Origins and Originals: an Approach to Pound's 'Cathay'

di William Rivière

It is not suprising that in the years in which the history of ideas has come to the study of rupture and discontinuity, the history of literature should have come to the study of translation. Michel Foucault cites Louis Althusser on «the breaks effected by a work of theoretical transformation which 'establishes a science by detaching it from the ideology of its past and revealing this past as ideological' [1]. To this should be added, of course, literary analysis, which now takes as its unity, not the spirit or sensibility of a period, nor groups, schools, generations, or movements, nor even the personality of the author, in the interplay of his life and his creation, but the particular structure of a given *oeuvre*, book, or text» [2].

I suggest the poetry of nostalgia as the site of heightened consciousness of those thresholds we can only cross one way. There we find the irrevocability of the loss of that which at last is acknowledged to be ideological merely, and the need to free oneself from imagined origins and to begin afresh. Further, I suggest the various forms of translation as a reasonable place to expect heightened consciousness of these acts of recognition and initiation. There one looks back, but in order to project forward. There the successive versions of a text, or the successive

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[1] L. Althusser, *For Marx*, London, Allen Lane; New York, Pantheon 1969, p. 168.

[2] M. Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Paris, Gallimard 1969; English translation, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London, Tavistock 1972, p. 5.

returns to a changing idea, become familiar not only in their resemblance to each other but also in their strangeness. There the divisions of language (of time and place) and the transmutations of literary traditions are simultaneously alienations and liberations, for the necessarily hopeless is, equally, the only opportunity. There the terretory – a distance composed as much of otherness as of sameness – between an original known to be no origin, and a new rendering which must be both a moment in the fading of an echo and the inception of a new event, may be most knowingly traversed. There a posited canon may reveal itself to be an archive of dislocations, breaks which are our only intellectual freedom, our chance, by ending, to begin.

We turn, therefore, no longer to Rimbaud's systematic derangement of the senses, but to the systematic disconnection of historical continuities. Again Foucault is exemplary. He writes of the necessary renunciation of two linked, but opposite themes. The first involves a wish that it should never be possible to assign, in the order of discourse, the irruption of a real event; that beyond any apparent beginning, there is always a secret origin – so secret and so fundamental that it can never be quite grasped in itself. «Thus one is led inevitably, through the naivity of chronologies, towards an ever-receding point that is never itself present in any history; this point is merely its own void; and from that point all beginnings can never be more that mere recommencements or occultation (in one and the same gesture, this *and* that)» [3].

But if we confine ourselves to what is present in history; if we dismiss origins as ideological; if we acknowledge the alienness of what went before each rupture and the newness of what is happening now as each rupture occurs – then regret becomes our consuming emotion, the poetry of nostalgia our cardinal literature, the perusal of lostness our most urgent duty.

Foucault goes on: «to this theme is connected another according to which all manifest discourse is secretly based on an 'already said'; and that this 'already said' is not merely a phrase that has already been spoken, or a text that has already been written, but a 'never said', an incorporeal discourse, a

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

voice as silent as a breath, a writing that is merely the hollow of its own mark. It is supposed therefore that everything that is formulated in discourse was already articulated in that semi-silence that precedes it, which continues to run obstinately beneath it, but which it covers and silences. The manifest discourse, therefore, is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say; and this 'not said' is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said. The first theme sees the historical analysis of discourse as the quest for and the repetition of an origin that eludes all historical determination; the second sees it as the interpretation of 'hearing', or an 'already said' that is at the same time a 'not said'. We must renounce all those themes whose function it is to ensure the infinite continuity of discourse and its secret presence to itself in the interplay of a constantly recurring absence» [4].

No apology, I trust, is called for, when one quotes in full a declaration which has had such a radical effect upon contemporary thought. We can now pursue its application to our present argument: for the genealogy of translation will display the inheritances and false inheritances of which Foucault writes.

We are dealing with a type of text which pretends its justification is that it is based upon another text already written. But not only is the translation's claim to depend on its original in question, but that original's assumed relation to previous speech and writing is now dubious too. Additional difficulties arise. Translation has for a long time masked its reliance on a hypothetical incorporeal discourse by pointing overtly to a predecessor it claimed to largely reproduce – but this is no longer convincing. So-called original writing, by overtly referring to previous writing and covertly depending on the same hypothesis of a 'never written', had masked its isolation, its strangeness to itself – and this too is no longer convincing, and must be supplanted by recognition that it has been more original than it had dared to think.

The relation of the translation to what it had called its original is becoming similar to that between a mediaeval scribe's text and the oral poem he recorded – but when the original is

[4] *Ibid.*

known to have been repeatedly altered and now only exists in this late, dubious, written form. Likewise the relation of original writings to the once-incontestible incorporeal discourse is becoming similar to that which religious works have to the deities whose dictation their authors claimed to be taking down – but when these deities have been half forgotten and a new religion is established in the land. In both cases we have the problem of originals decayed virtually to non-existence (the later version being thus at once freed and made suspect) or, differently phrased, the problem of awareness of rupture becoming far more acute than awareness of continuity. In both cases we are led to the question of a lost origin, i.e. an origin long posited but now no longer to be taken seriously. Thus thought frees itself, not from its own self-indulgences, but from those of its history; thus thought is forever struggling free of origins, relegating as much as possible to the ideological. But by doing so it helps the desert behind us to spread, the dead lands of thought which once sustained man but can do so no more (though ideas can be resurrected in debased form for rabble-rousing purposes) and which are perennially extending their infertile domain.

But if all that is articulated in discourse was not previously articulated in a semi-silence, how does it come into being? If neither man nor deity is a feasible origin, if the object in that sense is merely an object of nostalgia, we are liberated from theories of dependence. The question becomes, in any given instance: who or what is wielding this discourse, and what being does it have? Foucault poses it like this: «to the Neitzschean question: 'Who is speaking?' Mallarmé replies [. . .] that what is speaking is, in its solitude, in its fragile vibration, in its nothingness, the word itself – not the meaning of the word, but its enigmatic and precarioús being. Whereas Nietzsche maintained his questioning as to who is speaking right up to the end, though forced, in the last resort, to irrupt into that questioning himself and to base it upon himself as the speaking and questioning subject: *Ecce homo*, Mallarmé was constantly effacing himself from his own language, to the point of not wishing to figure in it except as an executant in a pure ceremony of the Book in which the discourse would compose itself. It is quite possible that all those questions now confronting our

curiosity . . . are presented today in the distance that was never crossed between Nietzsche's question and Mallarmé's reply» [5].

How might one cross that distance? I have suggested that the territory may be mapped as those successive rifts in the *episteme* lying between an origin known to be ideological and a writing known to be a beginning. But if it is clearly a vain exercise for the student of discourse to try to trace an origin which cannot be historically determined because it can only exist as imagined to be just prior to knowledge, he can trace the ways in which what had been an origin has receded out of reach. He can show (Foucault again) how «man is cut off from the origin that would make him contemporaneous with his own existence . . .». He can show how we have discovered that we pre-exist the ever-renewed origin we must clarify, «the mode upon which the possibility of time is constituted – that origin without origin or beginning, on the basis of which everything is able to come into being» [6]. So, while to analyse may be cartography, to cross the distance, to travel, is to write; but this too is now to be questioned – for if to write is to constitute momentary origins, to ceaselessly enact and dispel possibilities of time, we are still far from understanding how this happens.

Back to translation. Preferably, back to translation like Ezra Pound's *Cathay* [7] which claims no more than to be inspired imitation and derivation; which is known to have the vaguest relations with originals long since become remote and nebulous to most readers of the translation; which is widely enjoyed and admired for itself. Back to *Cathay* because it is exemplary, being suspended between no longer cogent ideas of the translated and the original or, less helpful still, the derivative and the creative.

The poet gives the origins of his work: «for the most part from the Chinese of Rihaku, from the notes of the late Ernst Fenellosa, and the decipherings of the professors Mori and Ariga (1915)» [8]. But *Cathay*, unlike some of Pound's transla-

[5] M. Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard 1966; English translation, *The Order of Things*, London, Tavistock 1970, pp. 305-306.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 332.

[7] E. Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems*, London, Faber 1952.

[8] *Ibid.*

tions, is in the act of freeing itself from translatedness, is writing caught in mid-stride as it comes from the old and to the new – for no student of Rihaku will turn to Pound to find out what the eighth century Chinese actually says. We are not yet so far into the modern literary adventure that we have a poet inventing a dead poet to pretend to translate. But we are at the stage where scholarship is as much a mask to conceal freedom as it is a way of making foreign texts available to a native readership. In other words, original and translation are both acknowledged to be largely fictitious (it no longer matters whether the first poem is rendered as accurately as is reasonably possible by the second) and, by implication, any unspoken origin is understood as a convenient or polite fiction too, for one cannot argue back from a contingency to establish an absolute, any more that one can argue forward from a would-be absolute that has not been shown to be, *a priori*, a necessary law – for example, the 'unspoken origin'.

After the single sentence which Pound offers by way of introduction, we read a part-translation part-original that faintly echoes poems we must regard, not only as being half lost and half recovered, but also as themselves being original and without reference to an original. (Whether we are readers of ancient Chinese or modern English, we are all post-Foucault now; and Rihaku, Bunno, Mei Sheng and T'ao Yuan Ming have lost, if they ever had, their assumption of incorporeal originals – thanks to mutability).

What, then, is the tone of Pound's voice as he moves from his celebration of the old into his making of the new? I think it would be generally agreed that all seventeen poems in *Cathay* are elegiac. They are poems of loss. They look backward. They regret.

To translate at all is, in part, to succumb to nostalgia. It is to confess openly the backward look that prepares the incipient action. It is to insist on one's indebtedness, to make a show of paying homage that could be left implicit, even as it is to invite criticism for travesty. So to imitate and re-write poetry of nostalgia, as Pound did with *Cathay*, is to be a prince among elegists: for it gives a further dimension to regret, it compounds the present lostness of origins with the present lostness of originals.

To translate – certainly to translate now – is to tell a story, a story of successive and necessarily forsaken origins, a story which traverses shifts of style and resonance till it arrives at a tentative and recent, though not definitive or last, version. This will not be a version of an original. But it may be a short-term way of understanding older versions – whether these were written and published and read, or simply held briefly in someone's mind – and are now subsumed, if the translation is any good, in the latest expression of that ravelling skein of notions. So if a successful translation carries within itself such a narrative, is itself a way of beginning «once upon a time . . .» or «long ago and far away . . .» and holding present in the telling the lostness of what if half-sincerely offers to regain, Pound's *Cathay* is superbly self-conscious; for, by insisting on their longing for what they never were, his poems espouse their supposed originals' longing for what they may or may not have had but assuredly have lost.

To return to what has been lost and to find it altered, irrecoverable, alien, unknowable, is to lose it again and to exacerbate loss. Translation thus becomes a mawkish haunting of ruins, an obsession with the decay of significances. It seems that the only way in which translation might be said to fulfil its conventional avowed aims is this: that by elaborating upon the mutability of linguistic phenomena it paradoxically displays how new, how original, they once were. What I have called 'a further dimension to loss' is parodic – for translation usually laughs if it has any sense of humour at all – but it is a useful parody because it mocks, in both senses of the word, its subject, loss, even as it mocks its object, the original. It is parodic, but not insincere. Rather, it has that cunning unkindness that lends pathos to its object, that reveals hopelessness, more ruthlessly to incite compassion.

Here is the opening of *Exile's Letter.*

To So-Kin of Rakuyo, ancient friend, Chancellor of Gen.
Now I remember that you built me a special tavern
By the south side of the bridge at Ten-Shin.
With yellow gold and white jewels, we paid for songs and laughter
And we were drunk for month on month, forgetting the kings and princes.
Intelligent men came drifting in from the sea and the west border,
And with them, and with you especially

There was nothing at cross purpose,
And they made nothing of sea-crossing or of mountain-crossing
If only they could be of that fellowship,
And we all spoke out our hearts and minds, and without regret.
And when I was sent off to South Wei, smothered in laurel groves . . . [9].

Chinese names in Roman script can be pronounced, though at these distances of space and time the people and places they designate may be constituents of an aura but have lost identity, have lost precise significance and gained a resonance which visits us through so many obliquities that to name ceases to be to insist on knowing the unique, and becomes to insist on knowing its unknowability. To know a little of the poet, of So-Kin and of their friends; to know a little of the bridge at Ten-Shin and of events there; to recall or imagine or banally doubt the romantic-sounding customs of far places and times; to be moved by affections that one knows one is moved by largely because, knowing so little, one is free to imagine more; to hear the ancient poet write to his friend in Edwardian English; all this is to feel exile, if only banishment from the notion that the transcendental «I» might one day gather again the scattered shards of its being, and to know the hope that banishment may not endure forever. There are two reasons for this feeling. The first is that, if we disconnect historical continuities, if we deny ourselves the sovereign subject in whose consciousness continuous history proceeds and where it might be resumed and ordered, if we deny ourselves «the uncompleted, but uninterrupted movement of totalizations, the return to an ever-open source, and finally the historico-transcendental thematic» [10], we will necessarily read the poetry of separation as the poetry in which we search for signs of possible reunion, the philosophy of exile will itself suggest that of return. The second reason is that translation is to the poet what Brecht's alienation is to the playwright and director: a technique for distancing, for mocking, for letting nobody comfortably dream that fiction is fact or the imagined is proven, for insisting that a story is being told, only a story.

The upshot is that the genre we have always called transla-

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, cit., p. 39.

tion begins to look more like the poetry of despair. For translation is not interesting because to translate is interesting. To partly succeed in reproducing an old text is a boring idea and a weary practice. Translation is interesting because to forge a style that will embody the story of how divorced we are from old origins, how divorced our writing is from old unspoken and spoken discourses, how our being comes to us across nothing but faultlines in the *episteme*, is what adventurous translation has been trying to do this century; and because it is exemplary, thus doing openly – and therefore in ways easier to isolate and discuss – what some of the same poets, and others, have been doing in their supposedly more original work.

The apparent phenomena to support such an assertion are there. We have seen translations of poetry – by Ezra Pound, by Robert Lowell and others – move farther and farther away from nineteenth century notions of verse renderings of foreign poems, and become instead texts which imitate, echo and take inspiration from their models. We have seen much of the finest so-called original poetry of the modern period incorporate translations and transmute them. Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot are canonic instances of this. Of contemporary English poets, Geoffrey Hill has made superb use of the riches of Spanish poetry.

That obvious translatedness can be a virtue is clear from the language of *Cathay*. Pound's Chinese poets speak an English produced for the purpose. (In prose, one might compare this romantic and yet alienating voice with the effect produced by the Enlish spoken by Conrad's Malays, for example, or by Hemingway's Spaniards). For *The Seafarer* [11] and for *Homage to Sextus Propertius* [12] he likewise developed styles redolent of models, brought the multiple translatedness of experience into the foreground of our minds as we read. What happens when the preexisting and the alien is embodied in the consciously new, in literature that knowingly posits itself as origin and produces its time and the things of that time – what happens when originals are half-concealed in the making of an origin – might be the subject of a future paper, but is beyond the scope of this

[11] E. Pound, *op. cit.*
[12] *Ibid.*

one. But *Exile's Letter* shows the way writing can free itself by attracting and holding off the reader, offering fabulous temptations, half satisfying longings.

And then, when separation had come to its worst,
We met, and travelled into Sen-Go,
Through all the thirty-six folds of the turning and twisting waters,
Into a valley of the thousand bright flowers,
That was the first valley;
And into ten thousand valleys full of voices and pine-winds.

The paradisal journey with So-Kin sets off the difficult journeys without him. References left unexplained (like «the thousand bright flowers») remind one of the friction there always is when you move ideas from one culture to another. All literatures have their conventions as to what is good hyperbole and what is bad, what splendour attracts and what is embarrassing. But here Pound, re-inventing a literature of which most of his readers know nothing, is free to establish his own traditions, which are always saved by sounding slightly false: the field of what can be thought, felt and said is thus vastly increased. There is an uneasy liberty, an excitement in knowing ignorance, in imagining possibility.

And with silver harness and reins of gold,
Out came the East of Kan foreman and his company.
And there came also the 'true man' of Shi-yo to meet me,
Playing on a jewelled mouth-organ.
In the storied houses of San-Ko they gave us more Sennin music,
Many instruments, like the sound of young phoenix broods.

How much is Rihaku embellishing what he conceived, how much is Pound embellishing Rihaku? Only the young phoenix broods are necessarily metaphorical. The names of places contribute more wonder than knowledge. From phrase to phrase there is a sliding away of certainty. The «silver harness» is fairly clear; but «reins of gold» might be leather twisted with gold thread, or might be gold brocade . . . As for the people, few readers will know what a foreman is a translation of it seems obvious only that he was *not* a foreman in the modern English sense) or what his status and role were. Coming to the 'True man' of Shi-yo, his playing a jewelled mouth-organ, which is

marvellous to imagine, makes one all the more balefully intrigued by the unimaginability of either 'True man' or Shi-yo. I do not say that scholarship does not elucidate the obscurities in *Cathay*; I say the obscurities have a function (and the scholarship is irrelevant, in this case, with salutary plainness, to the poetry).

Exile's Letter remembers friends and dancing girls, conversations and festivities, walks, drunkenness, generosity, courage; it remembers one man with overriding admiration and love; it celebrates friendship maintained through long inevitable separations, lives passed serving at far points of an empire, age and melancholy coming. In other poems in *Cathay* there is one departure – the theme is always there. But in *Exile's Letter*, the longest piece in the short collection, there are more than one meeting and more than one leaving, so a pattern of recurrent dissatisfaction and cumulative sorrow is established. Liberated, as I have said, to make his rhetoric consonant only with itself, with its own widely flung exuberances and tantalising elipses, the poet moves quickly and confidently between the exotic – his «blue jewelled table» or his «dynastic temple» – and his own Imagism – his «roads twisted like sheep's guts». His adaptation of the conventions of translation liberate the poet to sound as alien as he pleases, and near the end he thus draws his sharpest distinction between knowing and unknowing.

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 Moutains
    White-headed.

Till the last hyphenated two words, the more he says in this sentence the less one comprehends what the speaker actually did. One is reading an anti-rhetoric that tries, not to convince, but to dispel conviction. But then – «White-headed» – one is horribly moved, in the gentlest way.

This switching back and forth between the exotic and the familiar, this language alternately cloudy and transparent, foreign and ours, this story of reunions and renewed distances, this opening the world of what cannot be known and then closing upon what must be unavoidably felt, is a poetry of despair

at lost origins that allows the possibility of a poetry of return, though it does not speak it. The return never happens (many brief returns serve only to undo the idea of one more effective return) but nor is its impossibility even proven. There is a tireless repetition of the welter of experience – as there is tireless retranslation of the welter of texts – though it is a repetition, as Foucault says [13], which time renders impossible even as it forces us to conceive of it. In the same passage, he describes the preoccupation of modern thought with recurrence, recommencement and repetition; and it is this «strange, stationary anxiety» of his that we come to at the close of *Exile's Letter.*

And if you ask how I regret that parting:
It is like the flowers falling at Spring's end
    Confused, whirled in a tangle.
What is the use of talking, and there is no end of talking,
There is no end of things in the heart.
I call in the boy,
Have him sit on his knees here
    To seal this,
And send it a thousand miles, thinking.

There are ghostly homecomings and visitations throughout Pound's *oeuvre;* the Cantos have their gatherings after dispersal, their returns after loss. But in *Cathay,* which worries at loss like a dog worrying its finest bone, the admission of confusion and helplessness is scrupulous, the «stationary anxiety» is perfect. This mood will rehearse lost origins and dreamed returns, but will tolerate no graceless and futile snatching at them; it celebrates and then it grieves.

[13] M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* cit., p. 334.