

Peter Nicholls

## **Modernist Figures**

Volume 2: Ezra Pound and After

# The Best of Scholars and Scholarship in the Humanities

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Peter Nicholls

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**Part 1:**  
**Multifarious Pound**



# **An Experiment with Time: Ezra Pound and the Example of Japanese Noh**

It is 25 March 1941. Ezra Pound writes from his base in Rapallo to a Japanese friend, Katue Kitasono:

Note for you and VOU club/that I sent yesterday to United Press a statement of plan for Pacific Peace// We shd/ give you Guam, but INSIST on getting 'Kumasaka' and 'Kagekiyo' in return. i.e. INSIST on getting 300 Noh plays done properly AND recorded on sound film so as to be available to EDUCATE such amerikn stewdents as are capable of being cultur'd.<sup>1</sup>

Pound's proposal to trade territory for Noh plays is the bizarre climax of an interest in Japanese drama which had begun as early as 1913, when he came into possession of the papers of the sinologue Ernest Fenollosa.<sup>2</sup> Yet between 1916, when Pound and Yeats published their edition of plays, *Noh, or Accomplishment*,<sup>3</sup> and this moment in the early 1940s references to Japanese theater had rarely appeared in his work. The translations had in fact quickly seemed inadequate ("too

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- 1 Unpublished letter quoted in Tim Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 210.
  - 2 For details of Fenollosa's career, see Van Wyck Brooks, *Fenollosa and His Circle With Other Essays in Biography* (New York: Dutton, 1962) and Lawrence W. Chisholm, *Fenollosa: The Far East and American Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963).
  - 3 *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* (Churchtown: Cuala Press, 1916). These plays, without Yeats's introduction, were reprinted in *Noh, or Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan, by Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound* (London: Macmillan, 1916). This was in turn reprinted with the Yeats introduction as *The Classic Noh Theatre of Japan, by Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa* (New York: New Directions, 1959). The latter has been used throughout this essay, and is cited as *Noh* in the text.

damn soft," he complained to John Quinn in June 1918),<sup>4</sup> and Pound's subsequent mentions of Noh tended almost by way of compensation to emphasize the "Homeric robustness" of the originals.<sup>5</sup> It was this quality which he stressed in his later attempts to persuade the Salō authorities to sponsor an edition of two Noh plays: "KAGEKIYO where the impact reaches Homeric proportions in the memories of the old warrior. KUMASAKA where the sense of honor and punctilio is at its maximum splendor."<sup>6</sup> The appropriateness of Noh stoicism to the embattled final days of Mussolini's régime is easily grasped, but the ideological nature of Pound's late enthusiasm for the Japanese drama is likely to obscure the more complex relevance of Noh to the earlier stages of the long poem whose first Canto appeared in June 1917.<sup>7</sup>

Pound was not much interested in theater before or after his involvement with Noh, so why were these particular plays so important to him? There are various well-known answers to that question, most of them adumbrated in the commentary passages of *Noh, or Accomplishment*, but the suggestion I want to make is that the Japanese theater led to a fundamental redirection of Pound's early poetics, primarily because it offered him a dramatic temporal figure for a new mode of composition. To put it another way, these Noh plays suggested to Pound a structural conception of time which would allow him to progress from the momentary intuitions

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4 *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. by D. D. Paige (London: Faber, 1971), p. 137: "I admit there are beautiful bits in it. But it's all too damn soft. Like Pater, Fiona Macleod and James Matthew Barrie, not good enough."

5 *Guide to Kulchur* (1938; repr. London: Owen, 1966), p. 81.

6 Unpublished letter, quoted in Redman, p. 254. As so often, Pound echoes with uncanny accuracy one of his much earlier comments; compare *Noh*, p. 38: "The final passage is the Homeric presentation of combat between him and the young boy, Ushiwaka. But note here the punctilio."

7 "Three Cantos. 1," *Poetry*, 10. 3 (June 1917), 113-21.

of Imagism to the complex and extended structures of *The Cantos*.<sup>8</sup>

Pound's excited response to Fenollosa's translations of Noh plays can be seen in a letter to his father in 1916. They would instigate, he said, a "new dramatic movement, plays which wont [sic] need a stage":

Yeats seems to expect the new drama to do something, at least there will be no compromise, actors will wear masks, scenery will be mostly imagined, at most a cloth or a screen, and the dominion of [David] Belasco [...] will no longer be coterminous with the known and inhabitable world.<sup>9</sup>

Pound shared with Yeats the desire to see a theater freed from the machinery of realism, rendered austere in its refusal of the bourgeois matter of plot and naturalistic "psychology." Noh drama, an art of nuance and aristocratic social style, seemed to prefigure the abstractness of the emergent modernist aesthetic even as it exemplified a discipline and decorum painfully lacking in war-torn modernity.

The impetus behind this discovery of a "theatreless drama," as Pound called it,<sup>10</sup> had much in common with the earlier break with representation in the Symbolist theater of Villiers and Maeterlinck. Pound and Yeats were drawn to the high degree of stylization in Noh drama, and both welcomed the use of masks and ritual forms as an alternative to Shavian modernism (Yeats, of course, had already been moving in this direction in the eleven plays he wrote before 1916).

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8 The best discussion of the relation of Noh to the early *Cantos* is in Ronald Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977). Bush does not, however, explore the relation of dramatic temporality to composition which is the subject of the present essay.

9 Quoted in Donald C. Gallup's introduction to Ezra Pound, *Plays Modelled on the Noh (1916)* (Toledo, OH: Friends of the University of Toledo Libraries, 1987).

10 *Selected Letters*, p. 72.

Noh offered a theater purged of the conversational realism which dogged the contemporary stage, promising in its place a revival of a musical art of dance and mime. Yeats's way of developing the model of Noh would remain largely within the format of his own version of Symbolism,<sup>11</sup> but Pound, whose own experiments with the medium were to prove fragmentary and not very successful, seemed also to deduce certain structural elements from this theater which he was able to carry over into the construction of his long poem.

The Fenollosa papers reached Pound at a time when he was much preoccupied with formulating a theory of the poetic image. This was the period of Imagism and of Pound's keen interest in the reduced forms of Japanese haiku; earlier that year he had defined the Image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."<sup>12</sup> Working over Fenollosa's versions of the plays, however, Pound was now struck by a rather different handling of the image: "The Noh has its unity in emotion," he concluded. "It has also what we may call Unity of Image. At least, the better plays all are built into the intensification of a single Image" (*Noh*, p. 27). This unification through imagery was, indeed, especially characteristic of the drama of Zeami Motikiyo (1363-1443), author of nine of the fifteen plays presented in *Noh, or Accomplishment*. In his notes, Fenollosa had also stressed this type of unity:

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- 11 It is difficult to disagree with Richard Taylor's conclusion in *The Drama of W. B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese No* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1976) that "Yeats experimented with some of the most advanced theatre techniques and aesthetic structures of his day, but the worlds he created, however beautiful and effective, had little apparent relationship with either modern needs or outlook" (p. 119). Pound's brief period of dramatic experimentation is discussed below, pp. 12-13.
- 12 *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T. S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1968), p. 4. For haiku, see Earl Miner, "Pound, Haiku and the Image," *Hudson Review*, 9 (1956-57), 570-84.

The beauty and power of the Noh lie in the concentration. All elements—costume, motion, verse, and music—unite to produce a single clarified impression. Each drama embodies some primary human relation or emotion; and the poetic sweetness or poignancy of this is carried to its highest degree by carefully excluding all such obtrusive elements as a mimetic realism or vulgar sensation might demand. (*Noh*, p. 69)<sup>13</sup>

Yet Fenollosa's talk of "a single clarified impression" was not quite in tune with Pound's developing sense of the image. What Fenollosa had in mind was the capacity of a centralized metaphor to produce a unified, organic structure, and while this was in accord with Pound's original theory of the image as a sort of "absolute metaphor," he was now beginning to explore what he would later call the "moving" image as opposed to the "fixed" image.<sup>14</sup>

Pound's shift of terminology in 1914 from *image* to *vortex* ("a radiant node or cluster [ ... ] from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing")<sup>15</sup> had,

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- 13 On Zeami's use of the image as device of unification, see, for example, Janet Goff, *Noh Drama and "The Tale of Genji": The Art of Allusion in Fifteen Classical Plays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 151.
- 14 See Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 52: "If you can't think of imagism or phanopoeia as including the moving image, you will have to make a really needless division of fixed image and praxis or action." The chronology of this development is hard to map: J. H. Prynne argues convincingly that "Chinese poetic practice, and the Chinese language itself, became for Pound at a critically formative stage in his career a demonstration against metonymy" ("Postscript: China Figures," in *New Songs from a Jade Terrace*, trans. by Anne Birrell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 367), but I shall suggest that the structure of Noh offered Pound at the same time the possibility of a disjunctive, metonymic form (Prynne notes that "the Japanese tradition implies for the uses of imagery a strongly predetermined context of allusion" [p. 366, n. 10], though this point is made primarily in regard to poetry).
- 15 "Vorticism." repr. in *Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts*, ed. by Harriet Zinnes (New York: New Directions, 1980), p. 207.

however, turned out to be strategic rather than directly productive: Vorticism was primarily an art of the painted image, and an art which proved in practice to be almost exclusively identified with the work of Pound's colleague Wyndham Lewis. Yet Pound was increasingly fascinated by models of energy and movement, and as he began to draft the early Cantos, so he sought ways of using the image not as a static "equation" for a particular mood but as a device of reference and allusion which would hold in tension the various materials of the poem. In this opening phase of the work, he thought constantly of Noh theater as a model for "a long imagiste or vorticist poem" (between September 1914 and April 1916 he made the connection no fewer than five times):<sup>16</sup> "In the best 'Noh' the whole play may consist of one image. I mean it is gathered about one image. Its unity consists in one image, enforced by movement and music. I see nothing against a long vorticist poem."<sup>17</sup> The process envisaged here is metonymic rather than metaphoric and is clearly in line with Pound's recognition that "the art of allusion, or this love of allusion in art, is at the root of the Noh" (*Noh*, p. 4). The emotion expressed is, as Yeats puts it, "self-conscious and *reminiscent*, always associating itself with pictures and poems" (*Noh*, p. 160; his emphasis), and the "intensification" of the Noh image prized by Pound thus produces results which are rather different from the centralizing of a particular mood in the Imagist mode.<sup>18</sup>

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16 As noted in Ronald Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos*, p. 104.

17 "Vorticism," p. 209. In *Noh*, Pound gave the following examples of this use of the 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" (p. 27). Yeats's account of the grass-imagery in *Nishikigi* is more suggestive as it is more detailed (see *Noh*, pp. 160-61).

18 See Prynne: "Absolute metaphor was thus energetic and succinct, autonomous within the context of its presentation, and connected to it not by links of reference or idiom but by feeling and inner rhythm" (p. 367).