

## **Ezra Pound's *Women of Trachis*: Modernist Translation as Performance Text**

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Ezra Pound was the primary force behind a radical shift in values which characterized the modernist contribution to the field of poetic translation. According to George Steiner, Pound's translations "altered the definition and ideals of verse translation in the twentieth-century," revolutionizing "the idiom of translation, the notion of what a translation is and how it relates to the original" (Steiner 32-33). The innovations of the modernist movement provided both the creative impetus and the intellectual foundation for "a modern renaissance in English translation" (Apter 1). Its members, exasperated by what they perceived to be the over-ornamented and reductively literal pieties of Victorian classicists, preferred to view translation as an essentially creative act of transformative identification with the intuited aims of the original poet. Pound's many translations from a wide variety of geographically, temporally and culturally distant sources are predicated upon "the impulse" to "make it new" (Wilson 215) – to offer the reader, listener, or audience-member an immediate and complex intellectual and sensory experience which would represent, whilst not necessarily resembling, the culturally distant words, images and effects of an original poetic composition.

In my research, I have been using historical and literary analysis, in combination with physical theatre practice, to examine some of the distinctive ways in which Pound attempted to re-make ancient Greek tragedy and, more particularly, ancient choral dance, as a credibly modernist performance event. The dances which result are not presented as being either definitive or prescriptive. They are *my* physical responses to a set of poetic suggestions, and to the intellectual speculations and

intuitions arising from my related textual research. I do not present my performance experiments as *a* (let alone *the*) correct response to the poetic text under discussion. Instead, I aim to highlight some of the ways in which the provocations and parameters of Pound's distinctively modernist dramatic diction might be capable of impacting upon and directing the performing body. For, with characteristic imperiousness, Pound's iconoclastic translations from the Greek require that physical performance, as well as the words of ancient tragedy, be made new.

*Women of Trachis* was first published in 1954, but the challenge of translating a Greek tragedy had fascinated Pound for many years. Both Pound and T. S. Eliot had previously attempted to produce a modernist translation of the *Agamemnon*, in answer to the prevailing orthodoxy of lingering Victorian reverence for the literal word of ancient texts. Neither poet managed to produce anything which satisfied their own demands. In later years, Pound would ruefully describe the way he had "twisted, turned, tried every ellipsis and elimination," before finally condemning his own best efforts as "unreadable" (Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* 92-93). "A search for Aeschylus in English is deadly, accursed, mind-rending" the frustrated poet commented grimly (Pound, *Make It New* 146). The mature Pound's engagement with the plays of Sophocles was more fruitful. *Women of Trachis*, Pound's version of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, stands as testament to the poet's commitment to the demolition of the old rules of literary translation, in the dramatic text as well as the purely poetic. The play also provides a blueprint for some of the ways in which a genuinely modernist relationship might be achieved, not only between the dramatic literatures of the past and the present, but also between the organization of words upon the printed page, and the kinaesthetically expressive body of the performer.

Pound conceived this play in performance as a ritualistic dance-drama, in a style derived from the Japanese Noh. Pound had been intrigued by the Noh for decades. It was he who had introduced W.B. Yeats to the distinctive form, and he had also played an instrumental role in the development of Yeats' Noh-inspired *Plays for Dancers* (1916-21). The published text of *Women of Trachis* explicitly recalls this fascination, containing a dedication to Japanese poet Kitasono Katue, in which Pound expresses his hope that "he will use it on my dear old friend Miscio Ito, or take it to the Minoru if they can be persuaded to add it to their repertoire" (Pound, *Women of Trachis* 3). Ito was the Japanese dancer who had first performed the role of the Hawk in Yeats' *At the Hawk's Well* (1916). Umewake Minoru was a celebrated performer in the Noh theatre, and the teacher of Ernest Fenollosa, Pound's own mentor in the classical Japanese tradition. It is clear, even from this brief note, that Pound intended his play to be performed as a ritualised, symbolic drama, probably including a significant element of dance. He considered the *Trachiniai* to be the Greek tragedy "nearest the original form of the God-Dance" (Pound, *Women of Trachis* 3), and was evidently concerned to find some existing theatrical form which might be able to encompass the physical, as well as the verbal, ritual of ancient tragedy. Both Greek tragedy and the Japanese Noh, Pound wrote, developed out of "a sacred dance," and in both "action was a modification of the dance" (Pound and Fenollosa, *Classic Noh* 59-60). The suggestion that the play was imagined by the translator with an eye towards the possibility of it receiving production as a ritualistic dance-drama in the manner of the Japanese Noh offers tantalising clues as to the ways in which the latent physicality of the text might be explored and experienced in performance.

For the physical practitioner seeking to engage bodily with Pound's text, it is particularly exciting to read his comments on the relationship between text and

movement within the Noh tradition. In his introduction to *The Classic Noh Theatre of Japan* (1916), Pound wrote approvingly of a theatre in which “the poet may even be silent while the gestures consecrated by four centuries of usage show meaning” (Pound and Fenollosa, *Classic Noh* 4). That Pound was acutely aware of the actor’s body as a crucial absence from any written theatre text is evident from some of his earliest writings. In his 1910 chapter on “The Quality of Lope de Vega” he is emphatically of the view that:

The art of literature and the art of the theatre are neither identical nor concentric. A part of the art of poetry is included in the complete art of drama. Words are the means of the art of poetry; men and women moving and speaking are the means of drama. (Pound, *Spirit of Romance* 179)

In his writings about theatre, the poet often seems to be describing a relationship between page and stage within which the performer embodying the text is counted as a creative collaborator in the construction of meaning, rather than the passive mouthpiece of a self-sufficient linguistic dramatic narrative. Pound reiterated this understanding of the role of language within theatrical performance in his *ABC of Reading* (1934): “It is unfair to a dramatist to consider his WORDS, or even his words and versification, as if that were the plenum of his performance” (Pound, *ABC* 31). Meaning, in Pound’s re-imagined Greek theatre, is to be formed through the juxtaposition of bodies and words, poetic sound patterns and moving visual images.

So how are we to imagine the tragic choral dance of the Greeks refracted through Pound’s chosen prism of the Japanese Noh? A great deal of what Pound and Yeats believed they knew about the nature of dance within the Noh when they were preparing *At the Hawk’s Well* for performance had come from a young Japanese dancer named Mischio Ito. Both of the poets “erroneously assumed” that Ito was thoroughly versed in Noh traditions. However, in reality, the dancer “had not seen a

Noh production since the age of seven,” and had only begun to study dance seriously after being inspired by the performances in Paris of the aesthetically radical Ballets Russes, and the virtuoso star dancer Nijinsky in particular (Longenbach 198). Despite actually knowing very little about the classical drama of Japan, Ito proved more than willing to “read up on the subject in libraries” and eke out his limited knowledge with intuition and imagination (Carpenter 224). The resulting performances seem to have been examples not of “the living tradition of Noh dancing” (as onlookers might fondly have imagined), but rather a seductive conflation of a few ancient principles with a generally modern, sophisticated, western aesthetic (Longenbach 198). It is probable that Ito was able to demonstrate to the poets some of the basics of the Noh, to suggest “some idea of the posture, gliding movement and dance steps of the principal actor” (Yeats 313). However it is unlikely that he could have demonstrated a great deal more in terms of the concrete details of the Noh tradition.

Despite the limitations of their knowledge, both Pound and Yeats seem to have intuited or absorbed at least some of the central physical features of the sacred theatre dance of Japan, which Yeats described in his introduction to *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*:

A swift or a slow movement and a long or a short stillness, and then another movement ... their ideal of beauty ... makes them pause at moments of muscular tension. The interest is not in the human form but in the rhythm to which it moves ... there are few swaying movements of arms or body such as make the beauty of our dancing. They move from the hip, keeping constantly the upper part of the body still, and seem to associate with every gesture or pose some definite thought. They cross the stage with a gliding movement, and one gets the impression not of undulation but of continuous straight lines. (Pound and Fenollosa, *Certain Noble Plays* xii-xiii)

The appreciation of this “distinctive straight-line” aesthetic might suggest one of the ways in which Noh forms appealed to Pound’s aggressively modernist sensibilities (Kunio 240). The concept of a physical art composed of powerful straight lines might

have been calculated to appeal to the poet who preached fiercely of the need for a “hardness” of artistic image (Bradbury 238), and for a poetry “austere, direct, free from emotional slither” (Pound, *Literary Essays* 12). The aesthetic of the hard straight line, then, a physicality which privileges muscular tension, and a rhythmic succession of static poses, is one which might stand as at least partially representative of the Noh form as conceptualised by Pound in *Women of Trachis*. In making dances from the verse of Pound’s Greek choruses, I attempted to respond to this distinctively modernist reading of a classical Japanese aesthetic by constructing step sequences featuring a series of static body postures, linked by gliding steps, based around hard, straight lines and muscular tensions.



Another extremely characteristic feature of Pound’s text, which recalls his ideal of a creative and mutually-allusive relationship between sound and image, is the poet’s extensive use of melopoeia. This linguistic technique has important consequences for the practitioner engaged in the business of translating the text of *Women of Trachis* into embodied performance. Pound’s concept of melopoeia encompassed the “melodic and rhythmic aspects of poetic structure” (Wilson 58). It was based upon the

idea that words might be treated as musically suggestive, rather than as distinct and transparent segments of semantic meaning. Throughout the choruses of *Women of Trachis*, the reader or listener is invited to interpret potential meanings suggested through the sounds of transliterated Greek words, both singly and in sequence, rather than focussing upon an actual lexical content which is deliberately left obscure for the Greekless modern. For example, in one section of the text, the overall sense of a celebratory choral verse is carried through combinations of syllables which are largely meaningless in the English language, beginning:

APOLLO  
and Artemis, analolu  
Artemis,  
Analolu,  
Sun-bright Apollo, Saviour Apollo,  
analolu,  
Artemis,  
Sylvan Artemis,  
Swift-arrowed Artemis, analolu  
By the hearth-stone  
brides to be  
Shout in male company:  
APOLLO EUPHARETRON. (Pound, *Women of Trachis* 12)

Within this chorus, lexical sense is strictly limited. Rather than down-playing the untranslatable ululation “analolu,” Pound seems positively to delight in the evocative possibilities of the strange syllables, actively choosing (without Sophoclean precedent) to reiterate that and other transliterated Greek phrases at regular intervals throughout the verse, rather than employing more conventionally explicit descriptive language. This patterned juxtaposition of suggestive sounds is the medium through which meaning is accumulated and suggested. And this idiosyncratic response to the challenge of translation is deliberate.

“Mere words” were not, in Pound’s view, the primary concern of the translator of poetic texts. He viewed individual words, and their culturally-accepted semantic

meanings, as the constituent fragments of a larger poetic phrase, or image or sensory effect. It was this total effect or “sense” which he sought to recreate in his translations. As he explained: “I don’t see that one *translates* by leaving in unnecessary words; that is, words not necessary to the meaning of the *whole* passage” (Pound, *Letters* 358).

Throughout his career, Pound emphatically refused to sacrifice the potential artistry and poetic suggestiveness of the transformative translation to what he considered to be the hampering claims of verbal literalism. “Don’t bother about the WORDS, translate the MEANING,” he instructed the prospective translator of *Women of Trachis* into Japanese. Similarly, he ordered his German translator, “Don’t translate what I wrote, translate what I MEANT to write” (Kenner 150). He was adamant that a “poem is not its language” (Kenner 358), that the effect of a poem upon its reader, or of a play upon its audience, could not be reduced to the definitions of the collection of words contained within it. Always, with Pound, the poetic sense of the phrase or cluster of sounds or images was paramount. Individual words were simply the building blocks of a wider, more elusive, poetic suggestivity.

This way of considering the function of words within the dramatic text offers a fascinating challenge to the physical practitioner. The words of the translated text do not, in themselves, constitute any sort of total narrative. Rather, they function as a partial schema of a performance event, which will, in its fullest form, combine aural and visual suggestiveness in order to present the observer with a meaningful complex of individually-elusive fragments. Consequently, in making dances based upon Pound’s choral verse, I tried to adopt and utilise hard modernist lines of corporeal force which might function as bodily hieroglyphs for some of the word-images contained within Pound’s sometimes cryptic poetic text, as the abstracted corporeal symbolisms of the Noh theatre illuminate the highly formalised diction of classical



Japanese mythology. So, for example, an arm drawn backward in a strong horizontal line across my chest to a point of concentrated tension behind my shoulder was designed to correspond physically to the textual description of “swift-arrowed Artemis” (Pound, *Women of Trachis* 12). The movement incorporates an abstracted image of the aspect of the goddess upon which Pound lays most emphasis, representing the drawing back of a symbolic bowstring.



Likewise, the crossing of tensed, spread fingers and the backward inclination of head and neck which accompanies the line evoking the death of “the great stag” (Pound, *Women of Trachis* 12) was intended to function as another embodied hieroglyph, reiterating and visualising in concrete terms the image of the antlered deer.



In developing these semi-abstracted physical responses to Pound's poetic images, I was intrigued by the possibility that they might function as symbolically suggestive visual complement to the deliberate linguistic elusiveness of the translated verse.

It is also possible that Pound, drawing upon his enduring fascination with the simultaneously aural and visual communicative qualities of Chinese written poetry, began to envisage and encode an "ideogrammatic" technique of dramatic suggestion in his translations from the ancient Greek. The poet's theory of the Chinese ideogram, derived from the writings of Oriental scholar Ernest Fenollosa, was based around the idea that in pictorial languages, a sign would not merely indicate, but could actually visually resemble the thing it denoted. Describing the alien allure of such a system, the obsessively polyglot Pound emphasised the strangeness and the power of ideogrammatic language:

The Egyptians finally used abbreviated pictures to stand for sounds, but the Chinese still use abbreviated pictures AS pictures, that is to say, Chinese ideogram does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of a thing; of a thing in a given position or relation, or of a combination of things. It *means* the thing or the action or situation, or quality germane to the several things that it pictures. (Pound, *ABC* 5)

To demonstrate this theory, Fenollosa referred to the simple Chinese sentence "Man Sees Horse."



He described the operation of the sentence like this:



performances from translated text. Proceeding from Pound's fascination with Chinese ideograms, and his conviction that the figures underlying modern Chinese letters could be read as abstracted figures representing frozen moments of action, I began experimenting with basing the floor-patterns of my choreography of Pound's Greek choruses upon the patterns made by the verse upon the printed page. Pound habitually exploited a wide variety of spatial relationships between different words and phrases in his poems, and it rapidly became evident to me that there are any number of fruitful ways in which the practitioner might respond to the visual appearance of text as a stimulus for choreographed movement in stage-space. Individual words or phrases might be interpreted as representing the relative positions of choral bodies in the performance space, or the moving steps of an individual dancing figure, or they might represent a floor-pattern which could be traced out by multiple performers following behind one another in single file.

One approach which I found particularly productive was based around the concept of constructing a sequence of dance steps and postures which would broadly (or where possible, more specifically) reflect the backwards and forwards motion of the text across the page. So, for example, in constructing a step sequence to be performed during the opening lines of the verses quoted above, I aimed to create a piece of choreography in which the progression of my body across stage space would mirror the way in which Pound sequences and spaces the words of his poetic text:

APOLLO  
    And Artemis, analolu  
                                Artemis,  
Analolu,  
Sun-bright Apollo, Saviour Apollo  
                                Analolu. (Pound, *Women of Trachis* 12)

The first three lines were all performed travelling in the same direction (and at a diagonal angle to the audience), with the "Analolu" marking a change of direction.

The phrase “sun-bright Apollo” began my second sequence of diagonal steps, this time travelling in the opposite direction to the first set. This is not an exact replication of Pound's word patterning, which (when read ideogramatically as a provocation for a dance) seems to imply two sets of movements travelling in the same direction, beginning from different starting points (a choreographic option available to a group of dancers, but not to a soloist). However, in my own choreography, I tried to respond to the sense of two strongly diagonal movements, as well as to the sense that the exclamation “analolu” often seems to occur at points within the text patterning at which changes of direction occur. The recurrent positioning of “analolu” at the extreme edges of lines or phrases of verse suggested to me the possibility of using the word as a signal for a pivoting or turning step, which would be followed by the movement of the dance changing direction. In my choreography, I allocated the word its own distinctive elevated pose, which I used to pivot my body into new directions at these moments.



This repeated, whole-body pivot allowed me to develop my dance in ways which reflected the distinctive winding pattern of Pound's verse upon the page, whilst simultaneously exploring the ways in which bodily motion might be used to colour

the aural characteristics of transliterated Greek. Adopting an elevated body line, and raising my arms above my head, I attempted to loan the semantically-meaningless expression “analolu” a sense of ritual formality, or even religious celebration, the raised arms gesturing to some unreachable sphere of existence, knowledge, or power, recognised and celebrated in the choral dance.

What I've been hoping to suggest in this article are some of the ways in which Pound's idiosyncratic and ground-breaking modernist style of dramatic translation might influence the process of translating *Women of Trachis* from the page to the stage. When developing physical performance sequences, Pound's self-consciously incomplete approach to the suggestion of meaning through the melopoeiac and visual qualities of the dramatic text offers the practitioner an unusually large degree of freedom and responsibility in the establishment of performative effect. A movement, action, or gesture can often be crucial in deciding the specific sense which an audience might derive from deliberately ambiguous verbal phrases. Pound's modernist principles, and his fascination with abstracted symbols and ideograms, seem to call for a physical performance within which word and gesture are mysterious in isolation, but capable of great suggestivity and eloquence in sequence and in relation to one another. Throughout my work with Pound's texts, I have been concerned to explore the possibilities of a theatrical dance which might combine a modernist abstraction and clarity of line with appropriate symbolic suggestiveness, and which might respond to the complex texture of the poet's translated texts on a suitably polyglot variety of symbolic levels. Classical Japanese drama, as well as theories of the Chinese ideogram, and the aesthetic principles of modernist composition, all contribute significantly to the complex of influences informing the relationship between Pound's Greek tragedies and their potential physical

performance. For the practitioner, this complex of influences offers a variety of routes towards the composition of physical performances, each responding differently, and with a different range of potential outcomes, to the multiple aspects of Pound's transformative poetic translation.

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