

# JAPONISM AND MODERNISM: EZRA POUND AND HIS ERA

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## THESES OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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### 1. Scope of dissertation

The dissertation analyzes the intertwining phenomena of japonism and modernism from multiple angles; its general aim is to reconstruct and follow the complex course and change of the image of Japan at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with a focus on Ezra Pound's Japanese translations, adaptations and poetry.

After the 1858 opening of Japan, fictitious and aestheticizing representations of Japan were predominant in Victorian Great Britain for decades, due to the appropriative gestures of art nouveau. However, international political changes soon redrew the image of

Japan: the victories over China and the Russian Empire foreshadowed the birth of a new world power. Accordingly, the Japanese government portrayed itself at the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition in London as a modern colonizing empire, a political equal to Great Britain, emphasizing its industrial, scientific, economic and military advance. Despite all efforts, though, the Japanese organizers did not succeed in erasing preexisting stereotypes entirely. Instead, the earlier image shaped by art nouveau and the later one disseminated by the exhibition and the media lived on concurrently in the public discourse.

Ezra Pound received the literary legacy of the late American professor Ernest Fenollosa and his Japanese student Hirata Kiichi a few years later in 1913. These notes included essays on Japanese arts and translations of some Nō plays. Pound edited the manuscripts for publication, redrafting the translations and supplying explanations whenever he felt the need. Moreover, following the structure of Japanese plays loosely, Pound also wrote some adaptations in 1916. In the translations and adaptations, the Poundian interpretation of Japanese culture was markedly anachronistic, as it was mostly derived from the art nouveau approach to Japan, transmitted to Pound by James McNeill Whistler and various Victorian authorities on Japanese matters. For example, like many of Pound's 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors, he frequently compared Japanese arts to their ancient Greek counterparts, and established his interpretation of Japanese drama on the aesthetics of Greek theatre. Moreover, Pound found not only reinforcement of his own imagist disciplines in Nō plays, but he also thought he encountered reminiscences of fin-de-siècle spiritist doctrines in them. Pound's anachronistic and appropriated view of Japanese culture owes much to Pound's reliance on earlier, Victorian authorities on Japanese matters, whose expertise and linguistic competence was, to say the least, just as limited as Pound's own.

Ezra Pound did not turn to Japanese literature for inspiration again until the 1940s and 1950s. Two translations from Sophocles date to this period: the *Elektra* and *Women of Trachis*, both of which Pound adapted in a Nō-like manner. Before rendering these ancient Greek texts, however, Pound had the chance to watch films of Japanese Nō performances in Washington, DC. This fact resulted in a striking difference between the translations and adaptations of the 1910s and the Sophocles versions after the war. The vision-related aspects of the Japanese tradition, including motion, props and scenery, become much more emphatic than before. While in the 1910s Japanese theatre only existed as text for Pound, the 1950s recorded his perception of it as an event or happening. Alongside, references to Japanese theatre needed less explanation and appropriation in the later plays, as the genre of Nō had become more widely known by the mid-century. Therefore, the two distinct traditions of Greece and Japan could start to interact productively in Pound's renderings, without being too harshly domesticated or misrepresented.

The effect of japonism on modernism is scrutinized mostly in the works of Ezra Pound because he blended the two in different genres and periods as well. The relation of imagism and haiku is a much-researched area; however, my dissertation is the first to outline the proper formal evolution of the Poundian haiku and to show the convergence of the Greek epigrammatic tradition and that of haiku. The impact of the haiku on Pound's work did not last long: from around 1909 until the end of the 1910s. After the Second World War, the influence of the haiku on *The Cantos* can be claimed to be sporadic and marginal.

The effect of the Nō is more versatile and permanent in Pound's works; yet it is a less explored area in Pound studies. The significance of the early Nō translations and adaptations for the writings of Pound can be grasped with the help of the term of *nostos*

or 'return.' Pound tried to incorporate cultures past and present, close and distant in a common framework. My dissertation argues that the Nō was a major force shaping this framework, especially the concept of "subject rhymes." (Pound, *Selected Letters* 201) Concerning the Nō adaptations, the analysis addresses not only theoretical issues but traces the philological problems of one of the plays. The posthumously published text of the one-act drama is likely to be the result of the false reconstruction of authorial intentions, and may need the revision of existing manuscript material.

Lastly, the two translations from Sophocles differ from the earlier Nō texts to a great extent. The Japanese influence can be felt not so much in the poetics but more in the dramaturgy of the renderings. The foreign tradition is less evoked by intertextual references but by visual allusions, comprising dance moves, masks and background elements. Nevertheless, in the case of the *Elektra*, the evocation of the Nō theatre also conforms to the general focus of the translation, as it foregrounds the issue of tradition and the preservation of the past. The traditionality of the Nō was a pivotal point for the young Pound as well, and in this play it proved to be instrumental in transmitting a sense of commitment to past excellence. In *Women of Trachis*, similarly, the translation directs the reader's attention to the problem of the *pharmakon*, which resonates closely to Pound's usage of the Nō tradition.

Therefore, the dissertation gives an overview of the early changes of the popular and scholarly interest in Japan, with special respect to the role of politics and the various branches of japonism. More specifically, it analyzes the interaction of japonism and modernism in the works of Ezra Pound, one of the most known and acknowledged translators of Japanese literature.

## 2. Structure and methodology

As it has been noted before, the dissertation approaches the relation of japonism and modernism from different perspectives in order to be able to grasp the complexity of the historical, political, artistic and cultural aspects of the interaction between these two phenomena. Furthermore, the diversity of material used for analysis requires that every subject area be covered through the introduction of an emblematic example in the context of further similar contemporary instances. The thesis is among the first attempts to interpret the relation of japonism and modernism with a literary focus, but not neglecting related disciplines, either. Therefore, there is considerable space devoted to the inclusion of previously undiscovered primary sources, which is hoped to attract critical attention to them.

Because of the heterogeneity of the subject matter, individual chapters may have different theoretical approaches. The events during and leading up to the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition are best handled within a postcolonial framework, and the theoretical conclusion of the chapter is also based on Homi K. Bhabha's essay "Of Mimicry and Man." (Bhabha 121-131) However, for the discussion of Pound's literary adaptations deconstruction, speech act theory and the Freudian psychoanalytic criticism proved to be more fruitful; therefore, the analysis always applies the most serviceable critical tools, while it also carefully delineates individual approaches. Consequently, different schools of criticism are never mixed in the analysis but are confined to separate (sub)chapters to avoid the undesirable conflation of their diverse philosophical backgrounds.

## 3. Major points

- I. The dissertation is the first to include certain photographs, postcards, illustrations, speeches and newspaper clippings from the collection of the Museum of London to illuminate the discussion of early Japanese-British relations. This enables the analysis to draw a more detailed picture of the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition and its ideological foundations than before (up to date, the most thorough scholarly examination on the subject is Ayako Hotta-Lister's monograph). The term "mirrored colonial schizophrenia" introduced in the first chapter describes the conflicting political interests informing the exhibition, which foregrounded the unacknowledged but necessarily self-contradictory elements of the Japanese political agenda. The analysis is not specific to Japan's early twentieth-century politics, though; it may well be applied to any country that struggles for political or economic sovereignty and simultaneously suppresses its own minorities or other states' rights for the same. For instance, the 1848-49 Hungarian war of independence was an attempt to establish at least a partially independent political regime from Austria – and at the same time Hungarian troops are known to have subdued all Croatian and Serbian attempts at regional freedom. To mention a contemporary parallel, the status of Kosovo is complicated by the same issues. The variety of examples suggests that the framework may be used irrespective of cultural and periodic backgrounds, as it is argued in a paper of the present author. (Mihálka)
- II. The public image of Japan is complemented by Pound's private interpretation of Japanese culture. Pound's view of Japan is argued to be bound more closely to the Victorian, aestheticizing understanding of Japan than to the contemporaneous, changing and political representation of the country. Pound's anachronistic interpretation and lack of linguistic skills and background

- knowledge is likely to have been the root causes of his pioneering work being ignored by the fledging japanology. The discussion also gives a rough overview of the results of early scholarly attention to Japan. However, it not only situates Pound's work in the context of contemporary writing on Japan but also identifies and introduces a previously lesser known author, Marcella A. Hincks, who has been referred to wrongly in recent scholarship. (e.g. Taxidou 101, 104)
- III. The rest of the dissertation focuses on the effect of japonism on Pound's works, across genres and periods. The translations and adaptations of the 1910s are best approached through the concept of the *nostos* ("return") as described by Douglas Frame in classical and modern epic poems. Previously, Leon Surette and Demetres Tryphonopoulos discussed *nostos* as being roughly synonymous with palingenesis, a part of the occult tradition. My analysis differentiates between these notions with the help of Pound's poetry and prose, especially the construction of the concept of knowledge in his early writings. The *nostos*, thus made independent of the occult, can be seen as a central issue underlying not only the Japanese adaptations but also much of the just emerging first drafts of *The Cantos* through informing Poundian structural device of "subject rhymes." (Pound, *Selected Letters* 201)
  - IV. The study also addresses the philological problems of a posthumously published volume containing Pound's Japanese adaptations, *Plays Modelled on the Noh* (1916). The status of the third play of the collection, "De Musset's 'A Supper at the House of Mademoiselle Rachel,'" is, according to the argument of the thesis, erroneously identified. Instead of it being a play on its own, the dissertation suggests it being a lengthy introduction, also containing a piece of translation, to the last play of the volume, "Tristan." Not only is Pound's method of commentary similar to the one applied in his edition of the Fenollosa manuscripts, but inner textual references also make it plausible that the reconstruction of authorial intentions went astray in this case.
  - V. Concerning Pound's poetry, haiku was easily incorporated in Pound's imagism. The three-line haiku was soon abstracted into a one-line haiku that has distinguishing characteristics, for example a regularly recurring, almost identical syntactical structure or a rhythmic unit with three stresses at the end of the line. This latter, following Hugh Kenner's term "key signature," (Kenner 491) I called the "Japanese key signature." The Japanese key signature is argued to be a derivation from the poetry of Sadakichi Hartmann, a German-Japanese poet writing in English, who frequently applied the stress cluster in his own work, with which Pound was familiar. Lastly, the Poundian haiku is also observed to be converging with Pound's usage of the epigram in the volume of *Lustra* (1916).
  - VI. The impact of the Nō theatre on Pound's poetry is more limited. Primarily, it served as inspiration for the poetics of *The Cantos* (with the concept of *nostos*), and supplied occasional references. The *Ur-Cantos* (first drafts that were later abandoned) were generally more deeply influenced by Nō than the final *The Cantos*; the omission of several allusions to Nō indicates that they did not become structurally decisive elements in the 1910s. However, the post-war *Pisan Cantos* show a Nō-inspired landscape and subject rhymes with Japanese elements. Japanese drama is shown here to be a structurally significant poetic constituent, rather than an ornamental device as it used to be in the *Ur-Cantos*.
  - VII. The last chapter identifies an underlying connection between ancient Greek and Japanese theatre at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Numerous authors are investigated from this perspective, and Pound's translations from Sophocles in a Japanese manner are located in this tradition. As the Nō implied tradition very strongly for Pound, the analysis of *Elektra*

concentrates on the preservation of tradition and loyalty to the past not only on the level of the plot but also in the linguistic formation of individual characters' idiolects. While secondary literature on Pound's *Elektra* always notes the curious presence of transliterated Greek text scattered among English lines, there has been no attempt yet to account for the function and distribution of these lines. Starting with *Elektra* and the chorus's language, the study shows that ancient Greek insertions correspond to the usage of English archaisms and nursery rhyme-like lyric passages in set meters. This linguistic traditionalism is only accessible to *Elektra* and the chorus, the preservers of the past in Mykenae. No wonder, then, that it is also *Elektra*, tradition incarnated, who moves at the end of the play "as per Noh." (Sophocles, *Elektra* 38) Loyalty to the past is not only basis for identity formation but also the foundation of a secret linguistic community; therefore, Japanese theatre, too, features in this play as an emblem of tradition.

VIII. Pound's translation of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* as *The Women of Trachis* is another instance where he blended ancient Greek and Japanese traditions. Jacques Derrida's study of the *pharmakon* is the basis of the analysis of this play, in which the cure-like poison features not only in the plot but also determines a number of elements in Pound's translation. Although the translation erases the word *pharmakon* from the text (it is substituted with the pronoun "it" [Sophocles, *The Women of Trachis* 30]), it resurfaces through the apparent tension between the paratexts and the body text. The conflict turns out to be a play of disavowal and intrusion between surface appearances and underlying meanings, confirming the presence of the *pharmakon*. Pound's critical insight into the structure and reinterpretation of the play was reinforced decades later by classical philological scholarship.

IX. The dissertation, in general, relies extensively on the Ezra Pound Papers of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale

University, and occasionally on the Laurence Binyon Archive of the British Library and the Kiralfy and White City Collections of the Museum of London. I gratefully acknowledge the privilege of being granted access to these collections.

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