions of the ballade of Guido Cavalcanti, to *Cathay* (1915) to the *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1921), Pound's most significant achievements as a poet usually arose from his efforts as a translator.

3 The original French reads: "J'ai cité Gourmont, et je viens de donner un nouveau version de *Ta Hio* de Confucius, parce que j'y trouve des formulations d'idées qui me paraissent utile pour civilizer l'Amerique (tentatif)."

The significance of Pound's expressly political purposes for undertaking this translation become clear when one recalls that, as late as 1927, by which time he had already reached Canto XXVII of his "Poem of some Length,"⁴ Pound had openly lamented the inability of artists to effect political change in any timely or intentional way. In an essay entitled "The State," published appropriately enough, in the journal *The Exile*, Pound declared, "The artist, the maker is always too far ahead of any revolution, or reaction, or counter-revolution or counter-reaction for his vote to have any immediate result" (*Prose* 215). Yet Pound's remarks about the motivations underlying his 1928 translation of the *Da Xue* reveal a fundamental change in his attitude concerning this problem. In Confucianism the poet-sage serves the vital political function of instructing princes in the proper administration of their power, and Pound undoubtedly derived from this example the conviction that he could, as a poet, help to provide the "blueprint" for a civilization. But despite his reputation for being someone who always maintained a conviction in his own ability (indeed, responsibility) to help direct affairs of state, it was specifically as a translator, and not as a poet, that Pound first came to believe that his voice could in fact have direct and momentous political consequences.

Throughout the 1930's Pound continued to pursue his studies of Confucian texts, and any doubts about the efficacy of Confucian political principles that he might have harbored when writing to Taupin soon disappeared. Indeed, by 1934 Pound had come to believe in Confucianism so deeply that one of the answers he gave to T. S. Eliot's long-standing question, "What does Mr. Pound believe?" was the richly succinct, "I believe the *Ta Hio*" (*Essays* 86). Moreover, he continued to affirm the importance of translating Confucian texts, even going so far as to say in 1937, after having already written Cantos XLII-LI, "If my version of the *Ta Hio* is the most valuable work I have done in three decades, I can only wait for the reader to see it. And for each to discover its 'value' to the 'modern world' for himself" (*Prose* 75; emphasis added).

And yet, as important as his role as a translator of Confucius had been to his development as a poet up to that point, Pound did not remain satisfied with his initial version of the *Da Xue*. Indeed, the very terms Pound used to assert the "value" of his *Ta Hio*: *The Great Learning* looked ahead to an event that would fundamentally alter his understanding of Confucian political principles. In turn, this change would lead Pound both to expand the poetic means by which he presented those principles in *The Cantos* after the "Fifth Decad" and to retranslate the *Da Xue* in 1945, as well as to give versions of

the *Zhong Yong*, *The Analects*, and the *Shi Jing*, all using a radical procedure for translating Confucius into English. For in emphasizing the need for readers to "see" the value of Confucian thought, Pound himself foresaw the importance that the Chinese written character would assume both for his understanding of the precise nature of Confucian wisdom and his conception of the proper method for translating that wisdom into another language.

In an essay on Mencius published in 1938, Pound describes the single most important moment in the development of his practice as a translator of Confucius and, therefore, in his understanding of Confucian thought:

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

When I disagreed with the crib or was puzzled by it I had only the look of the characters and the radicals to go on. And my contention is that the learned have known too much and seen a little too little. Such of 'em as knew Fenollosa profited nothing.

Without knowing at least the nature of the ideogram I don't think anyone can suspect what is wrong with their current translations. Even with what I have known for some time I did not sufficiently ponder it. (*Prose* 82)

Pound refers here to Ernest Fenollosa's ideas about the Chinese written character, which shaped his own conception of the proper method for translating Confucian wisdom. As a result of this influence, Pound came to see Confucian texts as the perfect embodiment of politically effective writing. Correspondingly, it also drove him to expand the poetics of *The Cantos* beyond the expressive confines of Western, alphabetic languages to include graphic as well as semantic information.

Though sinological scholarship has for a long time now dismissed Fenollosa's "ideogrammic" conception of written Chinese,⁵ Pound himself always believed in the innate poeity of Chinese characters, that in the "ideogram" "the lines of metaphoric force are still shown, and in many cases are actually retained in the meaning" (Fenollosa 25), that "ideograms" retain "the creative impulse and process, visible and at work" (Fenollosa 25). Thus, when the first Chinese characters to be incorporated into the textual fabric of *The Cantos*, *Zheng* and *Ming*, appear at the end of Canto LI,

4 This is how Pound referred to his evolving poem in 1925 at the time of the publication of "A Draft of XVI Cantos."

5 For an excellent demythologization of and summary of contemporary linguistic views on the Chinese language, see DeFrancis 1984.

**You who have lived in a stage set.
A thousand were dead in his folds;
in the eel-fishers basket
Time was of the League of Cambrai:**

正名

(LI, 252)

they do more than simply refer to the Confucian doctrine of *Zheng Ming* (正名), or the Rectification of Names, which asserts that the first step to establishing a just and stable government must be, in the words of Pound's 1950 translation of *The Analects*, to "Settle the names (determine a precise terminology)" (*Confucius* 249). Even more important, they serve as illustrations (or perhaps more accurately, emblems) of the kind of thought processes that underlie the "ideogram" as a linguistic sign. As such, the Chinese characters appearing at the end of "Canto LI" symbolize the poem's transition after the "Fifth Decad" into the realm of Chinese history, a realm where, Pound believed, Confucian wisdom had been both tested and proven. In Pound's eyes, not only had the Confucian doctrine of *Zheng Ming* served as the basis for all the just and benevolent dynasties throughout Chinese history, and would do the same for the West if it were rigorously applied, but the texts of the Confucian tradition illustrated in the very sign system in which they were written the conceptual lines along which just such a rectification ought to take place.

If Pound's "recognition" of the importance of the "ideogram" to the precise nature of Confucian thought led him to begin incorporating Chinese characters into the body of *The Cantos*, this experience also forced him to re-evaluate his 1928 version of the *Da Xue* and to see the need for giving another translation of that text, one that assimilated Fenollosa's theories and reproduced the process by which Confucian texts both expressed and embodied political wisdom. Instead of simply accepting established semantic equivalents for all the terms contained in the texts of Confucius, Pound sought all at once to recognize the way in which those terms were defined by their constituent "ideogrammic" parts, to "rectify," in a Confucian way, his own understanding of the terms themselves, and to recreate in English the very way in which those terms had been originally conceptualized. In the process of doing all these things, Pound produced the fullest expression of his mature understanding of Confucian governmental wisdom, his 1945 translation of the *Da Xue*, or as he came to call it, *The Great Digest*.

While it remains beyond the scope of this paper to give a complete analysis of *The Great Digest*, I would like to focus on two examples of Pound's method for translating the *Da Xue* as a means of understanding both his own mature conception of Confucian political wisdom and how that conception shapes the presentation of such wisdom within the late *Cantos*. Before 1937, Pound had always referred to the *Da Xue* as either the "Ta Hio" (Pauthier's French transliteration of the Chinese title) or as "The Great Learning" (the standard English semantic translation). Pound's decision to re-title his 1945 translation of the *Da Xue* reflects the way in which he had come, through a careful examination of the Chinese characters themselves in light of Fenollosa's theories, to reconceptualize the very mechanics of the Confucian social program. In the Chinese "ideograms" conventionally rendered as "learning" (學), Pound saw the "pictograms" for a "mortar" (臼) placed over that for a "child" (子). He also apparently interpreted the (攴) symbols inside the upper half of the character for "learning" as abbreviated versions of the (米) pictogram, the radical for "rice" or cereal foods generally. Thus he explicates the first two characters of the text, which also comprise the work's title, as "The great learning [adult study, grinding corn in the head's mortar to fit for use]" (*Confucius* 27). To Pound, the superposition of the "mortar and corn" over the "child" (學) provided insight into how the Chinese had originally conceptualized the mental, abstract operation of "learning."⁶ It was, according to this kind of analysis, fundamentally akin to basic agricultural and alimentary process. In order to reproduce in English the same kinds of conceptual associations he saw at work in the Chinese title, Pound chose the word "Digest," which can also refer to either a bodily or mental operation. Thus, even in the title of *The Great Digest*, Pound pushes the limits of translation beyond the constraints of accepted semantic equivalence, attempting in his translation to describe and reproduce the kind of thinking he saw contained in the original Chinese text.

Just as he attempted to match the dynamics, as he understood them, of the original title of the *Da Xue* in *The Great Digest*, Pound also tried to expose the conceptual underpinnings of the body of this text, which contains the clearest and most succinct articulation of the Confucian social program. In the section of the *Da Xue* that delineates the "eight steps" to social harmony, Pound saw the key to this program in the phrase: 欲修其身者，先正其心；欲正其心者，先誠其意，which he had translated after Pauthier in 1928 as "those who wished to correct themselves tried first to attain rectitude of spirit; those who desired rectitude of spirit, tried first to

make their intentions pure and sincere" (*Ta Hio* 8). The *Zheng* (正), or "rectification," ideogram in this social equation suggested to Pound that there was a basic connection between the Confucian process of self-discipline and the act of *Zheng Ming* (正名), or the "Rectification of Names." Pound saw this suggestion confirmed when he analyzed the next step in the program: *Cheng Qi Yi* (誠其意). Applying the ideas of Fenollosa, Pound saw in the *Cheng* "ideogram" (誠), which he had earlier translated as "to make pure and sincere" the character meaning "to perfect" placed next to the "pictogram," or radical for "word" (言). Thus, he explicates this character, which he considered so fundamentally important that he put it in the "Terminology" section at the beginning of his translation, as "The precise definition of the word, pictorially the sun's lance coming to rest on the precise spot verbally. The right hand of this compound means: to perfect, bring to focus" (Confucius 20). And in the ideogram meaning "intentions, *Yi* (意), Pound saw the "pictogram" for "music" placed over the one for "heart":

意	音	心
Intentions	Music	Heart

and so he translates this as the "inarticulate thoughts [tones given off by the heart]" (31). For Pound, the Confucian process of self-discipline, or attaining "rectitude of spirit," is an essentially poetic operation because it entails discovering a linguistic exactitude. Thus, *The Great Digest* contends that the *paradiso terrestre* depends ultimately on the precise use of language. Pound's translation of this complete passage reads as follows:

4. The men of old wanting to clarify and diffuse throughout the empire that light which comes from looking straight into the heart and then acting, first set up good government in their own states; and wanting good government in their own states they first established order in their own families; wanting order in the house, they first disciplined themselves; desiring self-discipline, they rectified their own hearts; and wanting to rectify their own hearts, they sought precise verbal definitions of their inarticulate thoughts [the tones given off by the heart]; wishing to attain precise verbal definitions, they set to extend their knowledge to the utmost. This completion of knowledge is rooted in sorting things into organic categories.

5. When things had been sorted into organic categories, knowledge moved toward fulfillment; given the extreme knowable points, the inarticulate thoughts were defined with precision [the sun's lance coming to rest on the precise spot verbally]. Having attained the precise definition [*eliter*, this sincerity], they then stabilized their hearts, they disciplined themselves; having attained self-

discipline, they set their own houses in order; having order in their own homes they brought good government to their own states; and when their states were well governed, the empire was brought into equilibrium. (29-33)

In this passage Pound's early Imagist aesthetic, his belief in the important political functions of language, most concisely emblemized by the Confucian doctrine of *Zheng Ming* (正名) and confirmed here, his "ideogrammic" understanding of the Chinese written character, and his overriding belief in the historically proven effectiveness of Confucian social wisdom, all came together to form a single, unified approach to poetry and social action. Through his reading of the *Da Xue*, Pound came to see his own poetic practices as the most significant and enduring political work he could do. Exactly because he sought in *The Cantos* to use words as precisely as possible, or to *Cheng Qi Yi* (誠其意), he felt he was taking the first step to bringing peace to the world. And *The Great Digest* represents his attempt to bring to the West not only the great social insights of Confucius, but also the (in his eyes) revolutionary political possibilities implicit in the "ideogram" itself as a form of representation, one which helps to preserve the capacity of language as an agent of social action because it constantly reveals the dynamics of its own operation, because it always shows *how*, as well as *what*, it means.

Thus, even after the fall of Fascist Italy and the shattering of his dream that a truly just government and Confucian paradise would actually be established in the modern West, Pound maintained and continued to espouse his belief that the Confucian texts did in fact contain the answers to the world's political problems. This helps both to explain why he went on to translate three more Confucian texts after his incarceration at the U. S. Army Detention Training Camp at Pisa in May of 1945 and to illuminate the passage from the "Pisan Cantos" from which I have taken the title for this paper:

la pigrizia	to know the ground and the dew	中	the word is made
but to keep 'em three weeks	Chung		
	we doubt it		
and in government not to lie down on it		誠	
perfect			
better gift can no man make to a nation			
than the sense of Kung fu Tseu			
who was called Chung Ni			
nor in historiography nor in making anthologies			
(LXXVI, 454)			

Here Pound links the *Cheng* (誠) ideogram with his declaration of the explicitly political value of Confucian doctrine, thereby punning on the double meaning of the word "sense." For not only would he attempt to make a "gift" to the world of the "sense," or "meaning," of Kung fu Tseu through the medium of his own Confucian translations, he would try to communicate the "sense," or "sensibility," underlying that meaning by reproducing the way in which he believed the Chinese language itself operated. In Pound's eyes, Confucian social doctrine and the ideograms through which it had been expressed together formed a profoundly illustrative articulation of the political function of precise language; and in the explosion of Chinese characters that appear in *The Cantos* written after Pisa, Pound sought to preserve his faith in the social possibilities of language, even after his dream of a *paradis terrestre*, and the structure of his own poem, had crumbled around him. As Pound himself liked to quote from the Confucian tradition that had given him so much, "A man's character is known from his brush strokes." (*Prose* 210; see also *Kulchur* 91).

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