

ORIENTALISM AND MODERNISM



THE LEGACY OF CHINA
IN POUND AND WILLIAMS

ZHAOMING QIAN



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FOR MY MOTHER AND

IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER



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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

For the transliteration of Chinese names and words I have followed the pinyin system, which is both most accurate and increasingly widespread. In my quotations from Giles, Waley, and other early writers, however, I have retained their Wade-Giles usage. A short list is given below of those names whose pinyin and Wade-Giles spellings are quite different:

Bo Juyi = Po Chü-i
Guanyin = Kwanyin
Laozi = Lao Tzu
Li Bo = Li Po
Qu Yuan = Ch'ü Yüan
Tao Qian = T'ao Ch'ien
Yang Guifei = Yang Kui-fei
Zhuangzi = Chuang Tzu

For those unfamiliar with the pinyin system, it may be useful to remember these general rules for pronunciation: c = ts, q = ch, x = sh, z = dz, and zh = j.



PROLOGUE: THE PLACE OF THE ORIENT IN THE MODERNIST MOVEMENT

In this study I use the term Orientalism differently from Edward Said (*Orientalism* 1978) in several ways. For Said the Orient is specifically the Muslim Orient. For me it is the Far East, particularly China. If until the early nineteenth century the Orient "had really meant only India and the Bible lands" (Said 4), by the early twentieth century the term came primarily to mean China and Japan. Indeed, for the great Modernists—Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Williams, Stevens, and Moore—it was the Far East rather than the Near East that was a richer source of literary models. Therefore, a study of the Far East's impact on Modernism indisputably has greater significance. For Said "Orientalism is a cultural and a political fact . . ." (13). Accordingly, his study covers all the various dimensions of the complex system. For me the concept is primarily a literary one. I consider literary Orientalism not in abstract terms but in the concrete form of individual Chinese poets—Qu Yuan (Ch'ü Yüan), Tao Qian (T'ao Ch'ien), Li Bo (Li Po), Wang Wei, and Bo Juyi (Po Chü-i)—as discovered and translated by late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century English and American scholars. It was through Ernest Fenollosa, H. A. Giles, and Arthur Waley that Modernists like Pound and Williams had dialogues with the great Chinese poets. For Said "[t]he Orient was almost a European invention"; it was the key culture against which the West defined itself (1–2). There are obviously many examples where

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Said's model works well. In considering Pound's and Williams' enthusiasm for China, I find, however, that this model has shortcomings. First, Pound and Williams did not seem to believe in Western cultural superiority. Second, what attracted the two poets toward the Orient was really the affinities (the Self in the Other) rather than the differences (the Otherness in the Other). In the chapters that follow, therefore, I will adopt a contrasting Orientalist model—the model of imitation as defined by Reed Way Dasenbrock in *Imitating the Italians: Wyatt, Spenser, Synge, Pound, Joyce* (1991). In this model, China and Japan are seen not as foils to the West, but as crystallizing examples of the Modernists' realizing Self. Dasenbrock has not explicitly articulated the theoretical basis for his approach. In fact, one may find strong support for it in Heidegger's hermeneutics. As Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the leading proponents of hermeneutics, observes, in the Heideggerian hermeneutic process "interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones" (*Truth and Method* 236).

I have begun with the term "Orientalism" because it bears on the question out of which this book has grown: what role did Pound's and Williams' interest in Chinese poetry and culture play in their rapid transition toward high Modernism around 1920? My inquiry has unavoidably brought my attention to an influence in the Modernist movement as a whole that has been underemphasized—the influence of the Orient. (By the Modernist movement I specifically refer to the Anglo-American poetic revolution of the 1910s and 1920s.) Since I will focus my discussion narrowly on Pound and Williams in Part One and Part Two, I feel that I have an obligation to elaborate my broader premise about Orientalism and Modernism in this Prologue.

Critics like Zhang Longxi ("The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West" 118–19) have noted a strong Chinese influence on the West in the Age of Enlightenment. My own investigation of the early twentieth-century literary scene indicates a far more penetrating influence of the Far East. The first wave came in pictorial art around the turn of the century (see Julia Meech and Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Japonisme Comes to America: The Japanese Impact on the Graphic Arts 1876–1925* [1990]). For Americans of Pound's and Williams' generation, Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919),

Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), and the Oriental Wing of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts were the names associated with their initial awareness of the Orient. In England during the same period there were Arthur Morrison (1863–1945), Laurence Binyon (1869–1943), and the Sub-department of Oriental Prints and Drawings of the British Museum. Anglo-American interest in China and Japan was really sparked by a visual and intellectual encounter. Pound's friend John Gould Fletcher chronicled his response to a visit to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1914 that was characteristic of his contemporaries. "The hours I spent then in the Oriental Wing," he observed, "seeing the Sung or Kamakura masterpieces with new eyes, re-educated me in regard to the purposes of a pictorial art close in spirit to my own poetry, and to the function of the poetic artist in reshaping the world. They rededicated me to the vital instinct, and to the soul of nature" (*Life Is My Song* 185).

Note that what attracted Fletcher was the Self rather than Otherness. This sentiment was shared by Wallace Stevens, who observed to Elsie Moll in 1909 that Chinese landscape painting was inspired by impulses similar to his own (*Letters* 137), and by Pound, who wrote Dorothy Shakespeare in 1913 that he felt "older & wiser" beholding the Japanese prints of the British Museum (*ED* 177). Notice the dates—1909, 1913, and 1914—precisely the moments of the rise of the Modernist movement in poetry. And notice also what specifically in the Orient drew the English and American poets toward it—a prolonged and rich heritage of intensity, precision, objectivity, visual clarity, and complete harmony with nature—all key elements of Modernism itself. Little wonder that the early Imagists (T. E. Hulme, F. S. Flint, etc.), who began by imitating the French Symbolists, soon fell under the spell of the Orient. First it was the Japanese *haiku* and *tanka*, and then the more sophisticated verse of China represented by Tao Qian, Li Bo, Wang Wei, and Bo Juyi. It was not by accident, then, when Pound's *Cathay*, put together "from the notes of the late Ernest Fenollosa, and the decipherings of the professors Mori and Ariga" (*P* 130), came out in 1915, that almost all the major Modernists—Yeats, Ford, Lewis, Eliot, and Williams—applauded its freshness, elegance, and simplicity. Ford, in particular, remarked, "If these were original verses, then Pound was the greatest poet of the day" (qtd. in Stock

174), which should indicate that the English Modernist writer and critic had perceived affinities between his own and Far Eastern sensibilities.

Under the impact of Pound's *Cathay*, there arose in the late 1910s and early 1920s a vogue of imitating the Orient. Small magazines such as the *Chicago Poetry* and *The Little Review* competed around 1920 in bringing out Chinese poems as well as poems modeled on the Chinese and the Japanese. Amy Lowell, collaborating with Florence Ayscough on a Chinese poetry anthology at that moment, wrote, "Chinese poetry is much in people's minds at present . . . we must work hard and work quickly" (MacNair 76). Yeats, who worked closely with Pound between 1913 and 1916, was also caught up in this "Far East Fever," though his enthusiasm was principally for the Japanese *Noh* drama. Indeed, he claimed in 1916 that "I have found my first model—and in literature if we would not be parvenus we must have a model—in the 'Noh' stage of aristocratic Japan" (*Four Plays for Dancers* 86).

Many imitators of the Orient, like Stevens and Fletcher, later publicly acknowledged their debt to China and Japan. When asked about the Orient's impact on his Modernism, Stevens, for instance, candidly told his interviewer Ronald Lane Latimer, "Yes: I think that I have been influenced by Chinese and Japanese lyrics. But you ask whether I have ever 'tried deliberately to attain certain qualities.' That is quite possible" (*Letters* 291). Others, like Williams and Moore, chose to keep silent about their connections with the Far East. In Part Two, I will produce textual evidence in an attempt to show how Williams, inspired by Pound's *Cathay*, began a serious dialogue with the mid-Tang poet Bo Juyi, first through Giles and then through Arthur Waley, between 1916 and 1921, and how the encounter resulted in an adoption of Chinese notions and methods in his early Modernist *Sour Grapes* and *Spring and All*. As for the Moore-China connection, I have to find another occasion to deal with her "objective approach akin to the Chinese" (Fletcher, *Selected Essays* 79) as well as her numerous references to Chinese motifs. Among the poets of the Modernist camp, Eliot was perhaps one of the few who chose India over China and Japan for the Eastern spirit. But he also showed a high respect for China. Referring to his Harvard professor Irving Babbitt's "addiction to the philosophy of Confucius," he remarked: "I have the highest respect for the Chinese mind and for Chinese civilization; and I am willing to

believe that Chinese civilization at its highest has graces and excellences which may make Europe seem crude" (*After Strange Gods* 43).

Thus we see that like French Symbolism and Italian culture, Orientalism is a constitutive element of the Modernism of the 1910s and 1920s. In this study I will not try to downgrade the French influence in Modernism stressed by René Taupin (*L'influence du symbolisme français sur la poésie américaine (de 1910 à 1920)* [1929]) and Scott Hamilton (*Ezra Pound and the Symbolist Inheritance* [1992]), nor the Italian influence considered by Reed Way Dasenbrock (*Imitating the Italians: Wyatt, Spenser, Synge, Pound, Joyce* [1991]). Rather, I will argue for a multiculturalist model that recognizes the place of the Orient among all other influences in the Modernist movement. Modernism is a phenomenon of internationalism/multiculturalism. It would be gross insensibility not to perceive the Oriental contribution to its growth.

Though what I am attempting in this book is to assert the place of the Orient in the Modernist movement, I do not claim that the illustrations I am providing here are sufficient. Ideally a comprehensive work on Orientalism and Modernism would cover at least two or three more prominent Modernist figures. But tackling several other major Modernists—Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens, for instance—would create a huge new project and would eclipse the Pound-Williams dichotomy I intend to emphasize in this study. (True, there are other important dichotomies—Yeats-Pound, Pound-Eliot, Pound-H. D., Williams-Stevens, Williams-Moore—at work in the Modernist movement, but the Pound-Williams dichotomy appears to stand at the center.) Fortunately, the Orient's impact on Modernists like Yeats and Eliot has been studied elsewhere (for example, Shiro Naito, *Yeats and Zen: A Study of the Transformation of His Mask* [1984]; Masaru Sekine, *Yeats and the Nob: A Comparative Study* [1990]; P. S. Sri, *T. S. Eliot, Vedanta, and Buddhism* [1985]; Ashok Kumar Jha, *Oriental Influences in T. S. Eliot* [1988]; and Amar Kumar Singh, *T. S. Eliot and Indian Philosophy* [1990]). So, perhaps I can say with more legitimacy that my work, like those earlier treatments of individual Modernists and the Orient, is part of a mutual effort to reassess—beyond the scope of a single book—the role of the Orient in the Modernist movement as a whole.

It may be objected that in treating the legacy of China in Pound and

Williams I have largely ignored Chinese influences in the two Modernists' more important later works. But without suspending these later influences, I would not have been able to concentrate on the rich detail in support of my major thesis about the Chinese contribution to Pound's and Williams' rapid transition toward Modernism in the decade of 1913–23. Besides, previous critics, notably Hugh Kenner (*The Pound Era* [1971]), James Wilhelm (*The Later Cantos of Ezra Pound* [1977]), and John Nolde (*Blossoms from the East: The China Cantos of Ezra Pound* [1983]), have already read the Chinese influences particularly on Pound's epic and later lyrics. Summaries of these would add little to scholarship.

What follows, then, traces and elaborates not only Pound's and Williams' remarkable dialogues with the great Chinese poets—Qu Yuan, Li Bo, Wang Wei, Bo Juyi, and so on—between 1913 and 1923, but the role these encounters played in the two poets' perfection of a Modernist tradition. It explores Chinese influences such as the ethics of pictorial representation, the style of ellipsis, allusion, and juxtaposition, and the Taoist/Chan-Buddhist (Zen-Buddhist)¹ notion of nonbeing/being (formlessness/form) in Pound's pre-Fenollosan Chinese adaptations (1914), *Cathay* (1915), *Lustra* (1916), and *Early Cantos* (1915–19), and in Williams' *Sour Grapes* (1921) and *Spring and All* (1923).

Though my study relies heavily on historical data (rare and unpublished materials from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University as well as illustrations from the British Museum, the Freer Gallery of Art, and elsewhere), the real emphasis is on comparing literary works across cultures and periods. A recurring theme in my comparison is that instinctive affinity is the ground of all appreciation and influence. Pound's and Williams' backgrounds in American Transcendentalism, Hellenic culture, and European Modernism—close relatives to Orientalism—adequately prepared them for receiving the Far Eastern heritage in the crucial decade of 1913–23.

Zhaoming Qian January 1994



I

POUND'S

ROAD TO

CHINA

