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JAPONISME AND MODERNIST STYLE IN AFRO-CARIBBEAN LITERATURE: THE ART OF DEREK WALCOTT

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INTRODUCTION: MODERNISM, JAPONISME, AND THE AMERICAS

According to the art historian Gabriel Weisberg, *Japonisme* may be regarded as a type of 'East-West Renaissance ... a latter-day example of the kind of cultural diffusion which occurred during the Renaissance, when the excitement of classical discoveries stimulated imitation and veneration' (Weisberg, 1975: 43). In contrast to more gradual, diffuse eighteenth-century movements such as *Orientalisme* or *Chinoiserie* (both of which are forms of intercultural encounter that took place within the broader political and socioeconomic contexts of colonization and imperialism), the earliest, exoticizing phase of *Japonisme*, which Elisa Evett defines as *Japonaiserie* (in which Japanese objects were used 'as props for conjuring up fanciful visions of Japan') began with the initiation of diplomatic ties with Japan in 1854 (Evett, 1982: viii). In another recent study, Yoko Chiba argues that *Japonisme* may be distinguished from this earlier phase by 'a shift away from exoticism, to imitation, to absorption' (Chiba, 1998: 3).

The widening engagement with Japanese art and literature in various cosmopolitan centers of avant-garde activity such as Boston, New York, London, and Paris, gradually colored the diverse styles of modern and modernist poets in the United States, and the poet most often credited for nurturing this development is Ezra Pound (Miner, 1958: 108–155; Kodama, 1984: 32). According to Zhaoming Qian, early Imagists such as T. E. Hulme and F. S. Flint were first drawn to Japanese versification when they read translations of *tanka* and *haiku* poetry rendered by French Symbolists. Pound's study of Japanese poetics probably began when he joined Hulme's Poet's Club in London shortly before WWI, or from these earlier French Symbolist translations, although his preference for the term "hokku" (as opposed to the modernized French, "haiku") suggests that the former is the case (Qian, 1995: 17–18; Flint, 1915: 70–71).

The significance of Pound's interpretative reworking of *haiku* structural techniques—his superpository method, the use of a 'cutting word' to create discordant



halves, and so on—is elaborated in *Gaudier Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916, 1970). Observing that his immersion in Japanese literature had shaped his composition of “In a Station of the Metro,” in 1914 Pound recalled in *The Fortnightly Review* how he finally condensed his best-known Imagist poem:

Three years ago [1911] in Paris I got out of a “metro” train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face and another and another . . . and I tried all that day for words for what that had meant to me . . . I wrote a thirty-line poem and destroyed it because it was what we call work of the second intensity. Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later [1912] I made the following hokku-like sentence.

The apparition of these faces in a crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough (Miner, 1963: 119).

Pound’s full-blown interest Chinese art and literature would not emerge until two years after this coming-of-age as an Imagist, when he first met Mary Fenollosa, the widow of the distinguished American Orientalist in late September, 1913. Thanks in part to Fenollosa’s manuscripts, Pound’s subsequent efforts to understand and to translate Noh assumed an importance for his poetic practice, not just because of what he referred to as its “art of allusion,” but also because he used its mythical aspects to structure *The Cantos* (Pound, “Introduction,” 1916: 213).

Qian has done extensive work on the importance of Pound’s involvement with Chinese culture for the emergence of Anglo-American modernisms during the 1910s and 1920s, and Yunte Huang’s *Transpacific Displacement* (2002) documents a complex system of intertextual migrations to and from China, not just in Pound, but in Imagism as a whole. Still, it is not entirely correct to say that Pound *consistently* appropriated Far Eastern cultural meanings, as Huang suggests. Critics have rightly condemned Pound for his racism, and this certainly would have hampered any good faith effort at transculturation (Paz, 1987: 212–214). But to concede that Pound’s attempt at cross-cultural exchange was limited is not a sufficient reason to dismiss the historical fact of his influence. Pound’s interest in Japanese poetry, and especially his devotion to Noh, played a crucial role in the flourishing of twentieth-century dramatic experiments by W. B. Yeats, Bertolt Brecht, Paul Claudel, Eugene O’Neill, Samuel Beckett, and others (Tsukui, 1983).

What is more, Pound’s formative encounters with Japanese poetry and drama were not, as I shall show, intended to produce accurate, learned translations. Nor was he primarily concerned to write what Huang describes as ethnography, revising or displacing cultural meanings so that they fulfilled his racist preconceptions. Instead, Pound was trying to synthesize an entirely new and different, conversational poetic idiom, what T.S. Eliot would call a “style of speech.” Even though Pound often spoke of his works as translations, he deliberately minimized his role in this process. It is this com-

paratively humble yet significant engagement with *Japonisme* that brought Pound's work to the attention of such Caribbean writers as Derek Walcott.

In retrospect, Pound's role in the diffusion of *Japonisme* has been formidable. Even so, it may come as a surprise to realize that his technique traveled all the way to the small island of St. Lucia in the Caribbean. Derek Walcott was, by his own admission, deeply influenced by Pound. James Rodway, a British Guyanese poet who was Walcott's teacher at the St. Vincent Grammar School, first introduced Walcott to Pound in 1946—an event that dramatically transformed his style (King, 2000: 44). When, three years later, Walcott published *Epitaph for the Young: XII Cantos* (1949), a work dedicated to Rodway, critics were quick to observe that the poem was modeled on Pound's *Cantos*. But since that time, no one to my knowledge has ever noted the importance of Pound's *Japonisme* in this formative phase of Walcott's development.

Consider this passage from Walcott's *Canto X*, where he intimates the significance, and sources, of his poem's title. The speaker is, as Walcott was, a teacher faced with the bewildering hybridity of the Caribbean classroom:

A Chinese boy, now in the class, alien traditions, oddments
Of alien culture.
Li Po, my friend, you will remember
How time took under his sleeve the cicada's song,
And left the cockroach to describe circles in our dry brains,
On the day that you abandoned the wine glass of Rihaku
For the chamber pots of reason.
I am with tired loins in a dry country,
The wind blows the last white prayers from my head,
I believe I will give up the goose quill for a laundry
In far Hao.
A mixture of faces, damp faces torn like paper by the black wind,
Their fathers sons, an epitaph for the young.
Lord, send my roots rain.

In addition to echoes from Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Gerontion*, there is also a recollection of Pound's haiku-inspired "In a Station of the Metro": "A mixture of faces, damp faces torn like paper by the black wind." More important, and less obvious, is Walcott's allusion to a lesser known work by Pound—a short lyric called "Epitaphs," that appeared in the 1916 volume *Lustra*. Pound's second epitaph in that poem is for the eighth-century Chinese poet, Li T'ai Po:

And Li Po also died drunk.
He tried to embrace a moon
In the Yellow River.



But in Walcott's *Epitaph*, the reference to Li Po's Japanese name, "Rihaku," implicitly conjoins the allusion to Pound's "Epitaphs" with the *Japonisme* of Pound's subsequently published *Cathay*, a work where Pound explicitly acknowledges that his Chinese sources were viewed, as it were, through the lens of Japanese translations brought to him by Fenollosa:

FOR THE MOST PART FROM THE CHINESE OF RIHAKU,
FROM THE NOTES OF THE LATE ERNEST
FENOLLOSA, AND THE DECIPHERINGS
OF THE PROFESSORS MORI
AND ARIGA ...

Hugh Kenner was the first to note that, used in this context, the word "decipherings" implicitly questions the qualifications of these professors; and, more recently, Barry Ahearn has argued that Pound "not only suggests that his role in the process of translation has been minimal, but calls into question the qualifications of two of his fellow translators" (Kenner, 1971: 222; Ahearn, 2003: 33).

Walcott had no basis for assessing the quality of Pound's translations. What, then, does Walcott's allusion imply about his identification with Pound's predicament as a poet of the Americas; and, more generally, his close, sympathetic engagement with the project of Pound's *Japonisme*? Like Pound, Walcott is well aware that *Japonisme* serves as a "mask of the self"—in other words, the device is not primarily intended to be a faithful reproduction, or translation, of Japanese art (Pound, 1916, 1970: 85). Like Pound, and like the Chinese student humorously apostrophized as Li Po, Walcott's poet-speaker is concerned to synthetically construct, as Eliot would say, a "style of speech" from "oddments," or odd fragments, of strangely diverse cultures (Eliot, 1928: xiv). Echoing Pound, Walcott makes his own idiom sound foreign or non-native, as if his speaker were trying to communicate with a Jamaican-Chinese student for whom English was a second language. By assuming the mask of Pound's modernism, Walcott confronts the burden of his own hybridity and, implicitly, the shame and sense of anonymity that would have impeded his earliest effort to write poetry.

The allusion to Pound in Walcott's *Epitaph* recalls a whole series of prior cultural exchanges, including Pound's adaptation of Fenollosa's translation of texts in Japanese that were themselves translations by Japanese scholars from Chinese sources. The reference to Pound's Li Po is particularly apt, given that Walcott takes the occasion of his poem to acknowledge the presence of Asian diasporic influences in the Caribbean, in particular, the descendants of Chinese migrants (Patterson, 1977: 122–129). It is intriguing to consider how Walcott's adaptation of Pound's *Japonisme* allows him to draw an analogy, not just between Pound's project and his own, but also between his own effort to synthetically construct a style of speech, on the one hand, and on

the other the experience of Chinese in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean. For Walcott, the experience of cross-cultural encounter would have been as emotionally fraught and, in his own artistic terms, equally necessary as that of the Chinese student he depicts in his poem. Exiled from the wine-like sources of poetry, his ancestral heritage, the Chinese schoolboy and Afro-Caribbean poet alike are condemned to wander aimlessly amidst fragments of colonial culture. Any effort to write leads the uninspired to circle endlessly in logical tautologies, like a cockroach, trapped within the figurative chamberpot of western metaphysics. Like the Chinese immigrant to the Caribbean, the emerging poet must carry the burden of shame and anxiety without any guarantee of success.

When he wrote *Epitaph for the Young*, Walcott could hardly be said to have fully realized the stylistic possibilities of *Japonisme*. In fact, it would take another decade before he would encounter modernist interpretations of classic Noh theater, Kabuki, Japanese cinema, and the woodcuts of Hokusai and Hiroshige. As he recalls:

In New York, I came to the Chinese and Japanese classic theater through Brecht. I began to go to the texts themselves and, because I draw, I used to look very carefully at the woodcuts of Hokusai and Hiroshige. There was then a very strong popular interest in Japanese cinema—in Kurosawa, and films such as *Ugetsu*, *Gate of Hell*, *Rashomon*, etc. I had written one play which was derivative of *Rashomon*, called *Malcauchon* [sic]. This was a deliberate imitation, but it was one of those informing imitations that gave me a direction because I could see in the linear shapes, in the geography, in the sort of myth and superstition of the Japanese, correspondences to our own forests and mythology (Walcott, 1970: 48).

Deliberately commingling aspects of modernist *Japonisme*, Noh and Kabuki, Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi, Hokusai, and Hiroshige, Walcott taught himself a version of Japanese culture, and this new information in turn produced a correspondingly new perspective on, and deeply felt awareness of, his Caribbean heritage. Adapting modernist *Japonisme* as a means of examining the mysteries of hybridity, he commemorates a shared diasporic history of Asian and African peoples in the New World. This distinctly Caribbean adaptation of Pound's style, in turn, sheds new light on the practice of *Japonisme* during the interwar period. By engaging new materials and techniques from Japanese literature, Pound nurtured a critically conscious sensibility in Caribbean literature, a sensibility that would fuse with creative impulses, breathing life into staid and exhausted forms. As a result, a writer from a tiny post-colonial outpost was able to give art a new lease on life. Holding a mirror up to universal themes, Walcott's writings refract, yet preserve, a unique regional point of view.



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