

Pound came to read ernest fenollosa english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



He received Fenollosa's notes and papers from his widow whom he had met in London at the home of a mutual friend, the Indian poetess Sarojini Naidu, in 1913. Fenollosa had been working on the Japanese Noh plays and on his essay on The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry, when he died in 1908. Pound wrote to Harriet Monroe: " I think you will agree with me that this Japanese find is about the best bit of luck we've had since the starting of the magazine".²⁴ He also wrote to Felix E. Schelling (June 1915) to say that: " Fenollosa has left a most enlightened essay on the written character (a whole basis of aesthetic in reality), but the adamantine stupidity of all magazine editors delays its appearance".²⁵ A year later, he told another correspondent that Fenollosa's " big essay on verbs is a very good theory for poets to go by, though Heaven knows when I shall get it printed".²⁶ And writing to John Quinn, he referred to the essay as one of the most important essays of the time, for Fenollosa saw and anticipated a good deal of what has happened in art, painting and poetry, during the last ten years, and his essay is basic for all aesthetics. After making some unsuccessful efforts to get it out, Pound eventually published it in The Little Review. It appeared in four parts in the September, October, November and December issues, in 1919. A year later it was included in Instigations (1920). In his introductory note, Pound explains why he thought the essay was something more than a bare philological discussion; it was essentially a study of the fundamentals of all aesthetics. Some of the qualities Pound attributed to Fenollosa he had already discovered and embodied in his own poetry and poetics. Fenollosa's mind, he considers, was constantly filled with parallels and comparisons between eastern and western art. To him the exotic was

always a means of fructification. He looked to an American renaissance. The vitality of his outlook can be judged from the fact that although this essay was written some time before his death in 1908 I have not had to change the allusions to western conditions. The later movements in art have corroborated his theories. 27In reading Fenollosa's essay, one gets the impression that, in some respects, the subject might have well been Pound's poetry and poetics as much as Chinese poetry, since there are so many comparisons and parallels between what Fenollosa says about Chinese poetry and what Pound himself says about poetry in general. For instance, Fenollosa's description of the Chinese as idealists, and experimenters in the making of great principles, the same may be said of Pound's poetic principles and practice and the ideal he sought to realize in his poetry. And when Fenollosa draws the distinction between visible hieroglyphics and verbal poetry, and then goes on to describe the unique advantage that Chinese poetry enjoys, he might well have been analyzing Imagist poetry as defined by Pound. It might seem, Fenollosa observes, that poetry, which like music is a time art, weaving its unities out of successive impressions of sound, could with difficulty assimilate a verbal medium consisting largely of semi-pictorials to the eye. But since all that poetic form requires is a regular and flexible sequence, as plastic as thought itself, Chinese poetry has the advantage of combining the vividness of painting with the mobility of sounds. It is, in some sense, more objective than either, more dramatic. In reading Chinese, we do not seem to be " juggling mental counters", but " watching things work out their own fate". 28The dramatic vividness and objectivity of Chinese poetry is something that Imagist poetry also tried to

achieve and achieve it through a direct treatment of thing whether subjective or objective, by using absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation, and by composing " in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome", and through the use of a poetic image which Pound characterized as " a radiant mode or cluster... a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing".

29Because of a large number of primitive Chinese characters or ideographic roots carry in them " a verbal image or action", or shorthand pictures of actions or processes, Chinese, according to Fenollosa, comes close to things and in its strong reliance upon verbs it erects all speech into a kind of dramatic poetry. Pound also emphasized the closeness of language to things when he noted that language is made out of concrete things. General expressions in non-concrete terms are a laziness; they are talk, not art, not creation. They are the reaction of things on the writer, not a creative act by the writer. But for Pound, emphasis on the concrete did not rule out the use of metaphors or images. In his article " Psychology and Troubadours: A Divagation from Questions of Technique" (1912), in one of the most vivid, subtle and critically pregnant passages he wrote, Pound discusses man's (writer's) kinship to the vital universe, to the tree and the living rock and explains why because this is less obvious and possibly more interesting we forget it: We have about us the universe of fluid force, and below us the germinal universe of wood alive, of stone alive. Man is - the sensitive physical part of him -a mechanism, for the purpose of our further discussion, a mechanism rather like an electric appliance, switches, wires etc.

Chemically speaking, he is ut credo, a few buckets of water, tied up in a

complicated sort of fig-leaf. As to his consciousness, the consciousness of some seems to rest, or to have its center more properly, in what the Greek psychologists called the phantastikon. Their minds are, that is, circumvoled about them like soap-bubbles reflecting sundry patches of the macrocosm. And with certain others their consciousness is germinal. Their thoughts are in them as the thought of tree is in the seed, or in the grass, or the grain, or the blossom. And these minds are the more poetic, and they affect mind about them, and transmute it as the seed the earth. And this latter sort of mind is close on the vital universe; and the strength of the Greek beauty rests in this, that it is ever at the interpretation of this vital universe, by its signs of gods and godly attendants and oreads. 30Fenollosa's comment on the role of metaphor in poetic speech - metaphor but for which " thought would have been starved and language chained to the obvious"- shows how his whole thinking about language and poetry went a long way towards anticipating some of Pound's own views on the subject. As Fenollosa saw it the whole delicate substance of poetry is built upon substrata of metaphor because the relations seem to be more real and more important than the things which they relate. The forces which produce " the branch-angles of an oak lay potent in the acorn", therefore, by analogy, metaphor becomes the revealer of nature and the very substance of poetry. The known interprets the obscure and the universe is alive and pregnant with myth.. Art and poetry deal with the concrete of nature, not with " rows of separate particulars, for such rows do not exist". Poetry is finer than prose because it gives mankind more concrete truth in the same compass of words. Fenollosa also believed that the Chinese written language had not only absorbed the poetic

substance of nature and built with it a second world of metaphor, but had, through its very pictorial visibility, been able to retain its original creative poetry with far more vigour and vividness than any poetic tongue. Pound, too, believed that ideogram is essential to the exposition of certain kinds of thought, that Greek philosophy " was mostly a hair splitting, an impoverishment of understanding, though it ultimately led to development of particular sciences", and that Socrates was " a distinguished gas-bag in comparison with Confucius and Mencius". At any rate, he added, " I need ideogram. I mean I need it in and for my own job, but I also need sound and phonetics." 31Here is how Pound explains the 'ideogramic' method in ABC of Reading: Fenollosa's essay was perhaps too far ahead of his time to be easily comprehended. He did not proclaim his method as a method. He was trying to explain the Chinese ideograph as a means of transmission and registration of thought. He got to the root of the matter, to the root of the difference between what is valid in Chinese thinking and invalid or misleading in a great deal of European thinking and language. The simplest statement I can make of his meaning is as follows: In Europe, if you ask a man to define anything, his definition always moves away from the simple things that he knows perfectly well, it recedes into an unknown region, that is a region of remoter and progressively remoter abstraction. Thus, if you ask him what red is, he says it is a 'colour'. If you ask him what a colour is, he tells you it is a vibration or a refraction of light, or a division of the spectrum.... By contrast to the method of abstraction, or of defining things in more and still more general terms, Fenollosa emphasizes the method of science, 'which is the method of poetry', as distinct from that of 'philosophic discussion' , and is

the way the Chinese go about it in their ideograph or abbreviated picture writing.... But when the Chinaman wanted to make a picture of something more complicated, or of a general idea, how did he go about it? He is to define red. How can he do it in a picture that isn't painted in red paint? He puts (or his ancestor put) together the abbreviated pictures of ROSE CHERRY IRON RUST FLAMINGO That, you see, is very much the kind of thing a biologist does (in a very much more complicated way) when he gets together a few hundred or thousand slides, and picks out what is necessary for his general statement. Something that fits the case, that applies in all of the cases. The Chinese 'word' or ideogram for red is based on something everyone KNOWS. ³² However, it would appear that Pound never actually made enquiries to find out whether the sign for 'red' was in fact made in this way, but believed he had seen it mentioned in Fenollosa. But Fenollosa does not say - not in the essay on the 'Chinese Written Character' at any rate - that the Chinese made the sign for 'red' by putting together the pictures for 'rose, cherry, iron rust, flamingo'; he simply uses the words 'cherry, rose, sunset, iron rust, flamingo' in an explanation of abstract thought, saying nothing at all about Chinese signs. Fenollosa and Pound's "etymosinology" has met chilly reception among scholars of Chinese, who point out that only a small percentage of the ideograms have purely pictorial components. The characters began as pictures, to be sure, but in the combination of ideograms to produce new and more complex ideograms, one element of the new ideogram usually has a purely phonetic value. Many of Fenollosa and Pound's examples are dead wrong in their etymology, often because they ignore phonetic considerations. But is Fenollosa's thesis incorrect? I believe

that Fenollosa is actually showing what makes Chinese unique among languages. Though what he says is true to a lesser degree than he thought, that does not invalidate his general contention. He has accurately put his finger on the originality and genius of Chinese. Fenollosa and Pound give us a good reason for studying Chinese - which the professional sinologues do not. Pound's poetic aim was to achieve something that Fenollosa had described as being the peculiar characteristic of the Chinese written language. Poetic language, Fenollosa had said, " is always vibrant with fold on fold of overtones, and with natural affinities, but in Chinese the visibility of metaphor tends to raise this quality to its most intense power".³³ As to the nature of poetic thought, he described it as working by suggestion, crowding maximum meaning into the single phrase pregnant, charged, and luminous from within. Hence, it becomes obvious that Pound's views on the nature of the language of prose and poetry, as well as on Imagism, arrived at independently, and before reading Fenollosa's essay, found an inspiring proof and corroboration in it, though in terms of critical acumen and analytical insight they went beyond it. Fenollosa's influence upon Pound's ideas on the nature of poetry is to be found in the relation of his versions to Fenollosa's notes and to the Chinese originals; his translations were not based on any previous knowledge of Chinese but on notes made on Chinese poems by the Orientalist and art historian Fenollosa; his adaptations of Chinese poetry manuscripts, first published in 1915 as *Cathay* and then printed in *Personae*, are simply popular and many competent judges of both Chinese and English poetry think that these are the best translations of Chinese poems into English poems that have ever been made. T. S. Eliot

called them "translucencies". Ford Madox Ford was especially fond of the "Exile's Letter", and declared Cathay "a beautiful book", while "The River Merchant's Wife" has been loved by great numbers of readers, which justifies its presence in so many American poetry anthologies. But how much of these superb translations is Pound's work and how much Fenollosa's? Pound worked a miracle in turning Fenollosa's sprawling lines into a coruscant and durable poetry, without sacrificing their sense. His contribution was also one of selection; Fenollosa's notebooks contain, for example, twenty-seven poems by Rihaku, Japanese pronunciation of Li Po, only nine of which appear in Cathay. Pound's reworking must have been facilitated by the fact that the Fenollosa notebooks are arranged in a very orderly manner. The Chinese poems are all five characters to a line. Fenollosa gives first the phonetic transcription of each line, in Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese characters, then a character-by-character translation, and finally a translation of the line as a whole. Pound relied most on the letter for his own versions. Among the nine Li Po poems which Pound presents in Cathay are the "River Merchant's Wife" and the "Exile's Letter". Without giving so much of an account of how Pound approached translation, this will be dealt with separately in chapters 3. 1. 1., it is extremely instructive at this point just to observe what Pound did to the Fenollosa drafts. Here are the last lines of "Exile's Letter", in which a man is writing a dear friend from whom he has long been separated: The Fenollosa original: My hair was at first covering my brows (child's method of wearing hair) Breaking flowers I was frolicking in front of our gate When you came riding on bamboo stilts (you-ride on-bamboo horse-come) And going about

my seat you played with the blue plums Together we dwelt in the same
Chokan Village And we two little ones had neither mutual dislike nor
suspicion. The Pound version: While my hair was still cut straight across my
forehead I played about the front gate, pulling flowers. You came by on
bamboo stilts, playing horse, You walked about my seat, playing with blue
plums. And we went on living in the village of Chokan: Two small people,
without dislike or suspicion. The Fenollosa original: At fourteen I became
your wife. Bashful, I never opened my face (I never laughed) But lowering my
head I always faced toward a dark wall ashamed to see anybody (she sat in
dark corners) And though a thousand times called, not once did I look around.
The Pound version: At fourteen I married My Lord you. I never laughed, being
bashful. Lowering my head, I looked at the wall. Called to, a thousand times,
I never looked back. Fenollosa: At fifteen I first opened my brows (i. e., first
knew what married life meant-now she opens her eyebrows, smoothing out
the wrinkles between her brows-awoke to the meaning of love) And so I
desired to live and die with you-even after death I wished to be with with
you, even as dust and even as ashes [word illegible] together I always had in
me the faith of holding to pillars And why should I think of climbing the
husband looking out terrace? Pound: At fifteen I stopped scowling, I desired
my dust to be mingled with yours Forever and forever and forever. Why
should I climb the look out? 34 It is obvious that Pound has dropped several
complete lines of the Fenollosa draft on the " general principle of not putting
in mere words that occur in original when they contribute nothing to the
SENSE of the translation"; 35 but this gives birth to yet another controversial
issue, related to the point where one should begin to blame Fenollosa for

Pound's later prose and method; this is hard to say, however it is not hard to see why he appealed to the Pound of the Lustra and Cathay period and why his influence at this stage was all to the good, confirming Pound in what he had been aiming at for several years before he saw the Fenollosa papers, and at the same time acting as a stimulant, and introducing Pound to the world of the Chinese poetry.