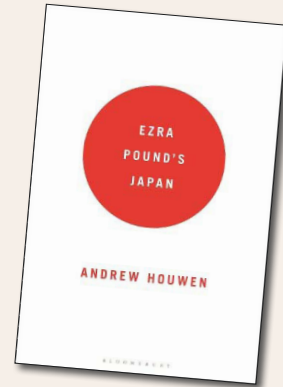


BOOK REVIEW

Ezra Pound's Japan

By Andrew Houwen

Bloomsbury Academic, 2021
280 pages.



Reviewed by Stephen RODDY

Andrew Houwen's study of Ezra Pound's Japanophilia is a welcome contribution to the existing scholarship on Pound's engagement with Japanese culture, and a corrective to various misconceptions and gaps in knowledge and understanding of this topic. Although focused primarily on Pound's creative life (ca. 1910–1960), the book begins in the early- to mid-Meiji era, and concludes with Pound's final years, thus covering approximately an entire century (ca. 1870–1970). It is divided into three parts of roughly equal length: (1) Pound and *hokku*, (2) Pound and *noh*, and (3) *noh* and the poem *The Cantos*, with a total of twelve chapters; as is evident from this summary, Pound's interest in *noh* takes up roughly two-thirds of the book, and could be considered both its heart and its principal contribution.

Houwen takes issue with statements by T. S. Eliot, Pound himself, and Pound's most influential biographer and interpreter, Hugh Kenner (1923–2003), amongst others, that *noh* was neither central to Pound's art, nor a significant component of his oeuvre. As Kenner put it, Pound's acknowledged masterpieces among *The Cantos* were relatively less influenced by *noh*; correspondingly, his translations of *noh* plays do not rise above the status of mere "translations," and are neither especially masterly nor significant. In part three, Houwen argues that Pound's early fascination with *noh* echoes through many of the later *Cantos*, and that specific plays (especially *Takasago*, *Kumasaka*, and *Aoi no Ue*) retained their hold on him and thus should inform our readings of some of his most memorable poems in the China (1940) and Pisan (1948) sequences.

Responding to the neglect of this aspect of Pound's work, Houwen marshals correspondence and some recently published materials unavailable to, or not consulted by, Kenner and others as evidence of this critical misconception. Moreover, he connects these arguments to the rise of Vorticism and *hokku* discussed in part one by demonstrating how Pound continued to view *noh* as a powerful expression of Vorticism's "Unifying Image," which informed Pound's poetic theory and practice throughout his later life (p. 125).¹

Houwen sensibly avoids well-studied topics that are less germane to this study, such as Pound's antisemitism, or those of his private or public relationships that were relatively

¹ Vorticism was an avant-garde group which emerged in London after 1912, which advocated for relating art to industrialization and the dynamism of the modern world. *Hokku* are the progenitor of the modern haiku.

unaffected by his interest in things Japanese. However, he performs an important service by demonstrating how Pound's later views of noh as a martial and nationalistic art form closely mirrored and were inextricably intertwined with his support for European fascism. These two strands of Pound's life are reflected in his appreciation for a joint Japanese-German film, *Die Tochter der Samurai* (*Daughter of the Samurai*; Japanese title, *Atarashiki tsuchi*, 1937), which includes a brief segment of a performance of the noh play *Aoi no ue*. Tracing the history of shogunate and imperial patronage of noh, and its symbolic appropriation by the Japanese military, especially during wartime, Houwen shows how these associations became important to Pound when his interest in Japan revived after a nearly two-decade hiatus thanks to his involvement with the Tokyo-based literary journal *VOU* after 1936.

It should be noted that some of Pound's own writings, as well as other assessments of his work, tend to deemphasize his Japanese interests in favor of the seminal impact on him of China, specifically Ernest Fenellosa's theories about Chinese characters, as well as Chinese poets like Li Bo and Qu Yuan, Confucianism, and other aspects of Chinese culture. Houwen cites some of Pound's correspondence to show that he, like others, tended to view Chinese literature and culture through the prism of its reception in Japan, where Japanese and some Westerners had argued that it was better preserved and better understood than in China itself (p. 200). Thus, even when Pound professed to admire China as the greater, more "solid" civilization, he did so through a Japanese filter, as for example in his consistent transliteration of the Chinese poet Li Bo's name as "Ri Haku" (its Japanese pronunciation). Houwen also gives a counterexample (p. 204) from *Canto* LVIII, where Pound relied largely on an eighteenth century Jesuit history of China to briefly sketch the history of Japan from Emperor Jinmu to Toyotomi Hideyoshi as prelude to the fall of the Ming dynasty and rise of the Manchus. In a letter written around the time of its composition, Pound complains that he had not found any good histories of Japan, and thus, Houwen speculates, he had not been able to produce a "Japan Cantos" that might have followed and complemented his China sequence. This may indeed be one reason for the greater visibility of China over Japan, which despite its relative inconspicuousness in the *Cantos* remains vital, Houwen convincingly argues, through the multiple echoes of noh (p. 195).

Another factor may have been Pound's own ambivalence toward Japan's invasion of China, especially in the aftermath of the Nanjing Massacre of December 1937–January 1938. *Canto* LVIII begins with Japan's 1592–1598 invasion and occupation of Korea as the incident precipitating the fall of the Ming court and the humiliation of Korea, and much of the rest of the poem dwells on the social chaos caused by peasant rebellions and disorder in China during the 1620s–1640s. The poem ends on a plaintive note with the Chinese character for "peace" beside the romanization of its Chinese pronunciation, "p'ing." In the late-1930s, Pound cast himself as a committed peacemaker and intermediary seeking to avert conflict between the US and Europe; perhaps we might read this poem as a prophetic plea for an end to hostilities in East Asia, lest peasant revolutionaries take advantage of wartime mayhem to destroy the pillars of neo-traditional states to which Pound was so passionately attached.