

DECOLONIZING CATHAY

Teaching the Scandals of Translation

Through Angel Island Poetry

The marginality of translation reaches even to educational institutions, where it is manifested in a scandalous contradiction: on the one hand, an utter dependence on translated texts in curricula and research; on the other hand, a general tendency, in both teaching and publications, to elide the status of translated texts as translated, to treat them as texts originally written in the translating language.

LAWRENCE VENUTI

Emphasizing the importance of translation in a class on English language literature may seem a contradiction. Teaching undergraduates in prerequisite "Introduction to Literature" classes, I have found that the question of translation often takes students by surprise. The overarching assumption they bring to class, reinforced by an ongoing marginalization of translation in English department curricula throughout the US, is that they will encounter texts originally written in English. Exceptions are made for the Bible or Greek authors, of course, but even in these cases, students get the impression that translation itself is rarely something worth paying attention to. It is as if English departments throughout the US had taken as their motto Texas Governor Ma Fergeson's famous 1924 statement (reportedly made while wielding a Bible at the pulpit): "If the King's English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it's good enough for the children of Texas!" Yet, a host of scholars have argued throughout the last century that translation is central to understanding not only Homer and the Bible, but literature throughout the world—including literature composed originally in English.

Having taught students in mainland China (where linguistic diversity is sometimes devalued in favor of more hegemonic languages like English and Mandarin), Utah (where linguistic diversity carries its own set of politico-missionary ethics), and now UC Irvine (where sometimes more than half of my students grow up with English as a second language), I believe that it is my responsibility to equip students with the critical skills they need to navigate their way through a media-saturated world increasingly marked by geopolitical time/space compression—and that the study of translation is crucial to this enterprise. Discussing how to teach "translation" is simply a more focused way of asking how to teach literature itself. How, then, can instructors use translation in the classroom to convey to students the inherent richness and slipperiness of language and meaning, stretching their minds across the traditional nation-based boundaries that have dictated English department curricula in the past?

R. JOHN
WILLIAMS

1 Mary Louise Pratt uses the phrase "contact zone" to refer to "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power." The value in teaching the arts of the "contact zone," Pratt argues, is that it has the potential to turn the classroom itself into a kind of contact zone, where bilingualism, transculturation, and mediation replace visions of the classroom or curriculum as a "homogeneous community" or a "horizontal alliance" (16). Reflecting on one of her own experiences in teaching the "contact zones" in American literature, Pratt recalls "The very nature of the course put ideas and identities on the line. All the students in the class had the experience, for example, of hearing their culture discussed and objectified in ways that horrified them; all the students saw their roots traced back to legacies of both glory and shame ... No one was excluded, and no one was safe" (16-17).

2 For more on the question of canon formation and cultural capital, see Guillory (3-84).

3 See "Carved on the Walls" (2001-2009).

As with any curriculum, deciding *what* to teach is every bit as important as *how* one goes about teaching. Choosing English translations of non-English-language texts, and then foregrounding the nuances of those acts of translation, is one obvious way of drawing attention to these issues, although this may be more difficult than it sounds. Departmental policies will sometimes limit the number of texts-in-translation that can be used in a given course, and if neither the instructor nor the students have any familiarity with the original language, the depths of an act of translation will sometimes go unexplored. Furthermore, if the chosen text provides *only* the English translation, without presenting the original language beside it, much of the potential defamiliarization can be lost on students.

Consider, for example, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, which seems to demonstrate the potential value of teaching American literature as a tangled mesh of multivocal "translations," while often failing to provide an adequate context for that teaching. Emerging from the Canon Wars of the 1980s and 1990s, the *Heath* is an ambitious attempt to canonize a more comparative and multilingual vision of American literary culture, exuding a heterogeneity that seems to dramatize perfectly what Mary Louise Pratt has called the "arts of the contact zone."¹ In preparing the anthology, editor Paul Lauter called for "a comparative model for the study of American literature" which would allow readers to "discard the notion that all literatures produced in this country must be viewed through the critical lens shaped to examine mainstream—that is, largely white and male—culture" (9). The final product is a massive and stunning volume that foregrounds the multiple uses of literary culture. As Lauter explains, "in certain periods art may help unify and stir a people; in others it may express sustaining beliefs; in still others it may help arouse the awareness of those outside a group; in yet others it may come to be a mode primarily of individual expression or self actualization" (20). In realizing this more complex image of American literary history, Lauter's project can be understood as part of what John Carlos Rowe has called the "New American Studies," an interdisciplinary collective of theories and approaches which attempt to "transcend successfully the monolingual and monocultural myth of 'America' that is both a political and an intellectual anachronism" (4).

As we perused the *Heath* in my classes, many of the students have come to understand it as a re-examination of the cultural capital invested in the production of American literature.² Some students have noticed, for example, that the Chinese immigrants imprisoned at Angel Island between 1910 and 1940 could hardly have supposed that the poems of desperation and despair that they carved into the walls of their detention center would one day be anthologized in one of the most important collections of American literature.³ Seeing these poems in the same anthology as, say, the work of Yellow Peril alarmist Jack London—the highest paid writer in America at the time the Chinese immigrant poets were imprisoned at Angel Island—allows students to begin exploring the sociological depth of a comparative literary analysis. If, for example, texts by both Jack London and Angel Island

detainees seem concerned with questions of survival and human suffering, how do the (non)circulatory conditions of their composition differ? Are these simply differences in genre, or larger material circumstances? How does our understanding of Jack London's quasi-socialist "naturalism" change when we learn what he thought of Asians?⁴ Although sometimes shocked by the contrasts that emerge in these literary and historical discussions, students generally enjoy delving into the complexities of a transnational "contact zone."

However, in attempting to use the *Heath* as a means of exploring translated multilingual American literature, it is surprising how little this anthology (like so many others) does to foreground these issues. Indeed, even as a greater emphasis seems to be placed on multilingual American literature, translation continues to be a pedagogical blind spot in the *Heath* and in post-Canon-War discussions of American literary culture more generally. If recent scholarship and anthologies have been able to demonstrate that American literature is a much more multilingual phenomenon than previously thought—one thinks of Werner Sollors' *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* (2000), which includes dozens of non-English language works alongside their English translations—they sometimes do so at the expense of glossing over the extremely complex and messy process of translation. In missing this elegant mess, we lose an invaluable teaching opportunity. In fact, a certain irony emerges when professors of English (embracing the poststructuralist premise of an irreducible plurality of meaning) teach translations as though they were univocal transmissions into English from some fixed linguistic system. As Lawrence Venuti has argued,

Current pedagogy implicitly conceives of translation as communication unaffected by the language that makes it possible, or in Derrida's (translator's) words, "governed by the classical model of transportable vocality or of formalizable polysemia"...To think of translation as "dissemination," however, as the release of different meanings owing to the substitution of different language, raises a political problem: it questions the distribution of power in the classroom by exposing the linguistic and cultural conditions that complicate the instructor's interpretation. (92)

Venuti suggests that one of the most interesting ways to foreground these issues is to point to the "remainder" in a work of translation. He defines the "remainder" (a term he borrows from J. Lecerle's *The Violence of Language*) as a series of variables in a given translation that "do not merely exceed any communicative act, but frustrate any effort to formulate systematic rules" (10). The "remainder" in an act of translation necessarily evidences the historical and linguistic contingencies that get lost in transmission. Drawing attention to that remainder, then, "subverts the major form by revealing it to be socially and historically situated, by staging [in Lecerle's terms] 'the return within language of the contradictions and struggles that make up the social' and by containing as well 'the anticipation of future ones'" (10). In

⁴ Several biographers have noted that London's socialist tendencies did not extend to the Japanese. Once, at a meeting of the Oakland chapter of the Socialist Party, London (recently returned from Korea) "cursed the entire yellow race in the most outrageous terms." When another comrade attempted to point out that there were exploited proletariat even in Japan, and that Marx's plea had been "Workers of all countries, unite!" London is reported to have stood up, pounding his fist on the table, and shouting: "What the devil! I am first of all a white man and only then a socialist!" (Kershaw 143).

other words, this concept of the “remainder,” which always exists in the wake of any act of translation, demands a certain social and historical thinking for readers of works in translation. It forces us “to confront the issue of historical difference in the changing reception of a foreign text” (46). Pointing to the remainder in translation “requires close attention to the formal or expressive properties of literature, while demonstrating that these properties are always historically situated, laden with the values of the cultural constituencies by and for which the translation was produced” (95).

How, then, can we help our students pinpoint the inherent “remainder” in translation or even language itself? In attempting to answer that question, I have found it useful to have a sense of the multilingual abilities my students bring to the classroom. A quick survey of my students’ “foreign” language abilities often yields surprising results. As the MLA Language Map shows, while there are currently 215,423,557 speakers of English in the US, 46,951,595 people actually speak another language besides English (which, incidentally, raises serious questions about whether or not it is even appropriate—at least for large parts of the US—to characterize these languages as “foreign”). In my own classes at UC Irvine, it is not unusual for more than fifty percent of the class to have knowledge of at least one non-English language. At the local community college in Irvine that number will sometimes reach seventy-five percent. To overlook this enormous resource in a class designed to instruct students on the complexities of language and literature would be a travesty. Indeed, I have often found that it is easier for these multilingual students to draw out the intricacies of a given “remainder” than it is for their sometimes monolingual professors.

Returning to my example of the Angel Island poetry, my students have noticed how odd it is that the original Chinese characters do not appear with the English translations in the *Heath Anthology*. My own language training in Chinese has conditioned me to look for the “original” in cases like this, but my Chinese-speaking students might have led me to ask similar questions even if I did not speak the language. Imagine, for example, monolingual English professors teaching a novel by García Márquez, and taking advantage of the Spanish-language abilities of their students to explore the challenges and rewards of translating his novels from the original language. And yet, how often does such a thing happen?⁵ In the case of the Angel Island poems, including only the English translations on the page (the “English Only” if you will) has the effect of glossing over the poems’ “bilingual, cross-cultural, transnational complexity” (Shan 379). By contrast, the bilingual edition, *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*, compiled by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, conveys a more complex picture of the particular contact zone represented in the poems. In this volume, the English translations are placed alongside their Chinese originals, and historical summaries of the detention center are included with pictures and testimonies of some of the original detainees.

When I present these politically-charged texts to my students, I have

⁵ The general assumption in teaching García Márquez to American students is that doing so with the English translation is a “pedagogical necessity.” See Macune (499).

noticed that one of the problematic aspects of the *Island* collection is that in emphasizing the historical specificities of the immigrant experience as reflected in the poems, these literary texts are read as exclusively historical documents. Consequently, students focus on the experiences endured by the imprisoned immigrants, and often overlook the literary qualities. The poems themselves become much less the object of study, while the “paratextual” elements of the poems’ packaging (photographs, testimonials, etc.) become the primary focus of the students’ attention.⁶ Stanley Fish’s essay, “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One,” is useful in helping students understand how certain *a priori* institutional communities determine the type of “lenses” they bring to differently packaged (whether by publishers or classroom syllabi) Angel Island poems. Fish’s essay describes a similar classroom experience in which students are led to confuse a simple document with a work of poetry:

As soon as my students were aware that it was poetry they were seeing, they began to look with poetry-seeing eyes, that is, with eyes that saw everything in relation to the properties they knew poems to possess. They knew, for example (because they were told by their teachers), that poems are (or are supposed to be) more densely and intricately organized than ordinary communications; and that knowledge translated itself into a willingness—one might even say a determination—to see connections between one word and another and between every word and the poem’s central insight. Moreover, the assumption that there is a central insight is itself poetry—specific, and presided over its own realization. (326)

Fish argues that in order to see poetry, one has to bring one’s “poetry-seeing eyes” to the text. The same could be said of historical documents requiring “historiography eyes,” or translations requiring “translation eyes,” but the point is that in order for the text to be meaningful at all it needs “lens-prepared” readers, and the curricular presentation and paratextual packaging of a text are crucial to that preparation.

It is thus understandable that students reading the *Island* collection, rather than the *Heath Anthology*, are more likely to see the Angel Island poems as historical documents. Scholars in Asian American Studies were initially resistant to the notion that their literary voices represented some non-English “other” form of expression. Emphasizing Asian American mastery of English in many ways had the effect of legitimating Asian American Studies as an academic discipline in the late 1970s and 1980s. Works by Sui Sin Far, Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, Frank Chin, and others (all in English) typically received greater attention in Asian American literary history than did non-English language works.⁷ Now that Angel Island poetry has achieved quasi-canonical status, it is read primarily in an English-only environment, where its presence has the political effect of destabilizing the American literary canon, but where there are very few scholars equipped to understand it in the original language.

Furthermore, when the Angel Island poems are taught at all, the

⁶ Here I am using Genette’s notion of the “paratext” which consists of the various materials of a book other than the actual text included in the book. (Genette 261).

⁷ The same argument could be made for literature by US Latina/os by comparing the massive popularity of English-language works like Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me Ultima* and Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* to the relative obscurity of Tomas Rivera’s *Y No Se Trago La Tierra*. Typically, African American literature has not had to deal with the same language issues in translation, which is perhaps why Richard Wright, when reporting on the Pan-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, characterized the use of English as a wonderfully universalizing and coalition-building gesture, overlooking the obvious cultural imperialism at work in such a move. See Wright (199). Wright’s position is very similar to Chinua Achebe’s in the debates between Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o on the relative value of English for African literary production. See Ngũgĩ (1–32). But if African Americans have not had to grapple with the question of foreign language and translation, they have had to deal with a form of what Robert Phillipson calls “Linguicism” in the area of accent discrimination. See Phillipson (55).

usual classroom procedure is to briefly acknowledge translation as a difficult balancing act, and then promptly ignore it. For example, the editors of the *Island* volume explain,

The act of interpretation itself implies creation and the reader should bear in mind that the process of poetic translation must involve a certain compromise. While these poems express the thoughts of the individuals who wrote them, they are not reiterations of their original literal forms. The form is oftentimes compromised in order to retain the content, which we for historic reasons feel is our first priority. (31)

This statement suggests that, for obvious “historic” reasons, the literary “form” of the poems has been sacrificed. Translation is a “compromise” based on certain pedagogical priorities, and there seems little reason to question the value of those priorities. By questioning this compromise, however, I am not suggesting that instructors should cease to articulate the historical conditions under which these poems were produced. To view the Angel Island poems as mere manifestations of “form” without historicizing the same would be to make a similar mistake in the opposite direction.⁸ Wolfgang Iser has identified these opposing pedagogical impulses as the two dominant trends that have emerged from “the focus on literature as evidence” (x). On the one hand there is “the attempt to grasp what is literary about it,” while on the other, the tendency to a “view of it as a representation of society” (x). Either approach, however, creates certain analytical problems: “first, the attempt to pinpoint its literariness hypostatizes it, albeit in the effort to salvage some of its...importance; and second, the attempt to conceive it as a means of promoting social enlightenment [or justice] reduces it to the status of a document” (x). If it is fair to characterize the reception of the Angel Island poems in academia as embodying these opposing trends, then turning students’ attention to the process of translation provides a means of bridging this heuristic gap.

When introducing Angel Island poetry in my classes, I explain that the translator’s note at the beginning of *Islands* has been examined at length in the larger academic discourse of translating Chinese poetry into English. One concrete way of illustrating the extensive discourse on translation is to bring a stack of books on the topic to class. It is also useful to assign different articles on the question of translation to small groups of students, asking them to report the next day on their reading. The *Translation Studies Reader*, for example, offers short excerpts of some of the major theoretical treatises on translation, from small and dense essays like Walter Benjamin’s materialist classic “The Task of the Translator” to more postcolonial approaches such as Annie Brisset’s “The Search for a Native Language: Translation and Cultural Identity.”

Prepared with “translation eyes” in this way, students begin to see that the separation of the Angel Island poems from this discourse is, if not unusual, at least potentially reductive. In fact, when students begin looking for translation—highlighting its systems, drawing out its dangers and

⁸ This would be the New Critical tendency to admit no extra-textual information into the construction of meaning, even if multiple meanings emerge from the formal text alone. For a classic example of the New Critical approach, see Brooks.

rewards—they necessarily expose Venuti's sense of the "remainder." They start wondering why translation is not the first topic they encounter in their literature classes. The questions go from simple, heuristic inquiries like "what does this text mean?" to more complicated theoretical questions such as "what are the institutional parameters that influence our reception of this text?" We begin to explore in classroom discussion how disciplinary boundaries can sometimes inhibit comparative analyses. We notice, for example, that scholars of Asian American Studies are concerned with historical issues, while scholars in English or Chinese poetry tend to focus on the literary qualities of the texts in question. We see how translation gets lost in the boundaries of these academic departments.

At this point, I provide two additional elements to create a clearer and more engaging sense of the process of translation. The first is to familiarize my students with important literary developments in translation over the last century, and the second is to engage them in the process of translation itself. In what follows, I summarize some of the necessary background information that I provide for my students when examining this process, and then I describe an activity I have used in the classroom in which students experience some of the joys and challenges of translating for themselves.

What students must understand before examining the Angel Island poems as translations is that, since the early twentieth century, any discussion of translating Chinese poetry has, for better or for worse, necessarily involved the "Imagist" innovations of Ezra Pound and his "translations" from the Chinese. The discourse on "Pound and China" is, of course, much too large to convey to students in a short classroom unit, but the popular "Voices and Visions" video series includes a succinct and informative introduction to Pound and, specifically, his translations from the Chinese and their effect on Anglo-American modernism. This episode even includes footage of Pound in the late 1960s showing off his Chinese calligraphy for a BBC documentary.

As my students learn, Pound was fascinated by what he thought was the inherently pictographic and ideographic nature of the Chinese writing system, and so set out to reinvigorate Anglo-American poetry by turning to the example of Chinese poetry. Pound published his first volume of "translations" as *Cathay* in 1915, even though he did not know Chinese, referring instead to the notebooks of the late nineteenth-century scholar Ernest Fenollosa to approximate their content. Pound's translations profoundly influenced American poetry and American images of "the" Chinese poem.⁹ To demonstrate for my class the degree of Pound's influence, I assign the first chapter of Wai-lim Yip's 1997 introduction to *Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Major Modes and Genres*, in which he argues,

The syntactical innovations initiated by Pound (aided by his discovery of the Chinese character as a medium for poetry)...suddenly open up a new perceptual-expressive possibility in English,

⁹ The discourse on Pound and China is massive, and would take a much longer article to summarize adequately. Some of the most important interventions that have recently emerged in the field, include Hayot's *Chinese Dreams*, Yao's *Translation and the Languages of Modernism*, Kern's *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem*; See also the essays in Qian's *Ezra Pound & China*. There are some exceptions to this imagist-centric rule, primarily among Sinologists like Stephen Owen; see, for example, his *Anthology of Chinese Literature*.

a new ambience whereby I can stage Chinese poetry according to its original operative dynamics rather than tailoring it to fit the Western procrustean bed. (xiv)

Like other scholars who have attempted to locate the inherent “Chineseness” in Pound’s translations, Yip seems convinced that Pound’s “innovations” make it possible to stage Chinese poetry according to its “original operative dynamics.”¹⁰ Without Ezra Pound, in other words, Chinese poetry has no real “voice” in English.

But what is it about Pound’s translations that Yip sees as inherently “Chinese”? In Yip’s reading, the most valuable tool in Ezra Pound’s translation (and the most important contribution made by his fascination with ideography) is itself a non-phonetic marker, the colon [:]. The genius in “Metro” is Pound’s refusal to reduce the poem’s visual effect by using a word such as “like”:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd :

Petals on a wet, black bough.¹¹

Many of my students majoring in English will have already been familiar with this poem, though very few of them will have seen it in its original layout as it is reproduced here. When analyzing this poem in class, with its fulcrum-like colon jutting out to the right like two punctured holes on the page, many students pick up on something Yip has already argued in this anthology: “Taking away the word ‘like’ disrupts the syntax, giving prominence and independence to the two visual elements, letting them coexist, one interdefining the other” (20). As early as 1969 Yip was arguing that this syntactical move brings us closer to the technical advantages of film, as well as the “original” Chinese poem (which is itself a kind of cinematic textuality). In *Ezra Pound’s Cathay*, Yip explains,

This simultaneous presence of two objects, like the juxtaposition of two separate [cinematic] shots, resembles [in Eisenstein’s words] “not so much a simple sum of one shot plus another shot-as it does a *creation*. It resembles a creation-rather than a sum of its parts—from the circumstance that in every such juxtaposition *the result is qualitatively* distinguishable from each component element viewed separately.”¹²

Thus, Yip’s anthology makes wide use of the colon: “Spring groves: flowers, such charm” (126); “Open door: white water” (127); “Forests weave: sun’s countenance torn” (160), “Slender rays: a chord barely seen,” (193), “Sun fades: a traveler’s sorrow freshens” (231). In fact, most Chinese poetry through the ages ends up looking very much like Poundian Imagism in Yip’s anthology, a literal colon-ization of Chinese poetry. As Yip argues (with a colon, of course),

The fact is: these images, often coexisting in spatial relationships, form an atmosphere or environment, an ambience, in which the

10 On the inherent “Chineseness” in Pound’s translations, Qian’s *Orientalism and Modernism*.

11 The layout here follows the original published version of the poem in *Poetry* (Chicago) in 1913, also reprinted in Pound’s *Personae* (251). Yip also reproduces this original layout, noting that it “brings out Pound’s obsession with visual order and the importance of the perceiving act” (21).

12 See Yip (22–3; emphases in the original). The passage quoted above is actually slightly revised, according to Yip’s changes in the introduction to *Chinese Poetry* (14–15). Eric Hayot has made the excellent observation that Yip’s Ezra Pound is something like a “Tiresias, whose blindness produces a heightened ability to ‘see’ into the unknown and there discern the truth of things” (35). It is also interesting to note that Yip’s decision of which Chinese poems to include in his anthology of “major modes and genres” was at least in part determined by the collection of poems translated by Pound in *Cathay*. In *Ezra Pound’s Cathay*, Yip retranslates from the Chinese all of the *Cathay* poems, all of which later end up in his anthology.

reader may move and be directly present, poised for a moment before being imbued with the atmosphere that evokes (*but does not state*) an aura of feeling... a situation in which he may participate in completing the aesthetic experience of an intense moment, the primary form of which the poet has arrested in concrete data. (6; emphasis in the original)

It is not difficult to see that Yip is loyal to Pound's imagist tendencies (the "arresting" of "concrete data," for example), and the image of Chinese poetry that emerges tends to reflect that influence.

But Yip is hardly alone. Although translators like Tony Barnstone have argued that Yip's frequent use of colons and dashes in his translation makes some of the poems sound "too choppy," Barnstone's own translations reveal an unambiguous debt to Pound's imagism (69). Indeed, it is difficult today to find contemporary editions of Chinese poetry whose translators do not either directly invoke Pound's legacy in a discussion of their methods of translation, or quietly adopt his syntactical methods.¹³ As Michelle Yeh has argued, "Although it is well known that Pound's translation is a particularly free, often ingenious rendition of the Chinese... what neither he nor Eliot could have foreseen was how powerful and lasting this translation would be in shaping poets' and translators' perceptions of Chinese poetry" (139). Robert Kern similarly argues: "to the extent that any translation deviates from [Pound's] conventions, it runs the risk of violating our sense of what Chinese poetry has in fact come to be" (181). There are even moments in *Cathay* where Pound himself seems to be laying the groundwork for future readings of both modernism and Chinese poetry. As Eric Hayot has argued in a reading of Pound's sole annotation in *Cathay* (a brief note included at the end of the "Jewel Stairs' Grievance" poem), the double translation that occurs as a result of the juxtaposition of the poem and its annotation creates an association of "Imagism with a Chinese mind-set, producing the 'original' for Imagism *avant la lettre*: what Imagism is in 1915, Chinese poetry seems to have been all along" (25).

Having established Pound's presence in twentieth-century discussions of translating Chinese poetry into English, I ask my students why they think this discourse failed to have any impact on the translation of the Angel Island poems. We notice, for example, that the translators of the Angel Island poems provide a series of elaborate footnotes (something Pound would have deplored), to help familiarize readers with the more obscure references in the "classical" style exhibited by most of the Angel Island poems, many of which are similar, in form, to those Pound was translating in 1915 (five-character, eight-line rhyming poems; seven-character, four-line regulated verse, etc.). However, while the translators of the Angel Island poetry, like Pound, make no attempt to approximate the rhymed and tonal patterns exhibited in the poems, they have no qualms about inserting personal pronouns, and using words such as "like" in their English translations when the Chinese text seems to call for it:

13 For examples of translators who directly cite Pound or Imagism, see Yeh (li) and Liu (1, 18, 123). Barnstone's *Out of the Howling Storm* (1-39). For examples of translators who seem to use Pound's methods, see Watson's *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, Red Pine's *Poems of the Masters*, and Chaves' *The Columbia Book of Later Chinese Poetry*, Sun's *Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poetry and Prose*, and Seaton and Malony's *A Drifting Boat: An Anthology of Chinese Zen Poetry*.

一盞殘燈伴此身
却似梨花經已落
可憐零落舊春時

A flickering lamp keeps this body company.
I am *like* pear blossoms which have already fallen.
Pity the bare branches during the late spring. (156; emphasis added)

A careful reading of the Angel Island poems in Chinese reveals that some of the anonymous poets had little or no actual training in Chinese poetry and literature, so that the rhythms are sometimes irregular, the constructions loose, and the imagery occasionally forced. But this looseness in rhythm only means that these particular Chinese-language poems more closely resemble the free-verse forms of Pound's translations than did the actual Chinese poems he was reading. So why, I ask my students, do Lai, Lim, and Yung decide not to translate the Angel Island poems according to the Imagistic dictates of Pound's legacy? What would an imagistic, Poundian version of the Angel Island poems have looked like? How would translations of this kind change not only our impression of Angel Island poetry, but also our understanding of Pound's modernism?¹⁴

As my students respond to these questions, they interrogate the value of categorizing poetry according to strict literary canons of form. They begin to see Lauter's argument that art may sometimes help to "unify and stir a people," while at other times it serves as "primarily of individual expression or self actualization" (20)—and that these different purposes of art are sometimes intertwined through intercultural modes of displacement. Misreading itself starts to look like a form of aesthetic production.

Asking students to examine these questions in their analyses of the Angel Island poems allows them to uncover an interesting historical irony in American modernism. At the precise moment that Pound and other modernists were professing an intense desire to access the exotic textual wisdom of the East, they were closing their eyes to the literal incarceration and forced exclusion of Chinese bodies. When viewed through the lens of the Angel Island "contact zone," Ezra Pound's poetry seems to acquire new meaning. Consider, for example, the exilic despair described in one of Pound's "translations":

Song of the Bowmen of Shu

Here we are, picking the first fern-shoots
And saying: When shall we get back to our country?
Here we are because we have the Ken-nin for our foemen,
We have no comfort because of these Mongols.
We grub the fern-shoots,
When anyone says 'Return', the others are full of sorrow.

¹⁴ It at least makes good "intertextual" sense to associate Pound's translations with the poems on Angel Island. Many of the poems Pound was translating were held in the memories of Angel Island detainees, and were often referenced in their own poetry. In one Angel Island poem, for example, we find the phrase, 堅心出外覓陶公 ["I resolved to go and seek Taogong"]. Taogong was also known in Chinese as Fan Li, a wealthy merchant in the fifth century whose name eventually came to represent wealth itself. The "Han-rei" in Pound's "Poem by the Bridge at Ten-Shin" (a famous poem by Li Po) is actually a Fenollosian transliteration of Fan Li. See Pound's *Translations* (193). There are also multiple references to Confucius, various Chinese legends and mythologies, and, as I mentioned above, the poems' original formal structures are very much in the tradition of those translated by Pound in *Cathay*.

Sorrowful minds, sorrow is strong, we are hungry and thirsty.
 Our defense is not yet made sure, no one can let his friend return.
 We grub the old fern-stalks.
 We say: Will we be let to go back in October?
 There is no ease in royal affairs, we have no comfort.
 Our sorrow is bitter, but we would not return to our country.¹⁵

Of course, the irony here is that the narrative voice in Pound's translation seems to resonate with the Angel Island experience, even though contemporary Chinese immigrants were clearly excluded from the burgeoning movements in those other Canon Wars in Anglo-American modernism. The need to reinvigorate the American poem thus involved a turn toward the linguistic and cultural "other," but did so without regard for the contemporary "other" immediately present. The editors of the *Heath Anthology* seem to replicate this fragmentation, placing the Angel Island poems in a section entitled, "Issues and Visions in Modern America," while Ezra Pound's translations in the same anthology are listed under the section "Alienation and Literary Experimentation."

What I hope to convey to my students is that translation allows us to read these aspects of American modernism together. If the discourse of Ezra Pound and China can help illuminate some of the more literary qualities (and translation difficulties) of the Angel Island poems, those same poems provide an equally valuable way of viewing Ezra Pound's abortive multiculturalism. Training students to see literature with "translation eyes" enables this more complex perspective because, as Lawrence Venuti has explained, translations and translation theories always rest on "particular assumptions about language use, even if they are no more than fragmentary hypotheses that remain implicit or unacknowledged."¹⁶ When students are able to focus on not only the linguistic or generic assumptions that inform a given interpretive mode, but also the disciplinary and institutional parameters that influence those interpretations, they begin to think in more complex—one might even say responsible (or response-able)—ways.

Such questions naturally lead us to other historical ironies. Although his family had employed the help of a Chinese male servant during Pound's youth in Hailey, Idaho, the closest that Pound comes to addressing the problems of America's immigration laws are times when he is more preoccupied with his own transnational status than the plight of Asian laborers.¹⁷ In a 1927 essay published in *The Nation*, for example, Pound recalled an earlier trip he made from France to London. Late in 1918, near the end of WWI, the US Congress (at the urging of President Wilson) had adopted a Passport Control Act, which stated that "no American citizen should leave the United States without a passport or a permit from the Department of State, and no foreign national should enter the United States without a passport properly visaed by an American consul or other accredited representative abroad." Ostensibly

¹⁵ See Pound's *Translations* (189). Pound had intended the translation to reflect the anxieties of the First World War. Noel Stock reports that in December 1914 Pound sent a typescript copy of this and some other of the *Cathay* poems to Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, a young French sculptor who at the time was fighting in the trenches. On December 18, Gaudier wrote to Pound that "The poems depict our situation in a wonderful way" (171-172). For a treatment of this and other aspects of Pound's translations, see my "The Modernist Scandal: Ezra Pound's Translations of 'The Chinese Poem,'" forthcoming in *Paideuma: Studies in American and British Modernist Poetry*.

¹⁶ See Venuti's *Translation Studies Reader* (5).

¹⁷ See Tytell (14).

limited to travel to and from the US, many officials began demanding tighter controls on all American travel. It was at the American consulate in Paris that Pound first encountered the new system. He wrote:

There the vice-assistant-second-sub categorically forbade me to return to my home in London. I said: "I live there," and suggested that he ask the assistant-first-vice or some one higher up concerning the regulations. He disappeared behind a partition, and returned with a request that I "get a letter" from my employer, evidently knowing no strata of life save one where *everyone* has an employer. It was next suggested that I find some sort of "reference" for myself. Every American I had known in Paris before the war had left. I knew no one save the Ambassador whom I had met two days before. I thought vaguely that he might have other things to do—at that particular time—than look after passports. However, I stepped into a taxi and drove round to the embassy. The embassy dealt with the consulate, and I proceeded about my lawful occasions. That was 1919, and Europe was, confessedly, in a mess, and errors might be exceptions. But what in heaven's name has that temporary confusion to do with 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927? What has it to do with the unending boredom of waiting an hour, a half-hour, three hours, in countless bureaus, for countless useless visas, identities, folderols? (600-01).

My students are usually scandalized by this comparison, and I point out that it may not be fair to compare Pound's grumpiness about the bureaucracy of passport trouble with the extreme violence visited on Asian Americans at Angel Island. But students recognize that there are important consequences that emerge in this new perspective. They ask: isn't Pound presenting his own work as *the* locus for East/West cultural interaction? Isn't his inattention to the actual location of material contact between the US and China at this precise moment rather insensitive?¹⁸ This heightened sense of the scandalous "remainder" surrenders nothing in terms of normal interpretive standards. If these texts begin to take on "new meaning," it isn't because the students are simply playing or "riffing" on the literary forms presented (although, focused "play" can certainly be a good thing); rather, the students have begun to see the more complex historical matrix of a text's formal production. The students' questions demonstrate that they have begun to explore the depths of literature as a product of human interaction—as a contact zone.

I have also found that engaging students in the process of translation is a useful way of reinforcing this sense of the "remainder" in translation. This exercise allows them to see how they too bring certain assumptions to interpretation and translation. First, I provide the class with a small stanza of a Chinese poem, such as Meng Hao-jan's classic "宿建德江" ("Stayover at Chien-teh River"), written around 700 A.D. (I have also used Angel Island poems, to different effect, as I will explain below). Initially, I show them only the Chinese character version, in this case:

18 Knowing that the young "master" of the Pound's house was attended to by a Chinese servant certainly casts some irony on Hugh Kenner's fawning praise: "the opportunity to invent Chinese Poetry for our time fell not to some random modernist but to a *master*" (198). E.D. Hirsch would no doubt bristle at the notion that Pound should have somehow been aware of Angel Island. In his widely popular exercise in canon making, *Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch provides, near the back of the book, a long list of terms that every good "American" should know. Ellis Island is on the list, but Angel Island is not.

移舟泊烟渚

日暮客愁新

野旷天低树

江清月近人

After reading the poem aloud in Chinese, I give my students a handout containing a word-for-word translation of the Chinese original (which is problematic, but more-or-less approximates the kind of information Pound was working with in his translations). Wai Lim Yip's word-for-word summary of the same poem is useful here:

1. move / boat / moor / smoke
2. sun / dusk / traveler / grief / new
3. wilderness / far-reaching / sky / low(er) / tree
4. river / clear / moon / near(s) / man¹⁹

19 Chinese Poetry (231).

I then give my students the following instructions:

Try to picture in your mind what is happening in the poem. Notice that there is no grammar, punctuation, or even tense in the original. Next, try to create your own English "translation" of the poem. You may be as literal as you like, or take as many liberties with the poem as you want to. The only requirement is that you make your translation unique, while still maintaining some loyalty to the original. Keep in mind that decisions about line spacing, grammar, verb tense, etc., are entirely up to you. You can choose to make the poem rhyme or not.

Interestingly, students take many more liberties, and have much more fun, "translating" a classical Chinese poem than they do the Angel Island poems. When students are aware of the racist context in which a poem was written, they adopt a much more serious tone and often draw on their own experiences to reflect that seriousness. As a result, the class recognizes both the "impossibility" and the potentially generative power of translation as a means of creating new poetry. Students begin to understand the challenges, rewards, and pitfalls of translating poetry from one language to another. They are fascinated by the creative opportunities and the responsibilities inherent in translation: can I use another word besides "boat"? Could I set this in modern times? What about this word "man"? Does that mean mankind, or could I say "woman"? Can I turn the poem into prose? Does it matter if the poem is in the first person? What is the original Chinese rhythm? My goal is to enable my students to understand how translation forces readers to consider that literary forms, cultural assumptions, and actual human bodies are sometimes displaced or ignored in the representation of other cultures.

In the fall of 2003, after delving into this unit on Angel Island translations, one student brought a *New York Times* article to class titled "Fear of Sabotage by Mistranslation at Guantánamo." She was fascinated by the

degree to which our discussion of the detention center at Angel Island and this question in Guantánamo seemed to overlap. It was a dramatic reminder that translation is never a simple process of linguistic misfiring or textual equivalence. If American interpreters are being questioned about “inaccurately translating interrogators’ questions and prisoners’ answers,” then the questions we ask about Pound and Angel Island have contemporary relevance. Could translation itself be construed as an act of espionage? Under what institutional conditions are the “others” we encounter translated for us? I brought Venuti’s text to class the next day, focusing particularly on his statement that: “The authority of any institution that relies on translations is susceptible to scandal because their somewhat unpredictable effects exceed the institutional controls that normally regulate textual interpretation” (68). Teachers of American literature or history have a special obligation to draw attention to these “scandals” of translation, not only because they expose our underlying assumptions about language, but also because they provide students with the critical skills they need to navigate their way through the semantic collage that mediates our everyday life. To teach the scandals of translation, then, is to teach the construction of reality.

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