

ORIENTALISM,
MODERNISM,
AND THE
AMERICAN
POEM

Robert Kern

Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem

ROBERT KERN

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Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem is a critical and historical interpretation of “oriental” influences on American modernist poetry. Kern equates Fenollosa and Pound’s “discovery” of Chinese writing with the American pursuit of a natural language for poetry, what Emerson had termed the “language of nature.” This language of nature is here shown to be a mythic conception continuous with the Renaissance idea of the language of Adam – a language in which things themselves are also signs. Analyzing and contextualizing the nineteenth-century works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ernest Fenollosa and the twentieth-century creations of Ezra Pound and Gary Snyder, Kern sheds light on the three contemporary nexuses of his search: the cultural study of orientalism and the West, the evolution of Indo-European linguistic theory, and the intellectual tradition of American modernist poetry.

*Orientalism, Modernism, and the
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*To Jean and Ben,
and to the memory of
Anna Marcus (1912–1962)*

Preface

BEGINNING with a wide-angle lens, in an effort to accommodate so broad a subject as Western fascination with Chinese since the Renaissance, this book ultimately narrows its focus to consider the effects of that fascination on language and style in the work of some twentieth-century American poets. Primarily, I am interested in writers who are drawn to Chinese – or to a mythologized and idealized conception of it – as an embodiment of the equally mythic (and Western) idea of the language of nature, and who thus see in Chinese a model for a purified poetic practice in English, a practice consonant, as I see it, with the aims of poetic modernism generally. One could argue, of course, that such a practice properly originates with Ezra Pound's *Cathay* (1915) or, a decade or so earlier, with Ernest Fenollosa's essay *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. Yet the impulses that drove Fenollosa and then Pound to Chinese, it seems clear, have deeper roots, not only in American literary history (particularly the work of Emerson) but in intellectual and linguistic traditions that go back at least as far as the Renaissance, and it is to this prehistory, with its ramifications in the fields of poetics, translation, and cultural exchange, that I also wish to draw attention.

For the purposes of this preface, and as a preliminary example of just some of the ways in which fascination with Chinese can affect twentieth-century American poetry, I want here briefly and selectively to examine "Of Distress Being Humiliated by the Classical Chinese Poets," a poem published as recently as 1989, in which its author, Hayden Carruth, quite explicitly evokes issues that seem almost part and parcel of the orientalizing poetry with which I shall be concerned. "Masters," he writes,

Your language has no tenses, which is why your poems can
 never be translated whole into English;
 Your minds are the minds of men who feel and imagine
 without time . . .
 When everything happens at once, no conflicts can occur.
 Reality is an impasse. Tell me again
 How the white heron rises from the reeds and flies forever
 across the nacreous river at twilight
 Toward the distant islands.¹

In the course of the poem, Carruth moves from his own rather discursive lyric voice to an approximation of Chinese poetry itself – despite the fact that he feels isolated from that poetry, alienated from its wholeness, by what he sees as the inadequacy of English to contain it. Nor does he hesitate to attribute to his Chinese masters, or to their language (which he presumably does not know), capacities unavailable to him or to English. The approximation of Chinese poetry with which he concludes, it should also be said, has little if anything to do with Chinese verse. What makes it “Chinese” for Carruth, and for his readers, no doubt, is its imagism, its focus on natural events and things themselves. In addition, what looks contradictory or paradoxical in Carruth’s English – the manner, for instance, in which the white heron “rises from the reeds and flies forever . . . at twilight” – is absent, we are to understand, in his Chinese source, as if Carruth’s language, at odds with itself, is the best English can do in representing Chinese, a language in which “everything happens at once” and “no conflicts can occur.” Chinese poetry thus becomes for Carruth an imagined site of serene, even sublime, transcendence of time and conflict, an alternative to the “impasse” of reality, as well as to the limitations of English.

Yet the possibility that he might himself achieve such transcendence is less than fully realized in the poem, and Carruth’s transaction with Chinese poetry seems finally to be subsumed by the expression of an escapist longing that constitutes a familiar motif in postromantic Anglo-American lyric. The relation between Keats and his immortal bird in the “Ode to a Nightingale,” one of the chief sources of this motif, lies behind Carruth’s text, as do other, similar relations between poets and their desired objects in many

later poems informed by the Keatsian paradigm. Carruth regards Chinese poetry, that is to say, across a certain distance – the same distance, by and large, that separates Yeats's speaker in "Sailing to Byzantium," for example, from Byzantium – or the same distance that separates Yeats's speaker in "Lapis Lazuli" from his own vision of Chinese sages similarly imagined to be above time and worldly circumstance (although "Lapis Lazuli" is a poem about a transfiguring gaiety, a poem in which the speaker delights in what he imagines more than he laments his alienation from it).

These comparisons with poems by Yeats become most compelling, however, when we see that the image in Carruth's final lines may be taken to represent his own version of a Yeatsian "artifice of eternity," not in the sense of Yeats's Byzantine mosaic or lapis lazuli cameo but to the extent that the poetic lines themselves compose a verbal or textual construct, carefully crafted and arranged as a series of alliterative phrases meant to suggest both stillness and change, time and its suspension, as well as a felt release from the poet's "impasse." The image is a permanent, almost talismanic presence or reality for Carruth's speaker, newly accessible with every reading ("Tell me again"). As much as it reaches out to Chinese poetry, then, Carruth's address to his Chinese masters and their work turns out, in a way which we shall see variously duplicated in other orientalizing texts, to be mediated or even overridden by the motives and motifs of Western poetic discourse.

I HAVE SOMETIMES been asked whether I myself read or speak Chinese, and the answer is, I do not. My concern in this book, however, is less with Chinese language and literature per se than with their construction and representation in the West, mostly in the work of Anglophone writers whose own knowledge of Chinese is often quite limited. This very limitation, though, as I hope the example of Carruth's poem suggests, can be imaginatively liberating, stimulating attempts to approximate Chinese in English or to produce English-as-Chinese which go right to the heart of my subject.

With respect to the romanization of Chinese in my text, I have thought it best to follow the usage of the writers I quote and discuss, most of whom employ older systems, such as the Wade-Giles, as opposed to the recent

pinyin system in which Li Po, for example, has become Li Bo and Tu Fu has become Du Fu.

FRIENDS, colleagues, and institutions have provided various kinds of assistance with this project, and it is a pleasure to thank them. Long ago, Donald Wesling cautioned me not to overlook the impact of the Orient on American poetry and later encouraged my first attempts to define what I wanted to do. Closer to home, Henry Blackwell, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, Paul Doherty, Robin Lydenberg, John Mahoney, Jack McCarthy, John Randall, Cecil Tate, and Dennis Taylor listened to an early version of the introductory chapter and were generous with advice and suggestions. For reading and commenting on later portions of the manuscript, I am grateful to Charles Altieri, Ethan Lewis, Robin Lydenberg, and John Mahoney. Special thanks go to Matt Parfitt, who helped me with translations of some thorny nineteenth-century French philological texts. Alan Richardson gave me a helpful tip about my title. I am most indebted, though, to Andrew Von Hendy, who not only read all the chapters almost as soon as they were written but who made himself available to discuss my work and to offer advice and encouragement. I also want to acknowledge, with gratitude, the support of Anne Ferry, to this project and others, over many years.

As a reader for Cambridge University Press, Albert Gelpi evaluated the entire manuscript and proved to be an invaluable source of help in revising it. My thanks go, in addition, to the press's editorial staff and especially to Christie Lerch for her meticulous attention to stylistic and technical matters and for her marginal comments and questions, which often provoked me to rethink my sentences.

To the College of Arts and Sciences at Boston College, I owe a debt of another kind. I was generously provided, first, with a faculty fellowship, which helped get the project off the ground, and later with a year-long sabbatical leave, during which it reached completion. I am grateful also to the staffs of several libraries, including the O'Neill Library and the Bapst Library at Boston College, the Houghton Library and the Widener Library at Harvard University, and the Library of Congress.

It should be clear that I owe a great deal to a legion of writers, critics, and historians in several fields, and my scholarly debts are recorded, less

than adequately, in my footnotes. The experience of writing this book has been a humbling and gratifying lesson in the collective, communal nature of the scholarly enterprise.

Finally, to my parents, Jean and Ben, to my parents in-law, Frieda and Ralph, and to my long-suffering family, Sharon, Rachel, and Josh, I can only say thanks for putting up with me and for keeping me anchored (though I sometimes resisted) to the real world. Although it must often have seemed more a rumor than a reality, here at long last is the book.

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Introduction

The European Hallucination

AMONG several possible starting-points for this study, perhaps the most prescient is provided by the publication in Paris in 1811 of a short book entitled *Essai sur la langue et la littérature chinoises*. Its author, Jean Pierre Abel-Rémusat, twenty-three years old and self-taught in Chinese, not only inaugurated modern sinology but in doing so employed a phrase that, with an already long history in Western perceptions of Chinese, was to become one of the principal signifiers of poetic modernism: “things themselves.”

Disavowing some of the earlier European ideas about Chinese – that it was, for instance, the most rational and systematic of languages, and that it was, therefore, the most likely model for a universal language – Abel-Rémusat nevertheless records his admiration for what he regards as the unique qualities of Chinese. Above all he admires its “energy” – a key term in Enlightenment and romantic theories of language – and it is this energy, especially as it is encountered in the most basic of the Chinese written characters, representing the fundamental ideas of humanity, that can be conveyed, he says, by no other language. What he has in mind is primarily a visual or pictorial quality, and those characters which exhibit it, he asserts, in terms that anticipate the whole postromantic quest for pure experience and unmediated vision, “present to the eye not the sterile and conventional signs of pronunciation but things themselves.” This energy, moreover, is an essentializing and synthesizing force, making for such conclusion that “several phrases are necessary to exhaust the meaning of a single word.”¹

Just over one hundred years later, in London, the twenty-seven-year-old Ezra Pound came into possession of the manuscripts and notebooks of the late Ernest Fenollosa, an American orientalist who had pioneered the

study of Japanese art and undertaken, several years before his death in 1908, a study of classical Chinese poetry. Among these papers Pound discovered an essay – “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” – in which it is clear that Fenollosa, like Abel-Rémusat, had looked at Chinese characters and also seen “things themselves.” Reading Chinese, for Fenollosa, was a process not of interpreting abstract signs but simply of seeing, of “watching *things* work out their own fate.”²

This conception of linguistic possibility appealed powerfully to Pound, who was in the midst of formulating his own notion of the poetic image as the supreme component, the only aesthetically valid component, of verse. That his efforts were greatly stimulated by Fenollosa’s speculations about Chinese is nearly a commonplace of modern literary history. “The image,” Pound was to write a short time later, quite as though he was regarding it as invested with the same kind of energy that both Abel-Rémusat and Fenollosa had attributed to the Chinese character, “is itself the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language.”³ Pound’s image, that is to say, although it draws upon a variety of sources, is strikingly similar to Abel-Rémusat’s “single word” in Chinese that requires several phrases in another language to release its full concentration of meaning. In 1913, in the first of the imagist manifestos, Pound called for “direct treatment of the ‘thing,’ ” a spare, concise poetry in free verse, and free of conventional verse rhetoric, that would be as immediate to the emotions and intellect as possible.⁴ And by 1915, working closely with Fenollosa’s notes, he had produced such a poetry in *Cathay*, a small collection of his own versions of Chinese poems in which he managed, as it seemed to many of his contemporaries, to reproduce in English not simply the meanings of the original texts but their unusual modes of feeling and perception as well.

Of course, American or British suppositions, circa 1915, about ancient Chinese modes of feeling and perception are less a matter of accurate historical and cultural knowledge than of what George Steiner has called a “general phenomenon of hermeneutic trust.”⁵ Responses to Pound’s translations were and still are governed largely by a conventional idea of China that has evolved over a long history of Western fascination with the Orient – a history, often, of arrogant assumptions and farfetched mistakes. In 1928, T. S. Eliot, looking back at his friend’s achievement in an introduction to

his edition of Pound's *Selected Poems*, observed that "Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time," a remark, often quoted as unqualified praise, that actually seems intended to indicate the limits of what Pound had accomplished.

The passage in which the remark occurs is broadly relevant to my concerns in this study and is worth quoting from at length. "As for *Cathay*," Eliot writes,

it must be pointed out that Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time. I suspect that every age has had, and will have, the same illusion concerning translations, an illusion which is not altogether an illusion either. When a foreign poet is successfully done into the idiom of our own language and our own time, we believe that he has been 'translated'; we believe that through this translation we really at last get the original. The Elizabethans must have thought that they *got* Homer through Chapman, Plutarch through North. Not being Elizabethans, we have not that illusion; we see that Chapman is more Chapman than Homer, and North more North than Plutarch, both localized three hundred years ago. We perceive also that modern scholarly translations, Loeb or other, do not give us what the Tudors gave. If a modern Chapman, or North or Florio appeared, we should believe that he was the real translator; we should, in other words, do him the compliment of believing that his translation was translucence. For contemporaries, no doubt the Tudor translations were translucencies; for us they are 'magnificent specimens of Tudor prose'. The same fate impends upon Pound. His translations seem to be – and that is the test of excellence – translucencies: we *think* we are closer to the Chinese than when we read, for instance, Legge. I doubt this: I predict that in three hundred years Pound's *Cathay* will be a 'Windsor Translation' as Chapman and North are now 'Tudor Translations': it will be called (and justly) a 'magnificent specimen of XXth Century poetry' rather than a 'translation'. Each generation must translate for itself.

This is as much as to say that Chinese poetry, as we know it today, is something invented by Ezra Pound. It is not to say that there is a Chinese poetry-in-itself, waiting for some ideal translator who shall be only translator; but that Pound has enriched modern English poetry as Fitzgerald enriched it. But whereas Fitzgerald produced only the one great poem, Pound's translation is interesting also because it is a phase in the development of Pound's poetry . . . It is probable that the Chinese, as well as the Provençals and the Italians and the Saxons, influenced Pound, for no one can work intelligently with a

foreign matter without being affected by it; on the other hand, it is certain that Pound has influenced the Chinese and the Provençals and the Italians and the Saxons – not the matter *an sich*, which is unknowable, but the matter as we know it.⁶

Eliot addresses himself to several issues here, although the passage as a whole is marked by a deep skepticism about the possibility of definitiveness in translation or cross-cultural and even cross-temporal transmission: “Each generation,” he writes, “must translate for itself.” Nor is he concerned with linguistically accurate translation. Modern scholarly translations, apparently, provide sufficient accuracy, although they “do not give us what the Tudors gave.” Instead, successful translation, or what passes for it, Eliot is suggesting, is always a matter of temporal and linguistic localization, a perception of the foreign limited by an inescapably provincial or ethnocentric perspective. “When a foreign poet is successfully done into the idiom of our own language and our own time,” the effect or illusion of translucence is created, and “we believe that through this translation we really at last get the original.” In fact, however, what we respond to more than anything else in such translation is “the idiom of our own language and our own time,” and it is in this sense that Pound is an inventor rather than, strictly speaking, a translator, bringing across to us “not the matter *an sich*, which is unknowable, but the matter as we know it,” which is to say our own idea of China and Chinese poetry in our own language. The matter as we know it, apparently, is all that we *can* know, and for this reason, “Chinese poetry, as we know it today, is something invented by Ezra Pound.”

Pound’s *Cathay* is thus largely an event within Anglo-American literature rather than an introduction into it of something from outside its boundaries. Like Edward Fitzgerald, “Pound has enriched modern English poetry,” and his work will ultimately be seen as poetry rather than translation. Under the circumstances that Eliot describes, in fact – circumstances characterized by a sort of epistemological inaccessibility to the radically foreign – Pound has no choice but to be an “inventor” of Chinese poetry. Expanding upon Eliot’s point, Hugh Kenner calls his chapter on *Cathay* in *The Pound Era* “The Invention of China,” thus recognizing Pound’s participation in the larger historical process of the reception or construction