

Ezra Pound and the Transformation of Culture

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Abstract

To the contemporary reader, the world re-created by this pioneer of High Modernism bridges references from such different cultural spheres, that Poundian discourse as a whole confuses and defies interpretation. The anthropology of culture has brought forth a concept which reaches beyond the pure meaning of the discourse; by analysing together various references, from the cultural background to the intentionality of the writing and, further on, to the influence which the published texts are responsible for: the concept of culture transformation. To apply this to Poundian criticism, one must neglect neither the biographical nor the political or literary contexts, and develop a special interest in the efforts made for a shift in perspective to take place. Such changes, resulting from a cultural patching and comparing, will be the object of this paper and of subsequent research.

“I am that terrible thing, the product of American
culture,
Or rather that product improved
by considerable care and attention.
I am really quite modern, you know” (CEP: 216)

From an anthropological point of view, to go back as early as 1871, to Edward Taylor “culture... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (qtd. in Kottak 1996: 21). As culture acquisition is a result of contact and communication, literary discourse in general, seen as a mirror for cultural communication, may show better than any other product the interactions at work between cultural intertexts and hybridisations. To acquire new cultural traits, specific groups in contact use mainly two relevant tools: observation and interaction. The transformation of culture has provided the grounds for the manifestation and reflection of all the above-mentioned spheres of beliefs, customs and values in contact and in continual change. The interactive dimension of culture represents the starting point in dealing with the concept of *cultural transformation*, our final goal being to specifically target that which High Modernism intended to record, to express, and to make new, in the lapse of time from the clash of modern civilization (which was World War I) to the changes in perspective and re-fashioning of a new set of values for the Western world.

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For Thomas Rochon, the transformation of culture deals with “the replacement of existing cultural values with new ones” (Rochon, 1998: 55-56) following transnational contacts and exchanges. For the purpose of this paper, I shall interpret “replacement” by remodelling and rethinking paradigms. This process, underway especially during the early 20th century, stimulated or precipitated by transatlantic contacts, furthermore experienced by Hemingway's “lost generation”, ultimately manifested itself in the lives and works of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Henry James. In this respect, transgressing the boundaries of fiction, Ezra Pound's prose in particular called for a transformation of the Western ideological spheres: from the inside, with reference to Pound's rethinking his inborn American roots, but most of all from the outside, by re-interpreting the American letters along new (even exotic) cultural grounds. If tradition and rootlessness are the two poles of modernist expression, then the modernity of the “lost generation” might appear as something “unhoused” and out of place. Gertrude Stein said that Modernism really began in America but went to Paris to happen (in Ruland 1992: x). In this respect, we may speak about cultural diffusion, extending beyond national boundaries. Through diffusion, migration and borrowings, culture specific traits, trends and traditions reach an international dimension and scope.

To mention just one example: for someone like William Carlos Williams, immune to “the virus of the land” (SL 31), (because of his Spanish blood), America provided what he needed, a “homemade world”, as Hugh Kenner puts it, a stimulus and a recipient for creative renewal. For Pound, however, the remaking of America meant leaving it. This culture shift is not to be understood as merely escapism, but as a form of ambivalent enthusiasm for an intellectual return to the sources and the perspective of change. The purpose of such an endeavour was to provoke a shift in perspective on the part of his international readership (and of his listeners), one which would translate into a transformation of the American way from the outside, modelled on the European ways.

The American Spectant from Europe

As an American who lived abroad for more than 50 of his 87 years of life, Ezra Pound saw fit to change the cultural spectrum of his nation, considered “a half savage country, out of date” (P 185). What he found in exile was the European paradox: a land rich in historical and political structures but, at the same time, a place of freedom from convention, a place of myth, as well as a time of renewal, of dream and decadence in the American imagination. Throughout his literary career, Pound, together with T. S. Eliot, moved modernism out of their native America into the land of artistic creativity and tradition. From this *ex-central* movement from the New World, they concocted an idea of Europe as the new *centre* for cultural innovation, a model of *cultural* meaning. Around it, Pound moulded his vision of modern culture combining occidental and oriental textual forms. Despite Pound's sixty-four years spent in exile from his native America and twelve years as an exile within it, he remained an American all his life and never

thought of himself as anything but an American. In *Patria Mia* he says: "it would be about as easy for an American to become a Chinaman or a Hindoo as for him to acquire an Englishness or a Frenchness or a Europeaness that is more than half a skin deep" (PM: 47). His interest in America turned into a longing for an American Renaissance that would surpass Italian *Renascimento*. It was his American restlessness, energy and ambition for the highest international standards that drove Pound to Europe. Establishing himself in London and later in Paris, he became a relentless advance guard and tirelessly supported American poetry, although W. C. Williams called him "the best enemy United States verse had" (SL: 169). Williams was speaking in favour of those American poets who preferred to stay inside the national borders, unlike such "exotics" as Pound and Eliot, who had chosen as models the foreign and the continental, and who had eventually migrated to Europe. Just as Eliot wrote of Henry James, "It is only an American who can choose to be a European" (in Eder 1984: 44). In his quarrel with Williams, Pound replied he was more American than Williams himself and it was because of that that he had to leave to the continent. What Pound tried to transform was precisely the American tradition of abstract thinking, with inclinations toward propaganda and insufficient demarcation between the public and the private life, together with a 'thin logical faculty' and maybe even Puritanism (SL 156-59). Back in the States, not only did Pound lack the intellectual support he needed as a writer, he feared that the support America could actually offer might eventually transform him into a propagandist and a pamphleteer rather than an acknowledged writer.

Pound's close friends never denied his Americanness. For his wife he always remained "quintessentially American". An European, said Archibald MacLeish, would contend himself with a single culture; only an American would spend his lifetime sampling other cultures, then collecting and combining the samples, like Pound did: "because Pound is so international, he is so American" (Reck 1968: 117).

Pound's exile followed in the line of many American artists hungry for beauty, culture and pleasure who emigrated or spent part of their careers in Europe starting with the 19th century. It was a movement from the margins to the centre - as George Steiner put it, "a nostalgic, obsessed voyage through the museum of high culture just before closing time... a final trace through the stacks before the illiterates and the bookburners take over". (1972: 136)

Pound's America and the Transformation of Ideology

In "How I began" Pound describes the high ideals that led him to London, walking in the footsteps of his favourite writers and studying their work: "This, perhaps means little to a Londoner, but it is a good fun if you have grown up regarding such things as about as distant as Ghengis Kahn or the days of Lope de Vega". Seen in this way, Steiner remarks, "the marginal origins of Pound, Eliot and Joyce, their upbringing on the frontier of the declining cultural imperium,

make beautiful sense: only a man from Idaho or St. Louis would bring such indefatigable zest, such “tourist passion” to the job of discovering and cataloguing the old splendours of Europe” (Steiner 1972: 136). Venice, London, Paris and Rapallo, closer to his cultural desire than his native land, failed sooner or later to become his ideal city, his Dioce and his initial ravishment with Europe was not his final feeling. Eventually, by the early 1960s, Pound concluded that the roots of civilization were no longer in contemporary Europe and referred to himself as “the last American living the tragedy of Europe” (Schulman 1974: 35).

Despite many theorists’ and historians’ perception of the American stage of letters as modernist from its beginnings, American reactions to high modernist poets often denied their essential American sensibilities: Eliot was considered a polyglot and to many a naturalized British poet, Stevens – a French dandy and Pound an aristocratic troubadour. Pound, despite his interest in Adams and Jefferson, was often felt as involved in some international movement and the centre of an “era”. If Robert Frost and Williams shared a distinctly American style and voice, Pound, strangely seemed just to sound American but not in a way to which American readers were familiar, closer in tone to Homer or Villon or Dante, at times, than to Emerson or Whitman or James. The critics’ complicity with Pound’s efforts to escape an uninspiring native tradition proves just how essentially American his desire was. Pound’s cosmopolitanism and his displacement and criticism of America may well be illustrative of how the American Pound was in search of the proper language and form for his epic, experiencing the distrust of the American artist at the feeling that he had no traditional language, form or sign. Consider, for example the foreign titles of the table of contents of *Personna*. Pound’s own criticism of American literature seems to have made up his reputation of an *international modernist* dismissive of his domestic heritage. Except for Henry James, no American writer had enjoyed his full endorsement. Moreover, Pound wrote in his essays that “studying American literature is self-defeating as studying American chemistry” (LE: 218). The simile implies that literature, like any science, can be understood as a system: “if you were studying chemistry you would be told that there are a certain number of elements, a certain number of more usual chemicals, chemicals most in use, or easiest to find. And for the sake of clarity in your experiments you would probably be given these substances pure or as pure as you could conveniently get them” (ABC: 38). Pound couldn’t find this degree of purity in American literature: “No American poetry is of any use for the palette. Whitman is the best of it, but he never pretended to have reached the goal” (LE: 218). In *Patria Mia* Pound portrays Whitman as a “reflex, the first honest reflex in an age of papier-maché letters” (SP: 110) creator of derivative forms of poetry and fiction: “America’s position in the world of letters is, relatively, about that which Spain held in the time of the Senecas. So far as civilization is concerned America is the great, rich, western province, which has sent one or two notable artists to the Eastern capital. And that capital is, needless to say, not Rome, but the double city of London and Paris” (SP:

114). Pound saw American letters as modelled according to historical parallels, which displace America into the classical world.

Pound's remarks about the American literary scene build an imagotype of the nation lacking cultural traditions and literary authority. The figure of Emerson, among others, seems as the typical American authority; Hawthorne is categorized as the colonial Englishman, while Edgar Allan Poe is the "inventor of macabre subjects", "a rhetorician, not a model" of good writing (LE 218, SL 55). Thus Pound liberates himself of the American tradition and promotes himself onto the continental scene. Hugh Kenner, Pound's pioneer critic and supporter starts from these premises and makes Pound the iconic international poet. But Pound was capable of breaking loose of the American heritage and this is visible in his significantly Italian titled "Patria Mia". American thought, in order to gain interest for Pound's literary project, had to pass through Japan and China before it could be fashioned in the form of Fenollosa's works on the ideogram.

According to Joseph Riddel, it was Fenollosa's contention that American thought, or Transcendentalism, was not only compatible with Oriental thought or Zen doctrine, but that it had been a virtual recuperation of the Oriental (in Kubersky 1992: 35). Fenollosa's influence guided Pound into a direction of American influence otherwise ignored. In exchange, Fenollosa's Buddhism is completely dismissed in the Cantos. In his *Cathay* volume, Pound describes an imaginary land where American ideologies and concerns can find their application without contamination of ignorant or false reverence.

Pound's America is still waiting for a Renaissance that only Pound could sustain and direct through his Cantos. Pound's America is re-discovered in China and has as its founders both Confucius and Adams. Pound's Chinese-Adams cantos (LII-LXXI) superpose episodes of Confucian history of China (translated via French sources) and an Adamsian history of the United States in a corpus of poetry only Pound could have wrote. Both Confucius and Adams spoke in favour of a language of simplicity, without figuration or marks of duplicity. In practice, Emerson and Whitman, however, encourage this duplicity by inventing new forms of discourse. Both authors revel in the possibility of admitting contradiction, in language and intention:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then... I contradict myself;
I am large... I contain multitudes (Whitman 2008: 62)

One might even see a disavowal of the I as one which unites all speakers in the manner of Rimbaud's *Je est un autre*. The incipient act of Whitman's poem and poetics is a casting of the signifiers of the self into a system of substitution at a universal scale of signification. For Pound, Whitman, like Emerson, is too much connected with the historical, banal realities of America, just as their perspectives are too domestic to stir Pound's interest in any profound way. In his 1909 poem "What I feel about Walt Whitman" he states that only from abroad was he able to

re-read Whitman. "... He is America... I honour him for he prophesied me while I can only recognize him as a forebear of whom I ought to be proud" (SP: 145). In his poem-to-poem dialogue with Whitman, and with other congenial literary predecessors, the perspective of assimilation of American tradition changes with time and location, as well as with the appropriation of the European points of view.

Settling in Europe, Pound re-reads and feels obliged towards his literary fathers, Whitman most of all. "Personally I might be very glad to conceal my relationship to my spiritual father and brag about my more congenial ancestry – Dante, Shakespeare, Theocritus, Villon, but the descent is a bit difficult to establish." (SP: 146). A few years later he remarks: "[Whitman] never said 'American poetry is to stay where I left it': he said it was to go on from where he started it" (LE 218). In a similar voice, his poem "A Pact" reads: "I have detested you long enough/ We have one sap and one root- / Let there be commerce between us".

Three decades later, in his *ABC of Reading*, Pound writes: "From an examination of Walt made twelve years ago the present writer carried away the impression that there are thirty well written pages of Whitman; he is now unable to find them" (ABC 192). In the 1930s, having found his own America in the Jefferson Cantos, the exiled poet no longer needs his condescending link to Whitman and he dismisses him mostly for technical reasons. Still, in the Pisan Cantos, Pound is again willing to offer Whitman a place in his literary lineage: "Hier wohnt the tradition as per Whitman in Camden" (C 80: 508).

Such examples of ambivalence in Pound's comments are symptomatic of the relationship linking the *Cantos* to *Leaves of Grass*; to be noticed especially in Pound's borrowing of Whitman's serial form. The model of *Leaves of Grass* is assimilated in the Cantos and the two feel satisfied with such titles as the "leaf" and the "canto" for works intended to transform the readers' perception and to assimilate into the epic vast subjects and multinational dimensions. Whitman argues that he was "jetting the stuff of more arrogant republics" whereas in Pound's cantos we read "By prong have I entered these hills" (238: 47). Still, the Cantos do not develop on Whitman's concept of the universality of the self. The author of the Cantos builds his open poem around the Odyssean motifs of discovery, voyage and return.

Pound's dismissal of his thematic and linguistic affinities with Emerson or Whitman should make the readers suspect his full endorsement for Henry James. James is for Pound the figure of the incontestable *American* precursor, but also an exponent of mere textuality, whose accomplishments are related to his threatening modernity. These accomplishments may be seen in Pound's criticism of James's "great labour of translation, of making America intelligible" (LE 296). Pound's remarks suggest that America should be accounted for in terms of Pound's own great efforts of translating and adapting Cavalcanti (1912), Li Po (1915) and Arnaut Daniel (1920), which means a labour of adapting medieval Europe, China and Provence to the intelligence of modern America. The dangerous account

appears in Pound's critic of *The Awkward Age* and its numerous "velleities, atmospheres, timbres, nuances, etc.": "One's complaint is not that people of this sort don't exist, that they aren't like everything else a subject for literature, but that James doesn't anywhere in the book get down to bedrock. It is too much as if he were depicting stage scenery not as stage scenery, but as nature" (LE: 324-26). Pound's reverence for James combines subtly with his dissatisfaction with James's unwillingness to touch a foundation. In the *Cantos* James significantly appears under the form of a ghost:

And the great domed head, *con gli occhionesti e tardi*
 Moves before me, phantom with weighted motion,
Grave incessu, drinking the tone of things,
 And the old voice lifts itself
 Weaving an endless sentence (Canto 24)

Whereas Tiresias' ghost drinks blood and utters prophecies and instructions, James's ghost only drinks the "tone of things" and his "voice lifts itself" to utter an "endless sentence". Analysing these difficult relationships, Robert Gregory comments, in his preface, on a sentence in Henry James's *Art of the Novel* "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so." (James 2011: 5) The so-called "endless sentence" which James weaves in Pound's seventh Canto stands both for the lure and danger of a sign detached from his bedrock, founding stone, or from nature.

Pound's dismissal of Emerson's centrality, Whitman's long verse and James's groundlessness are intended both to hide his attachment to the American literary tradition and to facilitate an evasion of their modernist reflections from the limitations of language. Yet, in a broader sense, Pound's dismissal of Romanticism could be seen as a distrust of the repressed literary self-consciousness starting with Wordsworth and Emerson and continuing with James and Joyce. Working to bypass the consequences of finding a simultaneous origin in the duplicity of the sign, Pound laboriously and single-handedly re-shaped his own mystical-rationalist tradition from Europe and the Orient and his own America of Jefferson and Henry Adams. If Pound had looked further into the American tradition instead of reinventing his own "civilized" rationalist America, he would never have attempted the writing of the *Cantos*. However, the collected corpus of abandoned preludes, literary fragments, shipwrecked voyages etc. finds its appropriate epitaph in the *Cantos*.

Changing the Code

By the late 19th century, Jackson Lears (1981: xv) claims, three reactions to the collapse of American rationalist values were observable on the literary scene: the celebration of warfare, culminating with the Spanish-American war, a longing for the sufficiency and simplicity of medieval life and the taste for Oriental art and

thinking. The anti-modernist views of Longfellow, Lowell or Fenollosa are not, according to Lears, “simply escapism; it was ambivalent often coexisting with enthusiasm for material progress.” The implied modernism of Ezra Pound is thus overshadowed by his anti-modern researches for authentic and simple forms of life he discovers in medieval societies, mystical experience and pagan vitality. Dante, according to Lears (1981: 155) “became a prophet of spiritual certainty in an uncertain excessively tolerant age.” Oriental art interested Fenollosa and Henry Adams, and Oriental thinking, Buddhism and Confucianism in particular, involved all those in search of an ideological background neither spiritually dogmatic nor materialistic in essence. Lears argues that the *antimodernists* were attracted to these by-gone cultures and values because they provided a refuge from the burdens of self-consciousness affecting the intellectual aristocracy in an industrial culture.

Pound’s fascination with the Middle Ages, with Oriental cultures and thinkers, and his celebration of war and martial values in *Sestina: Altaforte* “Damn it all! All this our South stinks peace” (CEP 327) are obviously part of these intellectual currents of late 19th century America. Pound’s early poetry and criticism describe the crisis of the European and American cultural state of the time, yet he decides to alienate himself from his cultural background in order to attempt single-handedly to “gather the limbs of Osiris”, to rebuild a mythical and cultural tradition. By criticizing the failure of the American literary canon, Pound attempts to hide his own ties to the tradition of *antimodernism*. In *Patria Mia* he notes: “[America] wanted a tradition like other nations, and it got Longfellow’s Tales of a Wayside Inn’ and ‘Hiawatha’ and ‘Evangeline’... American poetry is bad, not for lack of impulse, but because almost no one in that country knows true from false, good from bad.” (SP 124, 127)

Characterizing the American morality problems caused by sloth and popular ignorance rather than searching for their cultural origins, Pound assumes the “neutral” standpoint of a “technical” expert. Thus he disavows his anti-modern bonds with America and enhances his apparently modernist claims to an objective discourse. Nonetheless, Pound’s long lasting quarrel with America is representative of his dismissal of the philosophical issue of how words can be made ‘true’. Instead, the poet advises the American readership to study the classics, learn the meaning of words and reform American literary institutions. “If literature is to reappear in America it must come through, but in spite of, the present system of publication.” (LE: 226) The crisis of representation affecting Nietzsche, James, Lowell is resolved by Pound through the study of literatures and cultures, clarifying the means of expression, and reforming the mercantile publication policies.

Pound’s shift or predilection for certain cultural codes represents his own literary self-consciousness and endeavour for a cultural renewal. The “errand” of the 19th century cultural heritage is to restore a system of values through purification and a closer attachment to the emerging European forms of freedom and individualism. For the elite, America was not, then, a recovered sentiment of

identity, but the transcription of a re-discovered artistic heritage projected upon a new continent.

Pound's America would rediscover its strength from its actual difference from Europe, but it would pursue the same tradition that Victorian and materialist cultures had abandoned: the spirit of romance.

Abbreviations

- ABC – *ABC of Reading* (1934) reprinted in 1960, New York: New Directions
 C – *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (1986) New York: New Directions
 CEP – *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound* (1976) King, M. J. (ed), New York: New Directions
 LE – *Literary Essays*, Edited by T. S. Eliot (1954) New York: New Directions
 P – *Personae* (1926) Reprinted (1971), New York. New Directions
 PM – *Patria Mia and The Treatise on Harmony* (1962) P. Owen (ed.) London: Peter Owen Ltd.
 SL – *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941* Paige, D.D (1971) (ed.). New York: New Directions
 SP – *Selected Prose* (1973) W. Cookson (ed.), New York: New Directions.
 SR – *Spirit of Romance* (1968), New York: New Directions.
 T – *The Translations of Ezra Pound* (1978) Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers

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