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POUND'S RECEPTION OF NOH RECONSIDERED: THE IMAGE AND THE VOICE

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1. In 1913, Pound was asked by Mrs. Fenollosa to complete her late husband's manuscripts of the translation of Japanese Noh plays. He began immediately, and after preparing a few pieces and explanations on the Noh for magazines, published two books: *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* in 1916 and *"Noh" or Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan* in 1917. In total Pound completed the translation of fifteen Noh plays and wrote synopses of four more plays.

Pound's evaluation of Noh drama during the period of translation was ambivalent. At first, he was enthusiastic about the texts of the Noh, as indicated by his 1914 letter to Harriet Monroe, the editor of the magazine *Poetry*: "I think you will agree with me that this Japanese find [Noh] is about the best of luck we've had since the starting of the magazine" (SL 31).[1] He even tried his hand at plays modeled on the Noh; in 1916 he was expecting one of them to be performed at Nancy Cunard's salon, together with W. B. Yeats's "At the Hawk's Well," a play also inspired by the Noh. However, Pound occasionally commented on the Noh in words that were not so enthusiastic. For example, in a letter of 1914 to Dorothy

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Shakespear, he complains about the difficulty of the translation by saying, "[Noh] seems too delicate to give to a profane English vulgo" (Pound and Litz 293). And after the publication of the two books of Noh, his earlier enthusiasm seemed to have waned. In a letter of 1917 to John Quinn, for example, Pound says, "China is fundamental, Japan is not" (SL 102). In 1918, in another letter to Quinn, he also writes, referring to one of his Noh books, "I find *Noh* [*Noh or Accomplishment*] unsatisfactory. … I admit there are beautiful bits in it. But it's all too damn soft" (SL 137).[2]

Did Pound eventually lose interest in the Noh and dismiss its values? Was Pound's Noh experience a trivial episode of his infatuation with the Orient? Before answering these questions, we must remember that at the time of his translation of the Noh, Pound was developing his Imagist and Vorticist aesthetics, and it should be noted that this development of his aesthetics is reflected in his comments on the Noh. In the following, I will consider the relationship between Pound's interpretation of the Noh and the shift in his aesthetics, by comparing Pound's use of poetic masks in his early poems and the manner of the appearance of ghosts in the Noh, and by considering Pound's attention to the Image in the Noh.

2. Before he received Fenollosa's manuscripts, Pound had been experimenting with the poetic mask in numerous poems included in such early works as *A Lume Spento* (1908), *A Quinzaine for This Yule* (1908), *Personae* (1909), *Exultations* (1909), *Canzoni* (1911) and *Ripostes* (1912). In these poems Pound spoke in the voices not his own by using different masks, which include those of Cino, Bertran de Born, François Villon, Arnaut of Marvoil, Guido Cavalcanti, Pierre Vidal, Simon the Apostle, Marc Antony Flaminius and Lope de Vega. These are mostly masks of notable historical figures or poets that Pound liked, and in these poems they speak, in the manner of Robert Browning's "dramatic monologue," as

if they were revived from the country of the dead.

Wearing someone's mask and speaking as that person is an act of giving voice to that someone without voice, and giving a face to that person who has no face. At the same time, wearing a poetic mask, or impersonating someone, is letting someone who is not here and now manifest himself or herself. In the case of Pound, the idea of assuming someone's persona, giving presence to that person by so doing, is strongly linked with his transcendental cosmology. In several poems included in the books published before 1913, Pound emphasizes the continuity between the transcendent world, or the sphere of what he calls "all-soul" (CEP 296), and the world of reality, that of here and now. We see this continuity, for example, in a poem called "Invern," which has the lines, "I being part of all / And sith the spirit of all moveth in me" (CEP 35), and in "La Fraisne," where Pound talks about this continuity between the present and the transcendent, spiritual world in the voice of an old man who lost his love. Pound gives an explanation for his transcendental cosmology in a note to "La Fraisne"; here he says that he feels divided between "myself corporal" and "a self aetherial," and that being freed of the first, and of the weight of a soul "capable of salvation or damnation," he has become "simplex naturae" (CEP 8).

Because of this visionary identity with the spiritual and transcendent world, the poet can be "the assembler of souls" (CEP 8), according to Pound, and he assembles not only anonymous souls but also the souls of well-known figures in the past. As a kind of medium in a séance, the poet lets these souls speak through himself. Perhaps the best example of this scheme is "Histrion," the poem included in *A Quinzaine for This Yule*:

> And yet I know, how that the souls of all men great
> At times pass through us,
> And we are melted into them, and are not
> Save reflexions of their souls.

Thus am I Dante for a space and am
One Francois Villon, ballad-lord and thief
…
'Tis as in midmost us there glows a sphere
Translucent, molten gold, that is the "I"
And into this some form projects itself. (CEP 71)

As a "histrion" or an actor, the poet gathers souls; or rather the souls project themselves into the poet and they express themselves, using his voice. Pound's model of the poet in this period is thus highly Romantic, reminiscent of the metaphor of the Aeolian Harp adopted by Shelley and Coleridge.

3. If Pound's poetic mask is characterized by giving voice to transcendent beings, allowing them to express themselves, then its affinity with the Noh would seem apparent. The continuity between the transcendent and the mundane worlds is one of the hallmarks of the Noh, especially the "Mugen Noh," or "fantasy Noh."

The Noh plays are usually divided into two types: one is "Gendai Noh" or realistic Noh, and the other is "Mugen Noh." In the latter, the play is usually divided into two acts. In the first act, *shite*, the main character, appears in disguise to another character, or *waki*, and in the second act, the *shite* reappears in his true form, most often the ghost of someone who cannot find peace because of unfulfilled love, envy, or sadness. These Noh plays highlight the appearance of the ghost from the spiritual realm into the real world, the here and now. In "Kayoi Komachi," for example, the ghost of Ono no Komachi, a legendary beauty of the 8th century, and that of Shii no Shosho, a man who courted her ninety-nine consecutive nights, appear, speak and dance in the real world; in "Nishikigi," another "Mugen Noh," two dead lovers manifest themselves, first in disguise, and then in their true forms, and speak and dance; in "Tamura," the ghost of the 8th-century

general, Sakanoue no Tamura maro, appears in the here and now and speaks about his past military feats, dancing.

However, in spite of this similarity between Noh plays and Pound's poetic masks, there are elements in Noh that seem incompatible with Pound's poetics: the Noh lacks the role of an assembler of souls, or a medium for transcendent voices. The fictional space in the Noh plays is one in which spiritual beings manifest themselves and express their feelings without the medium of the poet. There is no room for a poet, or a poet figure, who gives voice to a ghost that does not have it. Certainly, in numerous Noh plays, a prayer by a Buddhist monk enables a ghost to make an appearance. However, even in those plays the monk does not serve as a subject that gives voice to the ghost. Even if the monk's prayer enables the ghost to appear in the real world, the monk does not speak for or as the ghost. Once it appears, it speaks and dances without the help of anyone. When it appears, it already has a voice. In Noh, ghosts do not possess someone so that they can speak through that person.

Instead, the revelation of the ghost is expressed on stage by the change of Noh masks. In many plays of fantasy Noh, the ghost appears in disguise in the first act, and in the second it reveals itself. And this revelation is symbolically expressed by the use of two different masks. In "Tamura," for example, the ghost first appears as a "doji," or a boy, and then in the second act, it reappears in its true self, that is, as Saka no ue no Tamura maro, a warrior who subjugated the Ezo, or the Ainu. The first actor, or the first *shite*, appears wearing a mask of "doji" that indicates he is a boy, and the second actor, or the second *shite*, appears in a mask of "heida," that of a grown man, to show the revelation of the ghost's identity.

In Noh, in other words, the revelation of the transcendent being takes place in the manner of "epiphany," in which spiritual beings simply manifest themselves, while in Pound's poetics of the mask, the transcendent beings are given pres-

ence through the medium of the poet, the assembler of souls. For Pound, the poet is "possessed," so to speak, by the souls residing in the transcendent sphere.

4. Despite such difference, however, Pound was fascinated with the Noh, at least at the beginning. This is possibly because he saw in it another characteristic that was important to him, a discovery that was related to the new aesthetics of Imagism and Vorticism, which he was developing at the time. As is well-known, in Imagism, Pound emphasized the importance of "presentation." The first of the famous Imagist "rules" was "Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective," and the second was "To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" (LE 3). "In a Station of the Metro," Pound's most famous poem of his Imagist period, consists of two lines presented and juxtaposed with each other to express a pure image that he had perceived at a subway station in Paris.

Pound's development of this new aesthetics, Imagism, thus meant a departure from his earlier, Romantic aesthetics. While his earlier aesthetics emphasized the poet's act of "expressing," that of Imagism stressed the act of "showing." There is no room for the poet as an Aeolian Harp, or an assembler of souls, in the aesthetics of Imagism. The speaking subject must recede from the text, which now consists in an image or images presented.

Pound tried to connect this new aesthetics with the Noh, as demonstrated by his repeated emphasis, in *"No" or Accomplishment*, on the idea that the Noh is an image. In the introduction to "Part II" of the book, for example, he says, "The [Noh] plays are at their best, I think, an image; that is to say, their unity lies in the image – they are built up about it as the Greek plays are built up about a single moral conviction" (T 247). In an explanation for "Suma Genji," he also says, "[Noh] has also what we may call Unity of Image. At least, the better

plays are all built into the intensification of a single Image: the red maple leaves and the snow flurry in Nishikigi, the pines in Takasago, the blue-grey waves and wave pattern in Suma Genji, the mantle of feathers in the play of that name, Hagoromo" (T 237).

Though in these remarks Pound does not refer to "presentation," his emphasis on the "Unity of Image" is actually in close connection with this concept; for considering Pound's explanation of the "one image poem" as "a form of super-position" or juxtaposition, what he means by such phrases as the "Unity of Image" and the "intensification of the Image" can be interpreted as the unity or intensification of an image achieved through the super-position or juxtaposition of different components of the play: that is, the text, the mask, the music and the dance. In the introduction to "Part II" of *"No" or Accomplishment*, Pound also says, just before the part just quoted, "The reader must remember that the words are only one part of this art. The words are fused with the music and with the ceremonial dancing. One must read or 'examine' these texts 'as if one were listening to music.' One must build out of their indefiniteness a definite image" (T 247). Just as the image in the Metro poem is achieved through the super-position of "one idea set on top of another" (GB 89), in the Noh plays the images of the red maple leaves, the snow flurry, the pines, the blue-grey waves and wave pattern, and the mantle of feathers are achieved through different components of the play, which are spoken, recited and sung by different characters and by the chorus, and through the music and the dance. The image of the "pine tree" in "Takasago," for example, is achieved, not by one single word, phrase, passage, or even metaphor, but through the combination of the symbolical painting of the pine tree on the background wooden panel, the references to it in the speeches and songs by characters – *shite* and *tsure*, the two spirits of the pine trees in disguise of an old man and his wife

– the song of the chorus, and the dance of the *shite*.

Pound was apparently fascinated with the formation of this composite or abstract Image by way of the presentation of different components of the Noh play. Indeed, in a footnote to "Suma Genji," Pound says, "This intensification of the Image, this manner of construction, is very interesting to me personally, as an Imagiste, for we Imagistes knew nothing of these plays when we set out in our own manner. These plays are also an answer to a question that has several times been put to me: 'Could one do a long Imagiste poem, or even a long poem in vers libre?'" (T 237). A long Imagiste poem is possibly a poem in which textual segments presenting ideas or facts are superimposed one on top of another to create intense images. Pound saw that in the Noh plays images are "constructed" and, we might argue, it was this idea of the image being constructed that Pound felt similar to his Imagist aesthetics and developed for the composition of his new type of poetry.

5. The transition from Pound's earlier Romantic aesthetics to Imagist aesthetics, however, did not seem to go so smoothly, for Pound occasionally reverted to his Romantic poet image. His four *Plays Modelled on the Noh* (1916), published posthumously in 1987, are a good example in which we can see this difficult transition. In spite of his emphasis on the affinity of Noh plays with Imagism, his plays of imitation are still dominated by his Romantic aesthetics.

For instance, in "A Supper at the House of Mademoiselle Rachel," an adaptation of an Alfred de Musset's letter, the main character Rachel, an actress with a strong aspiration for art and isolated in a milieu of misunderstanding and contempt, reads with her poet-friend – i.e., Musset – a passage from Racine's *Phèdre*. In the stage direction, Pound writes:

> *All at once her eyes glistened – the genius of Racine lighted her face – she turned pale, she blushed. Never had I seen anyone so beautiful, so*

> *interesting; never had she produced such an effect on me at the theater.* (PMN *30)*

The genius of Racine has possessed Rachel, and we can surmise that Racine's voice is revived through her voice. Pound's attention to the role of the speaking subject that revives the voice of a past figure is unmistakable. Rachel, who speaks as Racine, serves unwittingly as another "assembler of souls."

In "Tristan," it is the ghosts of Tristan and Yseult that appear in the here and now. In this play there is also a figure who serves as a medium that gives voice to a ghost: a character called "Sculptor." The Sculptor, a Frenchman, who is obviously modeled on Gaudier-Brzeska, comes to Cornwall to find a quince tree that blossoms in March before any other trees. A young woman appears and shows him the tree but then she suddenly turns into an apparition of Yseult. Then comes a male voice, saying, in Provençal, "pena d'amor / Per Yseutz la blonda" (PMN 35), and the ghost of Tristan appears. Tristan and Yseult then speak to each other, but because Tristan lacks enough power, he uses the Sculptor's voice. Pound writes: "(*standing near the Sculptor and using his voice*) Whose ring is that green on your hand?" and also "(*using the Sculptor's voice, the Sculptor moving a little*) What's the stick for?" (PMN 36). It should be noted that the Sculptor not only speaks for Tristan, but also as Tristan, for after Tristan begins to speak using the Sculptor's voice, Yseult begins to attend to the Sculptor, instead of Tristan himself. Tristan thus says:

> *(seeing that she is not attending to him but to the half-dazed Sculptor)*
> My dust is a veil in the wind
> So frail a thing, that you will turn your head,
> And look at any fool in a daze,
> And not hear me. (PMN 36)

At the end of the play, both Tristan and Yseult disappear, and the Sculptor, left alone, says, "I came to look at a tree, and I have seen a strange blossom" (PMN 37), presumably a blossom that is the scene of fantasy in which ghosts of Tristan and Yseult appeared and spoke to each other, an Image symbolized also by the quince.

This short play is important not only because it shows Pound's attempt at constructing an Image in the style of Noh but also because it reflects his fluctuation between his earlier Romantic aesthetics and that of Imagism. The fluctuation is revealed in the way Pound uses two modes of ghosts' manifestation in this play. Yseult appears in the manner of a typical fantasy Noh; she appears first in disguise, as a young woman, and then reappears in her real form, the ghost of Yseult. She appears and speaks without a medium. In contrast, Tristan appears in an interesting way. First his voice is heard. Then he appears just as Yseult's ghost does, without mediation, but then he possesses the Sculptor and speaks in his voice. As if experimenting with the ways of giving voice to the spiritual beings, Pound here contrasts the unmediated epiphany and the mediated speech through a poet figure. Since Pound could have made Tristan speak in his own voice and made the play modeled on the Noh closer to a typical play of fantasy Noh, his insertion of this scene of spirit possession, of the mediation of Tristan's voice by way of a poet figure, would suggest his attachment to his earlier aesthetics.[3]

6. Indeed, even in his post-Imagist years, Pound's earlier poet figure continues to make an appearance. For example, a variant version of the 1917 "Three Cantos" begins as follows:

> Ghosts move about me patched with histories.
> You had your business: to set out so much thought,
> So much emotion, and call the lot "Sordello."
> Worth the evasion, the setting figures up
> And breathing life upon them. (PP 2:220)

The first line clearly shows the poet figure that gives voice to the dead ("Ghosts") that lived in the past. Like Robert Browning, who "[breathed] life" upon his historical figures, Pound seems ready, in these lines, to give life to his ghosts in his own poems. This earlier Romantic image of the poet also persists in "Three Cantos," published in 1917, as well as in canto 7, which has the following lines evoking Dantean shades that speak to the poet:

> And the great domed head, con gli occhi onesti e tardi
> Moves before me, phantom with weighted motion,
> Grave incessu, drinking the tone of things,
> And the old voice lifts itself
> weaving an endless sentence. (7/24)

Through Imagism, Vorticism and the revisions of the first cantos, Pound's poetry approached the style of impersonal diction, collage, and ideogrammic juxtaposition of fragmentary texts. In this process Pound's self-conscious insertion of the poet as an assembler of souls gradually disappeared. The translation of the Noh was conducted along with this aesthetic transition, and it provided him with an occasion to examine his new poetics; for seeing the "Unity of Image" in the Noh was an act of reading his new aesthetics into the "Noble Plays of Japan." Though he occasionally reverted to his older aesthetics, as shown in his plays modeled on the Noh, Pound's reception of this traditional art form was part of his act of "Making It New," of creating a new poetics.

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Notes

[1] The following abbreviations are used for Pound's texts in the present article:

C: *The Cantos of Ezra Pound.*

CEP: *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound.*

GB: *Gaudier-Brzeska.*

LE: *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound.*

PMN: *Plays Modelled on the Noh (1916).*

PP: *Ezra Pound's Poetry and Prose: Contributions to Periodicals.*

SL: *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941.*

T: *The Translations of Ezra Pound.*

[2] Presumably due to this shift from enthusiasm to a seeming denial in Pound's evaluation of the Noh, some critics have regarded Noh as a less important influence on Pound than Chinese classical poems, which he translated after Noh. See, for example, Kenner 282-283. See also Miyake for a different view.

[3] Pound's play also provided the text for a one-act opera by Camillo Pennisi, *Tristan*. It was first performed at the Biennale Musica, Venice, 2 July 1995. It was conducted by Marcello Panni, and directed and designed by Margot Galante Garrone, who used the Noh staging and introduced puppets to act out the fateful story of Tristan and Isolde. – Eds.

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