

THE CONFUCIAN ODES OF EZRA POUND: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL. 13y L. S. Dembo.
Berkeley and Los Angeles University of California Press, 1963. 111 p.

Nine years after its publication, Ezra Pound's *Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* (1954) has finally received its first critical study in book form. The reason for its long neglect is pointed out by Professor Dembo in his Introduction: "In a sense, the Confucian Odes have naturally resisted comment, both in quantity and quality, for generally the critic able to judge them as poetry is ill-equipped to judge them as translations, and the critic who can judge them as translations is rarely in a position to judge them on literary merit" (p. 1). From this remark one assumes initially that its author, unlike other *Poundian* critics, is equipped with

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both the knowledge of Chinese and the critical acumen to enable him to judge Pound's translations. A closer examination will reveal whether such an assumption is fully justified.

The volume consists of six chapters ; three are concerned with Pound's version of the Confucian odes, and three are introductory. Slender though it is in size, the book's style is ponderous. In his "Introduction" (Chapter 1) Dembo states his multiple purpose:

"I am content to allow an essentially minor work to remain minor ; but what I should like to do is to show that this work, perhaps more clearly than the *Cantos*, defines the achievement and the tragedy of Ezra Pound as a poet, an aesthete, and an interpreter of the culture that he apotheosized. Pound's reasons for translating the three hundred and four [sic] odes of the *Classic Anthology* (to call the task arduous would be an understatement) constitute a poetic in themselves, a poetic closely related to a philosophy of history—in fact, of human experience in general—and correspondingly the methods that he used are derived from a particular theory of language worked out within this poetic" (p. 1).

These two sentences exemplify the general tenor of the book and its occasional lapses : there are 305, and not 304, odes in both the *Classic Anthology* and the extant Chinese text.

In Chapter 2 Dembo attempts to orient his reader. Unlike Achilles Fang's Introduction to the *Classic Anthology*, which provides sufficient background on the odes, Dembo leads his readers into the maze of post-Confucian commentaries and sidetracks them with various political and sociological interpretations. He is, in particular, intrigued with the Chinese term *feng*, which, in the proper context of the odes, designates the portion of "folk songs" in the *Anthology*. After dwelling upon all the possible readings of *feng*, which "means, literally, 'wind,' and secondarily, 'custom' or 'manners' ..." (p. 9), he cites and upholds the historical interpretation of two kinds of *feng*, namely, the *cheng feng* or "rectified wind," and the *pien feng* or "changed wind" (pp. 9-14). Dembo wishes to equate the *feng* with the Dantesque expression, *directio voluntatis*, which is frequently quoted by Pound. In so doing, he intends to draw a parallel between the motives of Confucius' editing of the odes and of Pound's translation.

As the title "Apocalyptic Translation" suggests, Chapter 3 probes into the reasons and poetics behind the *Classic Anthology*. "In a sense," Dembo states, "the odes are nothing less than an attempt to realize the thesis of *The Cantos*, actually to lay before the Western world that time and history have but one illumination for all men in all ages" (p. 23). Pound himself gave no explicit explanation for translating the odes ; Dembo's conjecture is perhaps as good as any other.

In explaining Pound's method of translation, Dembo examines in detail Fenollosa's essay, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium of Poetry" (PP. 23-25), which indeed is the source of inspiration of Pound's Sinology. Fenollosa's theory that the two poetic qualities inherent in the Chinese written character are the concrete image and the sense of dramatic succession was the "basis of the ideogrammic method as applied to the translation of the odes," which in practice, according to Dembo, evolved into two divergent styles : the lyrical and the colloquial (p. 25). And it is on the latter that Dembo focuses his attack through out the book, from a puristic standpoint. Pound's liberties and inaccuracies in translation are justifiable so long he chooses to stay in a consistently lyrical mode. Dembo exhorts Pound for his "overwhelming lyrical power" and criticizes his attempts at dramatization by means of colloquial idiom and slang end in failure at the same time for his inconsistency.

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Dembo the literary critic is clearly more convincing than Dembo the sinologue he shares with Pound the inaccuracies that are typical of the logocentric as a signifiant. In disclosing Pound's false etymology, Dembo inadvertently betrays his own limitations. On pp. 26-27, the juxtaposition of Pound's version of Ode 42 with the original text carefully copied by a Chinese calligraphist (p. vii), accompanied by a literal translation supplied by Professor Harold Shadick (p. 109), is an effective, objective presentation of Pound's peculiar technique of translation. But not content with the happy result thus achieved, Dembo then comments on the translation and runs into difficulties. He is correct in pointing out that in Pound's first line, "Lady azure thought" (p. 27), the word "azure" is derived from the left side of the compound ideogram *thing*, which is composed of *ch'ing* and *cheng*. But, when he informs us that "strictly speaking, *eWing* is a phonetic, not a pictograph" (p. 28), he is trapped by his own ostentation. No doubt he is misled by the host of compound ideograms in which the same *ch'ing* functions as a phonetic and not a pictograph or, more accurately, a signifiant, and thus assumes that it must be so in this case. Unfortunately, there are a few compound ideograms in which *ch'ing* is not a phonetic but a signifiant, i.e., the "radical" which designates the root of the word; and *thing* happens to be one of these. Errors of this kind are due to overconfidence, and could easily be avoided by consulting a Chinese dictionary.

Dembo's analysis of the ideogram *Juan*, rendered by Pound as "Lady of silken word" in the second stanza of the same poem, is another example of carelessness or inattentiveness to detail. In this instance, no Chinese dictionary is needed. A second glance at the ideogram in question detects the obvious error on Dembo's part. He has carelessly chopped off the head of the simple ideograph *yen*, and has mistaken it as an expendable, separate entity.

One is ready to make allowance for a linguist trained by the United States Navy (see blurb on book jacket), but one can hardly condone such obvious blunders from a literary critic who professes to enlighten his readers on Pound's errors in translation. By comparison, Pound, despite his hit-and-miss technique of "transetymology" (a term coined by Achilles Fang), is either more conscientious or more intuitive than his critic in handling Chinese ideograms.

Dembo's inadequate knowledge of Chinese diminishes but does not destroy the critical value of his book. When he focuses his evaluation of the *Classic Anthology* "on literary merit" alone, as he frequently does in the second half of the book (Chapters 4, 5, and 6), he is excellent. His ear is sensitive to the subtlety of rhythm; he detects Pound's shrewd manipulation of the various rhyme schemes and rhythms in creating or recreating the concomitant emotions. To illustrate Pound's way of suggesting the formalized emotion traditionally associated with epithalamion, he quotes Ode 24:

"Plum flowers so splendid be,
rolling, onrolling quietly,
a royal car with young royalty.

Flowers of plum abundantly,
Heiress of P'ing, heir of Ts'i,
to their wedding right royally.

Tight as strands in fisherman's line
may this pair in love combine,
heir and heiress loyally,
whereby P'ing is bound to Ts'i."

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To sum UP, Professor Dembo's book, despite its minor flaws, remains an important contribution to Poundian criticism. One may challenge him on matters of detail, yet one tends to agree with his conclusion that, "had Pound been consistent, the translations would have been one of the great literary documents of our times" (P. 98).

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