Foreword

The Archive of Cathay

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Published in 1915, *Cathay* is often treated as a poetic masterpiece by Ezra Pound, and Ezra Pound alone. This is a half-truth, as this book will show. Many hands were involved in its production—Chinese singers and poets from many different dynasties; Japanese scholars; an American nineteenth-century art historian; and a young expatriate American striving to make a place for himself in the London literary world. *Cathay* is also often treated as a translation of poems from the Chinese—another half-truth. Part of its originality lies in its distance from the Chinese “originals.” It may be least inaccurate to call *Cathay* a masterpiece of the art of editing, an art at which Pound excelled. But to understand what Pound edited is to know a great deal more than Pound could know. This edition supplies the missing connections among the Chinese texts, most of them eighth-century poems taken from an eighteenth-century Chinese anthology popular in Japan; the paraphrases made of them in Japanese and English for the benefit of Ernest Francisco Fenollosa; Fenollosa’s hastily jotted notes; and Pound’s distillation of what he could understand of the notes into some of the twentieth century’s most often read and imitated poems. It supplements the *Cathay* long known to readers—an English-language collection with an invisible, remotely guessed-at Chinese background—with an archive of sequential conversations leading us back from the modernism of 1915 to the protest verse of the Bronze Age.

Invention

“Not, good Lord, a translation: [but] a poem made out of words from another poem. . . . Let us be quite clear that they are deflections undertaken with open eyes,” Hugh Kenner wrote in 1971, defending the unoriginality and originality of *Cathay*.1 *Cathay* is the best-known case, perhaps even the originating example, of the “poet’s version,” a form of translation that does not ask to be judged by its obedience to the features of the original being translated.2 What to make of such “deflections”?

Chary of giving hostages to future literary history, T. S. Eliot hedged mightily when he wrote: “As for *Cathay*, it must be pointed out that Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time.” Eliot knew that “to invent” had once been synonymous with “to find,” but he was using the word in its modern sense. By casting Pound as Chinese poetry’s *inventor*, he meant to deny him the role of its discoverer or translator. Both the translator and the discoverer reveal something that was already there before their arrival. Inventors, on the other hand, have the burden of novelty on their consciences. (Marie Curie, discoverer of radium, wins our
admiration; radioactivity is not her fault; but whoever invented the atom bomb has liabilities to contend with.) Unwilling to be seen as endorsing Pound’s adventurism as scholarship (the discovery and truthful description of what was already there), Eliot pegs Cathay to the status of “invention”: an artifact, a possibly ingenious but certainly concocted novelty. “Chinese poetry, as we know it to-day, is something invented by Ezra Pound.” “Chinese poetry for our time”: not Chinese poetry in and of itself, not the definitive version of Chinese poetry, but Chinese poetry as people of the generation of the Great War, who have measured out their lives with coffee spoons and jumped to the Shakespearian Rag, are able to know it. It will be “a ‘Windsor Translation,’ . . . ‘a magnificent specimen of XXth Century poetry’ rather than a ‘translation.’” Of that time-bound, self-limited thing, Pound is the inventor. None of the scholars who knew Chinese better than Pound could find so much as a rash overture in Eliot’s measured praise.

Pound was less prudent—otherwise, Cathay would have had no possibility of existing—but all the same conscious of the difference between Chinese poetry and what he had made of his source’s “decipherings.” For the slim book is called Cathay and not China, China being a place to which you might buy a steamer ticket, Cathay a place of imagination or memory. A work of historical geography first published in 1866 but reprinted not long before Pound made his anthology, Cathay and the Way Thither by Henry Yule, contains hardly a word from or by the Chinese, but delivers four volumes of words about China from authors who, too, for the most part had never seen China but only transcribed reports of it. These reports were so inconsistent and unreliable that it was only in the late seventeenth century that geographers definitively established that “Cathay” and “China” were one and the same.4

But are “Cathay” and “China” the same thing? Do the words have the same meaning? Although the expressions “the morning star” and “the evening star” may name a single heavenly body, Venus, glimmering at us from millions of miles off, the act of saying “the morning star” is not the same as the act of saying “the evening star,” particularly when done in a poem; as Gottlob Frege put it, the two expressions have the same reference but not the same sense.5 “Cathay” might mean “China” on the condition that “the way thither” be long and indirect: Cathay would be China desired, anticipated, or vicariously experienced, and thus not simply China, by any stretch. By titling his collection Cathay, Pound signaled, as he could not have done if he were calling it China, that the words of the book were to be taken as having a sense independent of their reference. Cathay is a work of translation operating in the sphere of “sense,” of “the mode of presentation” (Frege) alone. It gives us not China but ways thither.

It is not clear what standards apply to such a translation. To seize on the errors of Cathay and proclaim it a bad translation is to force it back into the zone where translations are either true or false, good or bad, and that would be to amputate it of what best it had to offer. To ignore the errors and forsake the whole task of representing an original is another kind of violence, for Cathay is China, eventually or vestigially.

Pound’s literary personality, not to say his originality, as of 1915 had largely consisted of parodies, personae, archaism, imitation, and other in-between modes, neither I nor Thou.
Translation gave these masks and feints a unifying medium: translation is pervasively neither mine nor thine. But a translation that depends on an original inaccessible to the translator, that parodies the act of translation as usually understood, and that mimes a dramatic monologue in the person of a capable speaker of the foreign language, raises to a second degree the usual in-betweenness of translation. Could *Cathay* ever be translated back into Chinese? What stylistic equivalents could one find in Chinese, or indeed in any language other than the 1915 version of “Anglish, Englysshe, English, American,”6 for its deliberate nonidiomatic quality, its interrupted rhythms, its words just to one side of the *mot juste*? Such features are the springs and gears of Pound’s “invention.”

*The Unlost Archive*

Scholarly books rest upon a mountain of consulted texts. Historians need their archives: In modern times, history does not so much record events as much as it records documentation, the traces of events.7 To write the history of the history, one must revert to the archive. Lost archives, reopened or refound, rewrite history. Poetry, in some traditions, is written from within the archive: “every word an allusion,” as Huang Tingjian said in praise of Du Fu.8 This edition brings into view the archive from which Pound mined *Cathay*: the raw materials of its poetry, according to some, though a study of the archive reveals that Pound often found his “poet’s version” very nearly readymade in Fenollosa’s notes “from the decipherings of the Professors”—Mori, Ariga, and Shida. Unusually, this archive did not need to be discovered. No one had to wait out a documentary embargo. It has been in the safekeeping of the Yale University Collection of American Literature for decades, catalogued, inspected from time to time by a curious scholar, but not put before the general reader until now. The reason for the delay is the sheer bulk of the materials. Fenollosa’s papers contained several parallel sets of notes on Chinese poems (not always the same poems) as explicated by different Japanese scholars. Pound drew from several different notebooks, and the few specialists who have tried to reconstruct his compositional process have sometimes attempted to derive a poem from the wrong set of notes. The gaps between Fenollosa’s notes and Pound’s final version then leave the critic free to extol Pound’s inexplicable intuition: “Mori’s comments lay before Pound. . . . He pushed them aside.” Kenner too pushes them aside on behalf of literary history: “The way of a mind creating”—Pound’s mind—“is more interesting than a record of inattentions”—the gaps, guesses and distractions evident in Fenollosa’s tutorial notes.9

The valiant efforts of Hugh Kenner, Wai-lim Yip, Yunte Huang, Qian Zhaoming, and others have left us with an incomplete picture of *Cathay’s* relation to its archive, Pound’s to Fenollosa, and Fenollosa’s to the Tang poets. Timothy Billings now gives us the means to follow the transformations, word for word. We have a more meticulous proof than ever before of the way the most influential poetic pamphlet of the twentieth century arose, in all its freshness, from reading—from the reading of a reading of a reading.
Dante, everyone will admit, was a learned poet. A typical canto of his bulges with Saint Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, Galen, Hugh of Saint Victor, Ptolemy, and Tacitus. Cathay, also a product of learning with a deep archive behind it, makes little show of erudition, and what references occur are never glossed.

I went up to the court for examination,  
Tried Layu’s luck, offered the Choyo song,  
And got no promotion,  
    and went back to the East Mountains  
    White-headed.  
And once again, later, we met at the South bridge-head.  
And then the crowd broke up, you went north to San palace . . .

(“Exile’s Letter”)

The paired butterflies are already yellow with August  
Over the grass in the West garden;  
They hurt me. I grow older.

(“The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”)

Not only erudition is buried. Such plain utterance, pegged to no system of metrical feet, bespeaks a will on Pound’s part to eliminate the trappings of the poetic as heretofore understood. A foreign origin licenses this will—indeed, does the typical reader of English poetry know what a Chinese poem looks like? When one compares Pound’s

O fan of white silk,  
    clear as frost on the grass-blade,  
You also are laid aside

(“Fan-Piece, For Her Imperial Lord,” from Lustra)

with W. A. P. Martin’s chatty packets of filler —

Of fresh, new silk, all snowy white,  
And round as harvest moon;  
A pledge of purity and love,  
A small but welcome boon. . . .  
This silken fan, then, deign accept,  
Sad emblem of my lot—  
Caressed and fondled for an hour,  
Then speedily forgot  


—one surmises disgust as the motive of modernist poetics: the editorial red pencil hacking away at limp and pretentious decoration. But Pound was not only, indeed not even particularly, discontented with habits of translators from the Chinese. *Cathay* embodied a comprehensive refusal of the Edwardian verse just then being stirred into action by the Great War. Lines by Pound’s sometime antagonist Rupert Brooke were recited in newspapers and pulpits:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed . . .

(“1914,” v.: “The Soldier”)

Iambic pentameter, precise rhymes, elevating sentiment, patriotism, nostalgia: “the military-metrical complex” on parade. *Cathay*, however, refuses to fall in step, its national origins so distant as to be a mere outline, its meter for the most part unidentifiable and asymmetrical, and its sentiments far from sacrificial idealism:

Horses, his horses even, are tired. They were strong.
We have no rest, three battles a month.
By heaven, his horses are tired. . .
We come back in the snow,
We go slowly, we are hungry and thirsty,
Our mind is full of sorrow, who will know of our grief?

(“Song of the Bowmen of Shu”)

The little khaki-bound volume’s counterstatement to the official verse culture of 1915 was discreet but precise. It brushed aside both sentimentality and militarism, exhibiting in the smallest details of its language an ethos that could be called alien but not exotic. One does not need to know anything about King So, the five peaks or the waters of Han to understand (as “sense” not “reference”) the statements:

King So’s terraced palace
is now but barren hill,
But I draw pen on this barge
Causing the five peaks to tremble,
And I have joy in these words
like the joy of blue islands.
(If glory could last forever
Then the waters of Han would flow northward.)

(“The River Song”)

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“King [X]’s palace, the waters of [river]”: Sense remains even after reference has been washed away. Occurrences of “forever,” that single word amounting to a defense of poetry valid for most times and places, mark clearly enough the difference between Brooke and Pound. “For ever England,” staking a claim on the foreign field, is here paralleled by more skeptical “forevers” tied to distant conditions of possibility: “If glory could last forever” and

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
(“The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”)

Note the past tense: “desired.” The mode of presentation differs by a tense marker from the thing presented. We can’t be sure that the River-Merchant’s Wife brings up her earlier repeated “forever” to renew it or to reject it. Her sense, a matter of tone and will, holds the reference to a possible shared future in suspense. “There is no end of things in the heart,” as the speaker of “Exile’s Letter” says. Those “things” lodge in gaps opened up by the distanced, multiply mediated translation technique of Cathay.

Phantom Limbs

Nonetheless, the imagined China of Cathay exists somewhere and deserves to be filled out, as it now can be through the annotations contained here.

People who have lost an arm or a leg often feel pain, or an unbearable itching, in the limb that they no longer have. For over a hundred years, “phantom limb syndrome” was known and described in the medical literature, but nothing could be done for these patients: Drugs would not still the sensation in the nonexistent limb, and further amputations were cruel and pointless. A young neurologist named V. S. Ramachandran began to wonder if the problem were not in the flesh and nerves but in the brain. What if the agony were a signal of the brain’s disquiet at getting no signal at all from a formerly active part of the anatomy? On a hunch, Ramachandran knocked together a wooden box with a mirror inside it. When a patient inserts his or her unaffected arm into one side of the box, the other arm into the other side, and manipulates the mirror so as to project the image of a whole arm and hand over the amputated arm, the brain is tricked into thinking that the missing limb, now restored, can sense and move. The pain vanishes, at least for a while.13

The Chinese “original,” the mirror image of Pound’s Cathay, has long occupied the space of an itch in the minds of poetry-readers. That original is a phantasm: Pound did not, of course, translate directly from the Chinese, and what he did versify often corresponds to no Chinese original (as when he fashions a new poem out of parts of two poems). The double Cathay given here restores to history the composition process as it passed through a series of authors
in a series of languages over some three thousand years; it creates, as a bron, what never was.¹⁴

Let it stand as “the invention of Cathay for our time.”

Notes


8. [Editor’s note: That is to say: 無一字無來處. Huang Tingjian was an 11th-century (i.e., Song-dynasty) calligrapher, scholar, statesman, and poet.]


CATHAY