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journal or publication title	Journal of Inquiry and Research
volume	87
page range	205-213
year	2008-03
URL	http://doi.org/10.18956/00006218

Ezra Pound and the Pre-Raphaelites:

A Reading of Pound's Early Works

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Abstract

One of the leading poets in the 20th century, Ezra Pound is generally recognized by his experimental attempt to renovate poetical language in his early works and by the creation of a new poetics in his mature and major work *The Cantos*, which intends to incorporate human history itself in its poetical text. Among the most apparent characteristics which mark his text, is what he calls “ideogram”: a particular way of citation of, not only Chinese characters suggesting Confucious ideas for example, but also of diverse pronouns or even historical facts or fragments, in the manner of collage. In this paper, as an origin of Poundian idea of “ideogram” we examine the use of “emblem” by the Pre-Raphaelites, whose influences on young Pound seem to have been rather neglected. In fact, we can find many allusions and comments on the Pre-Raphaelites in Pound's early writings. The study of their literary correspondence will cast a new light on the development of Pound's poetics.

Keywords: Ezra Pound, Pre-Raphaelite, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, English Poetry, Vorticism

1. Introduction

Ezra Pound is, as might be generally recognized, the most conspicuous figure among the American poets in the twentieth century. He spent most of his life in Europe, yet dreaming of “a cultural fusion of the East and the West.” The famous slogan “Make it new” was fully realized in his earlier “modernist” style, and later in *The Cantos* his poetry has become like a huge experimental theater for the entire but fragmented history of human being. From T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) to Allan Ginsberg (1926-97), from Junzaburo Nishiwaki (1894-1982) to Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-75), we can easily enumerate a diversity of poets and critics who would not, or could not, have been what they actually were, without Pound's influence. The most polemical

point would be, however, for us contemporary readers, his mysterious engagement in the Italian fascism, or his admiration for Confucianism, as to be the opposed to the modern capitalism, which makes his poetry still actual, in other words, both controversial and attractive.

Such extravagant impression of Pound appears to be contradictory to his connection to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. But in his early writings, there are many allusions and comments on the Pre-Raphaelites, especially on Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82), the founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The importance and influence of Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism on young Pound has been often overlooked, but, in fact, the Pre-Raphaelites had a potent influence on his early poems: “Lady of Life” came from Rossetti’s short story “House of Life”; “La Donzella Beata” is a reply to “Blessed Damozel”; and there are direct echoes in “Aegupton,” “Nicotine,” “In Epitaphium Eius,” and “Scriptor Ignotus,” as Witemeyer points out (Witemeyer 46). Pound praises Rossetti’s translations of Cavalcanti, Dante, and other Italian poets, and quotes some of them in *The Spirit of Romance* (1910). Rossetti was a good guide for Pound when he started translating Italian and Provençal poets himself. In the process of translating and re-writing Italian and Provençal poems, Pound tried to establish new forms of poetic expression. And for Pound, “precision” and “exactness” in the choice of words, “color” and “imagery” become more important than “the Pre-Raphaelite elaborations.” At the time he was working out his poetic principles, as expressed in the Imagist statement, Pound encountered with the exactness of Chinese poetry. Pound revised some of Fenollosa’s rough translations of classical Chinese poems and published them in *Cathay* (1915), and also edited and published Fenollosa’s *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1919). Those works made Pound take a great step forward in formulating the structure and content of his later poetry. After his “Vorticism” proclamation, Pound seems to have lost interest in the Pre-Raphaelitism. Nevertheless, as Pound started his career as poet and critic under the strong influence of the Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism, a discussion on the noticeable correspondence between Pound and the Pre-Raphaelite will help us understand the development of Pound’s poetics. Here, let us consider first the correspondence between Pound and the Pre-Raphaelite.

2. Pre-Raphaelite poetry and “emblem”

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood protested against the academism and formalism of the classical tradition and tried to lead English painting back to the adherence to what they call “Nature.” Their creed “To study Nature attentively, so as how to express them” is also applied to

their literary side, as shown in their short-lived magazines *The Germ* (1850) and *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856). Yet their poetry was not a reaction against the tradition but a continuation and development of the Romanticism and the Gothic revival or Gothic medievalism. Their central symbol was often a woman whose spiritualized eroticism was highly ambiguous. This aspect of their work was violently attacked by Robert Buchanan in an article “The Fleshly School of Poetry” (1871) which Pound dealt with in “Yeux Glauques” in *Hugh Selwin Mauberley*. This poem is Pound’s epitaph on the Pre-Raphaelites.

However, the Pre-Raphaelite creed reminds us of the famous Imagist faith “Direct treatment of the ‘thing,’ whether subjective or objective.” What Pound calls “thing” seems to be in the faith equivalent to what the Pre-Raphaelites called “Nature.” They share the direct way of observing and studying an object. It might be possible to say that young Pound’s basic outlook on the world was somehow influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

To look closer into the Pre-Raphaelite poetry, it is useful to start with two of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Mary’s Girlhood.” It is attached to his painting *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, a very good example of the fusion of poetry and paintings, which the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood aimed at:

There are the symbols. On that cloth of red
 I’ the centre is the Tripoint – perfect each,
 Except the second of its points, to teach
That Christ is not yet born. The books – whose head
Is golden Charity, as Paul hath said –
 Those virtues are wherein the soul is rich:
 Therefore on them the lily standeth, which
Is Innocence, being interpreted.

The seven-thorn’d briar and the palm seven-leaved
 Are her great sorrow and her great reward.
 Until the end be full, the Holy One
Abides without. She soon shall have achieved
 Her perfect purity: yea, God the Lord
 Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son. (15-28)

This sonnet provides a “reading” of a picture. Rossetti insists on the spiritual significance of material things. The “lily,” the “seven-thorn’d briar,” and the “palm seven-leaved” are all symbols of the iconographic tradition surrounding the Mary Virgin.

Rossetti is striving for precisely detailed visual depiction both in his poems and paintings, while his poems are written in single syllabled words with simple vocabulary. Written in simple language, a poem sounds more powerful and more impressive. The Pre-Raphaelite poetry in general shows this feature: the simplicity in sound, rhythm and vocabulary. Besides, compounds such as “seven-thorn’d” or “seven-leaved” are also characteristic of the Pre-Raphaelite poetry. A compound limits the meaning of a word, and endows a word with a concrete image, a kind of iconographic image. Such effects make the meaning of their poetry clearer and more precise.

Simplicity, clarity, and precision: Pound found and appreciated these features in the writing of Ford Madox Hueffer/Ford (1873-1939), the last Pre-Raphaelite and young Pound’s close friend. In 1909, before leading the Imagist movement, Pound met Ford for the first time and stayed at his house, which was full of the Pre-Raphaelite legacy. Pound “was tremendously impressed by the fact that Ford used Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s brown velvet coat as his dressing gown” (Tytell 49). Naturally, he got influenced by the ambience and aesthetics of the Pre-Raphaelite. Pound says in his *Literary Essays*, “I found him [Ford] significant and revolutionary because of his insistence upon clarity and precision, upon the prose tradition; in brief, upon efficient writing – even in verse.” (377). Whether Pound noticed or not, what he found in Ford’s writing, both in prose and in verse, is the very characteristics of the Pre-Raphaelite style.

More noteworthy is what Rossetti calls “symbols.” They are common to the Pre-Raphaelite paintings and poetry. By using such “symbols,” the Pre-Raphaelites tried to produce the same emotional effect both in their paintings and poetry. They tried to strengthen the integration of these two sisters of art. The important thing is that such symbols are not limpid but opaque, in other words, they have certain concrete meaning defined by the Pre-Raphaelite peculiar interpretation, as the painted symbols are *read* in the attached sonnet. The Pre-Raphaelite symbols are endowed with iconographic or rather emblematic function, and supposed to cause an already preset reaction to the viewers and readers. The Pre-Raphaelite symbols function as an “emblem” in a traditional way, as an iconographic image or a sign bearing allegorical value, common to paintings and poetry. And this is what Pound calls “symbolism” in his literary essay “Vorticism.”

In addition to emblems, the use of numbers is characteristic of the Pre-Raphaelite poetry.

As Pound mentioned in the essay, the Pre-Raphaelite symbols have “a fixed value, like numbers.” Numbers should be considered a kind of emblem. Let us have a look on the beginning of “The Blessed Damozel”:

The blessed damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven. (1-6)

The “three lilies,” the “seven stars” and the “white rose” are all emblems relevant to the Blessed Virgin, and each number has a mystical meaning. Especially “three” is the most prevalent number among the Pre-Raphaelites.

Such “emblems” could be defined as a stylized iconographic image or sign, such as white lilies, roses, or golden hair, repeated consistently in the Pre-Raphaelite works, to take control of stylizing emotion, including even sentiment or melancholy. In this respect, the Pre-Raphaelite “symbols” are exactly what Pound calls “the Symbolist’s symbols” or “permanent metaphor.” Pound alludes to the Pre-Raphaelite emblems and differentiates them from ordinary symbols. What we should note here is that the Pre-Raphaelite emblems function as a kind of proper nouns, peculiar to the Pre-Raphaelites. As mentioned above, they have “a fixed value.” The Pre-Raphaelite medieval dreams are embodied in the stability of the Pre-Raphaelite emblems appearing in their poetry and paintings.

3. “Emblem” in Pound’s Early Works

Now, let us move to the works of young Pound. After the fashion of Rossetti’s “Blessed Damozel,” Pound composed a short poem “La Donzella Beata”:

Soul
Caught in the rose hued mesh
Of o’er fair earthly flesh
Stooped you again to bear

This thing for me
And be rare light
For me, gold white
In the shadowy path I tread?
Surely a bolder maid art thou
Than one in tearful fearful longing
That would wait Lily-cinctured
Star-diademed at the gate
Of high heaven crying that I should come
To thee.

The “rose,” the “gold white,” the “lily” and the “star” are all emblems relevant to the Blessed Virgin. The compounds such as “Lily-cinctured” and “Star-diademed” as well as “the rose hued mesh” convey a concrete image to the reader. Such effects make the meaning of the poem clearer and more precise. It may be safely said that compounds bearing emblems, like, in this case, “Lily-cinctured,” “Star-diademed,” take on particularity, and function as a kind of permanent emblem.

There is another interesting poem called “Phanopoeia.” This is a suitable example to compare the Pre-Raphaelite medieval illusions with Pound’s medieval imitations:

The swirl of light follow me through the square,
The smoke of incense
Mounts from the four horns of my bed-posts,
The water-jet of gold light bears us up through the celings;
Lapped in the gold-coloured flame I descend through the aether.
The silver ball forms in my hand,
It falls and rolls to your feet.

.....

The whirling tissue of light
is woven and grows solid beneath us;
The sea-clear sapphire of air, the sea-dark clarity,
stretches both sea-cliff and ocean. (1-7; 23-26)

This work shows some characteristics of the Pre-Raphaelite poetry: such as colors, precious stones or jewels, precious metals. Sapphire, after emerald, was Pound's favorite jewel appearing quite frequently throughout his poetry. Pound makes an interesting comment on this precious stone when he talked about "Und Drang" which is enriched with jewel imagery: "...there [in "Und Drang"] the sapphires certainly are NOT anything but sapphires, perfectly definite visual imagination" (Witemeyer 159). These characteristic elements are bearing an emblematic function, exactly in the same way as the Pre-Raphaelite emblems ; written in simple language, using compounds such as "water-jet of gold light" "gold-coloured flame" "sharp-edged sandals" "wire-like hands" "The sea-clear sapphire of air" "the sea-dark clarity" and "sea-cliff and ocean." These compounds bring a concrete image to us.

Similar to "Phanopoeia", "The Alchemist" is another suitable example to display various precious stones and metals as emblems:

Sail of Claustra, Aelis, Azalais,
As you move among the bright trees;
As your voices, under the larches of Paradise
Make a clear sound,
Sail of Claustra, Aelis, Azalais,
Raimona, Tibors, Berangere,
' Neath the dark gleam of the sky;
Under night, the peacock-throated,
Bring the saffron-coloured shell,
Bring the red gold of the maple,
Bring the light of the birch tree in autumn,
Mirals, Cembelins, Audiards,

Remember this fire.

.....
Midonz, with the gold of the sun, the leaf of the poplar, by the light of the amber,
Midonz, daughter of the sun, shaft of the tree, silver of the leaf, light of
the yellow of the amber,
Midonz, gift of the God, gift of the light, gift of the amber of the sun,
Give the light to the metal. (1-13; 25-28)

An interesting point about this poem is the invocation of a long name list of famous ladies. Names play a role of emblem indicating “virtues.” A name could be very much a particular and permanent emblem. Pound must have noticed such emblematic function of names or proper nouns, and realized that the whole poem is supported by the stability of emblems, after the Pre-Raphaelite poetry. We could go farther to point out that emblems and ideograms have common features: iconographic functions and emotional effects, as well as stability. More interesting is that the famous *cheng ming* 正名 could be translated into ‘proper name’ according to the original meaning of the characters. This coincidence suggests that Pound’s dream of “a cultural fusion of the East and the West” is fulfilled in the “superposition” of Western emblems and Eastern ideograms.

4. Conclusions

Finally we could sum up the comparison between the Pre-Raphaelites and Pound. The stability and peculiarity of the Pre-Raphaelite emblems reflects their ideal medievalism. The Pre-Raphaelites were seeking for a stable relation between image and language, between art and the world, and even between people and God. In the “aesthetic” movement, the Pre-Raphaelites attempted to separate art from modern society and bring it back to the Middle age. In this separation, however, “Pre-Raphaelite medievalism ironically reveals not the cohesion of medieval society, but the fragmentation of modern society” (Riede 68). This movement settled in a limited, narrow interpretation reflecting the material space of a medieval cloister or the sonnet form; while Pound tried to grasp the whole world history, and tried to create his own language with the variety of world languages, reflecting the fragmentation of the modern world, as seen in his vast world of *The Cantos*.

In conclusion, both Pound and the Pre-Raphaelites were trying to obtain stability and simplicity of the medieval age as a model of historical and permanent world. While the Pre-Raphaelites regarded the medieval age as the most permanent emblem of their ideal world, Pound tried to grasp the entire history as an emblem, and progressed towards the ideogram of Chinese characters. In other words, the Pre-Raphaelite poetry is an emblem of their medieval illusions, while Pound’s poetry is an ideogram of the whole world and history. Coincidentally, an ideogram is the ultimate end of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in the integration of paintings and poetry, but the movement could not survive long enough. In this way, from emblem to ideogram, from Imagism to Vorticism, Pound has overcome the medieval imitations after the Pre-

Raphaelites, and proceeded to the homage to the vast tapestry of the human history.

* This is a revised version of the paper “A Reconsideration of Medievalism in Pound’s Early Works” prepared by Keiji Yasukawa and Miho Takahashi (Tenri University), and read by Takahashi at the 22nd International Ezra Pound Conference held in Venice, Italy, on 26th June 2007.

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