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Ezra Pound and Post-Colonial Theory: Rethinking Empire, Cultural Identity, and Resistance

Introduction

Ezra Pound's poetic oeuvre, particularly *The Cantos*, occupies a paradoxical position in twentieth-century literary history: it represents both the apex of modernist innovation and a troubling entanglement with imperial and fascist ideologies. His engagement with global histories, economies, and cultures extends far beyond aesthetic experimentation—it interrogates, and at times reinforces, the dynamics of empire. When read through post-colonial theory, Pound's poetry emerges as a site of negotiation between admiration and appropriation, resistance and complicity, universality and cultural specificity. This essay explores how post-colonial frameworks—especially those developed by Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Dipesh Chakrabarty—reframe Pound's poetic vision, exposing its ideological contradictions while revealing its complex engagement with non-Western epistemologies.

By situating Pound's representations of China and Japan alongside his critiques of capitalism and usury, this essay argues that Pound's work both reflects and destabilizes imperial narratives. The modernist techniques that define his poetics—fragmentation, allusion, polyglossia—can be interpreted as both a form of aesthetic resistance to imperial authority and as a reiteration of the cultural hierarchies that underpinned colonial modernity. Through close textual analysis and theoretical contextualization, Pound's poetic imagination will be re-examined as a case study in how Western modernism internalized and reconfigured the global dimensions of empire.

Pound and the Question of Empire

Pound's lifelong fascination with history and power situates his poetry squarely within imperial discourse. *The Cantos*, begun in the early 1920s and continued throughout his life, attempts to

construct a poetic epic of civilization, weaving together Western and Eastern sources, ancient and modern economies, and moral as well as aesthetic systems (Pound, 1996). *Canto I* opens with a translation and transformation of Homer: "And then went down to the ship, / set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea" (Pound, 1996, p. 3). This invocation of Odysseus' journey already situates Pound's modern epic within the lineage of empire and exploration. In its ambition to recover cultural coherence from historical fragmentation, Pound's project mirrors the imperial desire to organize diverse traditions under a unified aesthetic order. Yet, as James Longenbach (2016) notes, Pound's "poetics of history" resists linear chronology, instead proposing a network of cultural equivalences that blur boundaries between civilizations (p. 47).

From a post-colonial perspective, this ambition to synthesize global traditions raises profound ethical and ideological questions. Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* demonstrates how Western representations of the East often function as instruments of control, projecting exoticized images that reaffirm Western superiority. Pound's idealization of Chinese and Japanese cultures, though expressed with admiration, falls into this pattern. His translations and adaptations of Chinese classics—most notably in *Cathay* and *The Cantos*—transform the East into a moral corrective to Western decadence (Qian, 1995). Yet, as Homi Bhabha (1994) argues, such ambivalence—oscillating between attraction and appropriation—constitutes the "hybrid" space of colonial discourse, where mimicry and admiration coexist with domination. Pound's "Confucian order" thus becomes a double gesture: it both contests Western materialism and reinstates Eurocentric authority by reinscribing the Orient as a symbolic repository of moral purity.

Orientalism and Cultural Translation

Pound's engagement with Chinese and Japanese texts exemplifies the contradictory processes of cultural translation at the heart of modernism. His readings of Confucius, Li Po, and the *Analects* were mediated through Ernest Fenollosa's notes and the ideogrammic method, which Pound interpreted as evidence of the East's superior linguistic and ethical systems (Pound, 1968a). In *The Spirit of Romance*, he praised Chinese civilization for embodying a harmonious synthesis of art and governance, in contrast to the West's spiritual decay. However, as Zhaoming Qian (1995) observes, Pound's "Sinological modernism" was less an authentic recovery of Chinese thought than a creative reconstruction filtered through Western modernist priorities (p. 33).

This act of mediation corresponds to what Gayatri Spivak (1988) identifies as the "epistemic violence" of representation—the process by which subaltern voices are appropriated into Western frameworks of intelligibility. Pound's translations flatten historical and cultural difference, transforming Eastern philosophy into a universal moral code compatible with his own anti-capitalist ethos. For instance, his recurring invocation of Confucius in *The Cantos*—as in Canto XIII, where the sage teaches moral clarity through concise aphorisms—functions less as cultural exchange than as ethical allegory:

And Kung said, and wrote on the bo leaves:
The wind moves above the grasses,
And his name shall be as a fragrance. (Pound, 1996, p. 60)

This passage encapsulates Pound's projection of Confucian virtue as the antidote to Western corruption. The Chinese figure becomes a symbolic anchor for his critique of modern Western corruption.

Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity helps articulate this ambivalence. Pound's cross-cultural poetics inhabit a liminal zone between reverence and reification, where the non-Western other is both elevated and contained. His incorporation of ideograms and Eastern motifs disrupts the linguistic homogeneity of Western poetry, yet the very act of inclusion often reproduces Orientalist hierarchies. As Jahan Ramazani (2006) notes, modernist "bricolage" can resemble post-colonial hybridity, but the two differ in intent: while hybridity foregrounds negotiation and resistance, Pound's bricolage often universalizes difference within a Eurocentric synthesis (p. 448).

Modernist Form and Imperial Ideology

Modernist form, as exemplified by Pound, Eliot, and Joyce, frequently mirrors the fragmentation of imperial modernity. The disjunctive structure of *The Cantos*, its multilingual collage, and its non-linear temporalities embody the disintegration of Western hegemony and the search for new aesthetic orders. *Canto XLV*, one of the "Usura Cantos," reveals this aesthetic in compressed moral indictment: "With usura hath no man a house of good stone / each block cut smooth and well fitting" (Pound, 1996, p. 229). The rhythmic urgency of the line dramatizes economic and moral decay, linking financial exploitation to cultural collapse. Yet, as Paul Morrison (1996) argues, this aesthetic radicalism coexists uneasily with reactionary politics. Pound's formal innovations, though avant-garde, were motivated by a desire to restore hierarchical order through culture—a paradox that exposes the complicity of modernism with imperial ideology (p. 12).

Post-colonial theory reframes this aesthetic paradox as a symptom of colonial modernity's contradictions. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) emphasizes that European modernity has always been "provincial," dependent on its colonial others for definition. Pound's modernism participates in this global asymmetry: his "world poetry" reimagines the globe as an archive of cultural fragments accessible to the Western poet-curator. This impulse to collect and reorganize world traditions under the aegis of Western genius parallels what Bill Ashcroft et al. (1989) describe as the "imperial imagination"—a desire to claim universal authority through selective appropriation (p. 9).

Nevertheless, the formal indeterminacy of *The Cantos*—its refusal of closure, coherence, and linear progression—also opens interpretive spaces for resistance. As John Gery et al. (2021) suggest, Pound's cross-cultural aesthetic networks inadvertently destabilize Eurocentric hierarchies by foregrounding multiplicity and translation. The very failure of *The Cantos* to achieve total synthesis mirrors the breakdown of imperial unity. Thus, while Pound's poetic

vision aspires to empire, his modernist form inadvertently exposes the impossibility of imperial totality.

Usury, Capitalism, and Imperial Power

One of Pound's most persistent obsessions—his denunciation of usury—provides a revealing lens through which to examine his economic and political imagination. In *The Cantos*, usury functions not only as a financial evil but as a symbolic shorthand for spiritual decay, social injustice, and historical corruption. Pound's refrain—"Usura rusteth the chisel / It rusteth the craft and the craftsman" (Pound, 1996, p. 230)—condenses moral, aesthetic, and political critique into a single image. His diatribes against banking, capitalism, and materialism reflect his broader critique of Western modernity's exploitative structures. Yet his economic rhetoric, as Nick Selby (2005) notes, often blurs into reactionary conservatism and anti-Semitic tropes, linking financial corruption to racialized anxieties about modernity (p. 21).

In *Canto XVI*, he juxtaposes Confucius with European mercantilist figures, asserting that moral clarity in governance and economy is historically contingent yet aspirational: "Confucius say / Govern / By rites / and not by sword" (Pound, 1996, p. 89). Through this layering of Eastern and Western historical references, Pound constructs a polyphonic critique of imperial authority, signaling both admiration and resistance to dominant narratives of power. Beyond cultural critique, Pound's poetic form itself engages with questions of empire and resistance. The Cantos' fragmentary structure, multilingual layering, and historical allusions disrupt linear narratives, creating a textual space where conventional power hierarchies are interrogated. In Canto XLV, Pound's juxtaposition of biblical, Chinese, and European sources constructs a collage that exposes the artificiality of singular imperial histories: "With usura / the houses pile up / like the dead / on the battlefield" (Pound, 1996, p. 230). Here, form and content converge to critique the structural violence of usury and imperial expansion, suggesting that modernist aesthetics can themselves enact a form of resistance to hegemonic discourse. From a post-colonial perspective, usury can be reinterpreted as a metaphor for imperial control. The economic domination of colonized regions through debt, trade monopolies, and extraction parallels the systemic exploitation that Pound condemns. However, his critique remains trapped within a Eurocentric frame that envisions redemption through a revival of "organic" (often pre-capitalist) order rather than through anti-imperial solidarity. Fanon's (1963) analysis of colonial capitalism in *The Wretched of the Earth* illuminates the limits of Pound's economic thought: while Fanon views economic liberation as inseparable from decolonization, Pound's vision substitutes cultural reform for structural change.

Despite these limitations, Pound's anti-usury discourse exposes the moral contradictions of Western modernity. In his vilification of financial abstraction and his idealization of productive labor, one can discern an implicit critique of imperial capitalism's alienating effects. Yet, as Ronald Bush (1977) observes, Pound's search for "economic justice" culminated in political naivety—his alignment with Italian Fascism, which he saw as a corrective to capitalist decay (p. 189). Post-colonial analysis thus reframes Pound's economic utopianism as symptomatic

of modernism's entanglement with imperial nostalgia: a longing for order that masks systemic domination.

Identity, Resistance, and the Poetics of Hybridity

Pound's engagement with cultural identity and resistance is fraught with ambivalence. On one hand, his admiration for non-Western traditions and his critique of Western exploitation suggest an oppositional stance toward imperial hegemony. On the other, his idealization of cultural purity and his hierarchical aesthetics reinforce the very logic of empire. Bhabha's (1994) theory of ambivalence clarifies this paradox: colonial discourse simultaneously undermines and sustains imperial power through the unstable interplay of mimicry, admiration, and fear. Pound's "orientalizing" imagination thus reveals both the attraction of the colonial other and the anxiety it provokes.

In *The Cantos,* identity is not fixed but dispersed across cultural and linguistic fragments. The polyphonic weave of Canto LXXXI exemplifies this dynamic: "What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross" (Pound, 1996, p. 541). Here Pound's personal creed of loyalty and artistic integrity transcends national or racial boundaries, gesturing toward a global moral order.

The poem's polyphonic structure—interweaving Greek myth, Chinese philosophy, and American history—produces a form of poetic hybridity that anticipates post-colonial strategies of cultural negotiation. As Ming Xie (2023) argues, Pound's "spatial poetics" reconfigure cultural identity as a dynamic field of translation and spatial relation rather than as a stable national essence (p. 134). Yet this cosmopolitanism remains shadowed by exclusion: while the poem gestures toward universality, its author's politics restrict its moral horizon to an imagined community of the elect.

Still, Pound's modernist fragmentation can be reread as a proto-postcolonial gesture of resistance to imperial totality. His refusal of narrative coherence and his emphasis on linguistic multiplicity resist the homogenizing tendencies of empire, which seeks to impose singular meanings and centralized authority. Ramazani (2006) interprets modernist fragmentation as a "prehistory of postcolonial hybridity," a formal precursor to the discontinuous subjectivities of decolonized writing (p. 455). In this sense, Pound's aesthetics, despite their ideological contradictions, contribute to a poetic vocabulary that later writers—Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire, and others—would transform into explicit post-colonial resistance.

Reassessing Pound's Legacy through Post-Colonial Lenses

Reinterpreting Pound through post-colonial theory requires moving beyond moral condemnation to critical reassessment. Said's (1978) framework reveals the Orientalist structures underpinning his cross-cultural imagination, while Bhabha and Spivak illuminate the ambivalence and appropriation that characterize his engagement with non-Western te

Chakrabarty's (2000) call to "provincialize Europe" invites a reconfiguration of Pound's global modernism as a symptom of Western self-universalization. Yet these same theoretical tools also recover subversive possibilities within his poetics—the moments when his aesthetic experiments undermine the very hierarchies they seem to sustain. Gery et al. (2021) argue that reading Pound across cultural boundaries reveals not only his failures of understanding but also his contributions to global literary exchange. His work helped make non-Western texts visible within the modernist canon, even if through problematic mediation. As Paul Stasi and Josephine Park (2015) suggest, reassessing Pound "in the present" involves acknowledging his contemporaneity—the ongoing relevance of his contradictions to a globalized literary field. The challenge for post-colonial criticism is thus to hold these tensions in view: to see in Pound both the arrogance of empire and the potential for intercultural dialogue. Ultimately,

Pound's legacy compels a rethinking of modernism itself. If modernism once signified the aesthetic response to Western modernity's crises, post-colonial theory exposes it as a global formation shaped by empire. Pound's poetic method—his juxtaposition of civilizations, his translation of non-Western texts, his economic critiques—embodies the contradictions of that formation. His work demonstrates how cultural modernity cannot be disentangled from imperial history, and how even the most revolutionary aesthetic can reproduce the structures it seeks to oppose.

Conclusion

Ezra Pound's poetry occupies a critical crossroads between modernism and empire, aesthetic innovation and ideological complicity. Through the lens of post-colonial theory, *The Cantos* and related writings reveal a complex negotiation with the global structures of power that defined the twentieth century. Pound's representations of China and Japan exemplify the double movement of admiration and appropriation that characterizes Western encounters with the East; his economic critique of usury exposes the moral contradictions of capitalist modernity while perpetuating conservative and exclusionary ideals.

Post-colonial frameworks—Said's Orientalism, Bhabha's hybridity, Spivak's subaltern critique, and Chakrabarty's provincializing of Europe—illuminate both the limits and possibilities of Pound's poetic vision. His modernist form, though born of imperial conditions, also gestures toward pluralism and fragmentation, anticipating the de-centered aesthetics of post-colonial literature. Reconsidering Pound through these theoretical lenses not only complicates our understanding of his politics but also broadens the field of modernist studies, situating it within a global history of domination, resistance, and cultural translation.

By interrogating the imperial dimensions of Pound's imagination, we begin to see modernism not as a purely Western phenomenon but as a site of ongoing negotiation between center and periphery, power and creativity, appropriation and resistance. In this reimagined framework, Pound's contradictions are not merely historical failings but vital sites for rethinking the entanglements of art, ideology, and empire in the modern world.

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