

"healing-of-the-nations." Abstract principle confirmed by mystic renewal, she urges, must be projected in the artist's vision, the primary hope for reconstructing a war-ravaged culture that has lost its spiritual moorings. Hence her appeal takes on a note of urgency that seeks action as its end. The early avowal that "we are at the cross-roads, / the tide is turning" (*Trilogy* 26) assumes in the course of the poem the quality of a great psychic journey jointly undertaken and guided by the passionate hope that though the path is unmarked, the goal of "haven / heaven" (*Trilogy* 59) is within reach.

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*POUND IN THE THEATRE:  
 THE BACKGROUND OF POUND'S OPERAS*

Reading James Laughlin's entertaining memoir *Pound as Wuz*, I was surprised to come across the following statement: "I have heard it said, though Pound did not say it to me, that when he was planning the operas, *Le Testament* and *Cavalcanti*, Pound had the Noh plays in mind. I can't see much connection. The operas are not ritualistic."<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to trace this connection and demonstrate the Noh-based ritualistic nature of Pound's operas. Very simply, the operas originated, I believe, in certain ideals for the oral performance of poetry, which then became transformed through Pound's discovery of the Noh plays and W. B. Yeats's dance plays based upon them, and finally emerged, further altered by a number of other models, in *Le Testament*. This background greatly clarifies, I believe, the nature of these surprising and peculiar entries in the Pound canon.

The listener to either of the recordings of Pound's *Le Testament*<sup>2</sup> will be struck by their peculiarity. One's first impression of the opening "*Et mourut Paris*" is of a modal, vaguely medieval sounding melody—and the hope for a revival of early music was certainly a primary impetus here. But Pound's tune, falling back repeatedly to the same note, doesn't seem to go anywhere, and the musical phrases are quite asymmetrical, ranging from two to five irregular bars per line of verse. Looking at the score (transcribed for Pound by George Antheil),<sup>3</sup> one

1. James Laughlin, *Pound as Wuz: Essays and Lectures on Ezra Pound* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1987) 147.

2. The LP recordings are by Robert Hughes with the Western Opera Theatre of the San Francisco Opera (Fantasy Records 12001), and Reinbert de Leeuw with the ASKO Ensemble and Chorus (Philips 9500 927 PSI).

3. Beinecke Library collection. A note by Antheil on the front of the score (signed The Editor, January 1, 1924) reads:

As the opera is written in such a manner so that nothing at all is left to the singer, the editor would be obliged if the singer would not let the least bit of temperament affect in the least the correct singing of this opera, which is written as it sounds! Please do not embarrass us by suddenly developing intelligence.

sees the extraordinary rhythmic notation, which contains complexities not to be found again, I suppose, until the generation of Boulez and Stockhausen. The intent is clearly to capture the rhythms of the words as they are, without forcing them into the straightjacket of symmetrical bar lengths. Secondly, the accompaniment, far from providing a comfortable bed of background harmony, provides almost no harmony at all (though there is some); instead, instruments double the vocal line at unison or octave, but no one instrument plays more than a few notes at a time, thus creating a shifting kaleidoscope of instrumental colour. The accompaniment serves mainly just to punctuate the irregular rhythms of the vocal line.

This music resembles no other written in its time. It is not like any other "opera." It is not like the music of Antheil. It clearly asks to be judged by different standards from the music of, say, Puccini, or even Stravinski. But the question I want to ask about this bizarre work by a self-taught amateur is not "How good is it?" but "Why on earth would Pound have undertaken such a project?" The answer begins in a crucial aesthetic agreement between Pound and Yeats about the proper musical setting of verse.

This aesthetic, let me stress at once, is one of song, not of "opera" *per se*. Pound's concept of opera is suggested in an odd phrase he uses, "combining orchestra with songs."<sup>4</sup> No lover of traditional opera would be satisfied with such a definition, but Pound was no lover of traditional opera, being cheerfully ready to discard the entire repertoire since Rossini. And, while not uninterested in dramatic values, he conceived opera as essentially lyric. It is a string of poems set to music. His purpose with Villon and Cavalcanti is to conjure the presence of those histrionic figures through their poems—set to music and performed in a very particular way. Pound hoped to reform the genre of opera as a kind of ritualized theatrical presentation of lyric poetry.

When Pound talks about words and music, the words come first. He values melody and rhythm above other elements of music, and the problem of fitting word rhythm to melodic line is foremost. Harmony and counterpoint hardly matter. A song, in his definition, is "the presentation of a poem musically in order to interpret its meaning."<sup>5</sup> It is a species of glorified recitation. After all, he remarks, "the voice is more favoured

4. Ezra Pound, *Ezra Pound and Music*, ed. R. Murray Schafer (New York: New Directions, 1977) 439.  
5. *Ezra Pound and Music* 230.

than the oboe *because* it can articulate words."<sup>6</sup> Pound presents this notion as self-evident, but most musicians would find it naive. Yeats too declares that "one does not add meaning to the word 'love' by putting four o's in the middle,"<sup>7</sup> but the musician would claim that he can, thereby creating a vocal gesture far more expressive of the feeling of love than the mere word. Music seems to have, for whatever reason, a power over words: in song, words enter as musical rather than as poetic elements. This dominating power is termed by Susanne Langer the "principle of assimilation." Music absorbs words, as dance absorbs music, as theater in turn absorbs dance. This hierarchy is defeated only by reducing music to such a rudimentary condition that the text stands out. Both Yeats and Pound actively experimented with modes of musical presentation that tip the balance in favour of the text.

When Pound met Yeats in 1909, both poets had fully formed ideas about the proper musical presentation of words. At Wabash College in 1907-1908, Pound had already been discoursing about "graphology, palmistry, spiritualism and rhythmic.... 'rounded voice tones' ... spacing of words 'to a mental metronome', and ... propagat[ing] such slogans as 'Strive for graceful gestures and smooth gliding stride' and 'Full circle living for mind and body'."<sup>8</sup> This fusion of oral performance with spiritualism had probably been encouraged by reading Yeats ("Speaking to the Psalter" appeared in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, 1903); but it was also part of the aesthetic and occult program of Katherine Ruth Heyman, the concert pianist whom Pound had met in 1904 and travelled to Europe with in 1908.<sup>9</sup> The very title of Heyman's later book, *The Relation of Ultramodern to Archaic Music* (1921), is Poundian, and her chapter "Parallels between Ultramodern Poetry and Ultramodern Music" is filled with references to Pound, H.D., Walter Rummel and Amy Lowell, all personal acquaintances, as well as figures like Laurence Binyon and Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser, prominent in Pound's London circle. Heyman too sees new movements in art as a resurgence of ancient ritual: "Ritual music began in our age with Wagner; ritual poetry with Yeats," she declares, in a heady passage that

6. *Ezra Pound and Music* 152.

7. W. B. Yeats, *Explorations* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 174. On the principle of assimilation, see Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner's, 1953) 149-68.

8. Viola Wildman, quoted in Noel Stock, *The Life of Ezra Pound* (1970; San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982) 42.

9. See Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition: A Study of Ezra Pound's The Cantos* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1992) 60-4.

lines up the seven vowel sounds with the seven spiritual senses, the seven spheres of astrology and the seven tones of the scale, and then develops a parallel between the invention of *vers libre*, the rhythms of the new composers, and the complex metres of Oriental music. Heyman places great emphasis on the artistic discovery of inspiration from the Orient, distinguishing, however, between those who simply pilfered Oriental motifs ("In those days we conquered strange peoples instead of learning from them") and those like Pound and Amy Lowell who successfully enter the Oriental spirit.<sup>10</sup>

By 1908 Pound had firmly built his ideal of word and music on the art of the troubadours. The precise manner of performing troubadour lyrics was, conveniently enough, a lost art—"as of the nightingale too far off to be heard," he says in Canto 20. So he was free to imagine it in his own terms. As in the present day, he wrote, there was a popular tradition, but there was also a secret art, a *trobar clus*, known only to experts who listened with the same kind of rapt, self-conscious attention to the relation between words and music that Pound displays in his William Atheling reviews. Pound pictures the twelfth-century courts of France as a select audience of self-conscious aesthetes: though he concedes that "The ballad-concert ideal is correct, in its own way," the superior songs, he insists, "are not always intelligible at first hearing. They are good art as the high mass is good art. The first songs are apt to weary you after you know them.... The second sort of canzone is a ritual. It must be conceived and approached as a ritual.... [Such songs] make their revelations to those who are already expert."<sup>11</sup> Pound's own musical settings do not abandon this ideal of aesthetic ritual.

It is significant in this connection that Pound at his first meeting with Yeats impressed him as "really a great authority on the troubadours." In his famous account of their meeting in 1909, Yeats declares that "this queer creature ... has I think got closer to the right sort of music for poetry than Mrs Emery—it is more definitely music with strongly marked time and yet it is effective speech. However, he can't sing as he has no

10. Katherine Ruth Heyman, *The Relation of Ultramodern to Archaic Music* (Boston: Small Maynard, 1921) 84-109. The book is based on lectures given in 1916 and thus closer in time to Heyman's contact with Pound; her general attitudes were certainly developed by 1904. Pound wrote to Margaret Anderson that he did "not approve of" her book on music, but without saying why—perhaps because of her adulation of Debussy and Scriabin, or perhaps because of her admiration for Amy Lowell. See *Pound/The Little Review*, ed. Thomas L. Scott et al. (New York: New Directions, 1988) 291.

11. Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 89. The term "ballad concert," incidentally, refers to the practice of English music publishers early in this century of hiring singers to present programs selected exclusively from their own publication lists; Pound was not alone in considering such events more akin to advertising than to art.

voice. It is like something on a very bad phonograph."<sup>12</sup> Yeats's readers know of his collaboration with Mrs Emery, the actress Florence Farr, in the "new art" of "cantillation" to the psaltery—a harp-like instrument constructed for them by Arnold Dolmetsch in the mid 1890s—largely through Yeats's essay "Speaking to the Psaltery." But a much more informative account exists in Florence Farr's own pamphlet *The Music of Speech*, which was published by Elkin Matthews in 1909, the same year he brought out Pound's *Personae*. This peculiar attempt to reduce music to a minimum while retaining the experience of musical performance fascinated Yeats for many years. He compared this new art to that of a fictive Homer striking his lyre, and Florence Farr, appearing in classical drapery, began each performance with some lines from the *Odyssey* (in William Morris's translation). He also evoked the art of the troubadours, prompting one excitable journalist to gush, "a new troubadour has come chanting through Provence, that golden land of love, romance, sunshine, music, and poetry ... and I am persuaded that Florence Farr is more splendid, more skilled, more subtle, more various, and far more expressive than were any of her predecessors of the Middle Ages."<sup>13</sup> This collocation of medieval Provence with ancient Greece—the nexus of Pound's Eleusinian love religion—is likewise habitual with Pound, and has relevance for *Le Testament*.

Florence Farr's recitations are usually described as "liting" or "sing-song," and there were some complaints that her voice as well as the psaltery's were scarcely audible. The psaltery itself had a chromatic compass of one octave on G. It was used in simple unison with the voice. Examples printed by both Yeats and Florence Farr indicate that most often the unadorned vocal line was used to set definite pitches but indeterminate rhythms. One form of notation dispenses with the musical staff altogether:

G E G F# E  
Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!

G B E G F#  
Bird thou never wert,

G E G F# E  
That from heaven, or near it,

12. W. B. Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Hart-Davis, 1954) 543.

13. H. V. Burnett, quoted in Florence Farr, *The Music of Speech* (London: Elkin Matthews, 1909) 10.

B F# G  
 Pourest thy full heart

F# E G E G F# E  
 In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

This example from Shelley's "Skylark" has a fairly well defined melodic contour, but other examples are more like psalm-tones:

E<sub>b</sub> G  
 O Death's old bony finger / Will never find us there  
 C E  
 In the high hollow townland / Where love's to give and to spare;  
 E  
 Where boughs have fruit and blossom / At all times of the year.

Another form of notation uses the musical staff but still leaves rhythm indeterminate. Yet another uses simple rhythmic values, like the folksy melody composed by the notoriously tone-deaf Yeats for his "Song of the Old Mother," which simply bobs up and down on two adjacent triads.<sup>14</sup>

The most circumstantial account I know of these performances comes from the drama critic William Archer, champion of Ibsen and Shaw, who is quizzically sympathetic: The four speakers who were present, he reports,

seemed to be unanimous on two points: first, that poetry ought to be recited in such a way as to throw into relief its metrical structure: and second, that the musician ought not to be allowed to smother it, so to speak in melody, perverting its natural phrasing and accent ... Mr Yeats desires to revive what he believes to have been the method of the old rhapsodists or bards, of chanting or lilting their measures – not singing them (that he expressly repudiates) but speaking them with such insistence on rhythm, and such clear transitions from note to note, as can be recorded in musical symbols....

So much for principles, now for practise ... I should say that [Florence Farr] did three different things: Some pieces she simply recited with very strong rhythmical emphasis; other pieces (and these I think were the ones which most closely represented Mr Yeats's idea) she intoned, very much as Psalms are intoned in church; others again – I can find no other expression for it – she sang.... It could scarcely be said that she sang them to 'tunes,' for there was no structure, no symmetry, no definite melodic scheme in the settings. The musical phrases did not, so to speak, rhyme with each other. There was no regular musical pattern to distort or overlay the poet's metrical pattern. Nevertheless, each phrase,

14. See Farr, *The Music of Speech* 23-27, and Yeats, "Speaking to the Psaltery," *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961) 13-27.

taken by itself, was a fragment of melody, and the voice was kept throughout at the tension of song, not speech. I am bound to confess, moreover, that these were the two pieces which most distinctly impressed me.... Yet Miss Farr, as I have said, did not add to them any definite musical form. It was not the melody, as distinct from the poetry, which moved me; it was the poetry buoyed up, as it were, on a smooth-flowing stream of melody, which simply lent perfect grace to its natural movement.<sup>15</sup>

Archer's account of Florence Farr's asymmetrical, wandering melodies could be applied word for word to the characteristic settings of Pound's operas. So, of course, can the idea of punctuating the melodic contour with unison accompaniment. Some of the psaltery intonations also show odd chromatic twists, which may prefigure some of the chromatic lurches of tonality in *Le Testament*. And another account records yet another device, in which the normal unison is momentarily parted "with extraordinary effect in counterpoint to the melody of the voice."<sup>16</sup> This sounds like the device called in ancient Greek music "heterophony," a momentary divergence of unison melody and accompaniment. Heterophony, too, is an occasional feature of Pound's settings, and it seems possible that he experienced its expressive power in spare musical textures while listening to the psaltery. If, as the old joke has it, the orchestra in Bellini's operas is nothing but a big guitar, then it might be said with equal justice that the orchestra in Pound's is nothing but a big psaltery.

Although Florence Farr left for Ceylon in 1912, where she died five years later, the psaltery cantillations typify ideals that were subsequently reflected in Yeats's dance plays. These plays arose, of course, out of the Noh translations which Pound carved out of the Fenollosa documents during the time he and Yeats were sharing quarters at Stone Cottage. Pound's remarks on the music used in the original Japanese plays are very confused – not surprisingly, since he is straining to describe in words an alien musical tradition that he had never heard, and Fenollosa's accounts, he observes, are "not absolutely lucid."<sup>17</sup> But he draws a number of Western parallels. The analogies between Noh and Greek tragedy are indeed striking, both traditions uniting music, verse, dance, chorus, minimal scenery, and a

15. Quoted in Farr, *The Music of Speech* 1-3. A biography by Josephine Johnson, *Florence Farr: Bernard Shaw's 'New Woman'* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1975), especially chapter 6, contains additional information, though the treatment is not sympathetic.

16. Farr, *The Music of Speech* 11.

17. Ezra Pound, *The Translations of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 244.

limited number of players to present an already familiar story. Pound's description of Noh delivery sometimes suggests Florence Farr's cantillations: "the words," he says, "are spoken, or half-sung and chanted," or, "one might better say, intoned."<sup>18</sup> At other times he implies analogy with Western opera, referring to the texts as "libretti" and the major speeches as "arias."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps more incongruously, he mixes his account with his own troubadour preoccupations: The art of the Noh, he claims, is "one of the most recondite" ever known, "a refinement in barbarous times, comparable to the art of polyphonic rhyme, developed in feudal Provence four centuries later."<sup>20</sup> All of these parallels have their relevance to *Le Testament*.

When Yeats wrote his first dance plays, he turned to two of Pound's friends for the music, Edmund Dulac and Walter Morse Rummel, and he published their contributions twice in his own books.<sup>21</sup> Rummel's music might seem to be the more relevant here, since he had been an intimate, long-time friend of Pound, and he was furthermore a sophisticated musician—a published composer and a concert pianist sponsored by Debussy and soon to be compared in the London press with Walter Gieseking and Artur Schnabel. But Pound may never have heard Rummel's music for *The Dreaming of the Bones*, since that play was not performed until 1931 at the Abbey Theater, and even then Rummel's score was abandoned as too difficult.<sup>22</sup> Pound was very familiar with Dulac's music for *At the Hawk's Well*, however, because it was used at the first performance—the famous one in Lady Cunard's drawing room on 2 April 1916—for which Pound assisted as stage manager.

Dulac may seem to have been an odd choice for composer, since he was a musical amateur. Well known of course as an illustrator, he designed the extraordinary masks, costumes and scenery for the play; but as a musician, he had developed an interest in Eastern music, and he was an avid collector of exotic musical instruments. One photograph described in Colin White's study of Dulac shows him surrounded by a sitar, a group of bamboo flutes, a Chinese sheng, a round yueh-chin

(or moon guitar), and a Japanese samisen. He listed in *Who's Who* as one of his hobbies "making bamboo flutes," and these apparently were the instruments used for Yeats's play. (This surely explains why some of Rummel's flute parts are notated in the bass clef.) My realization of this solved a long-standing mystery about *Le Testament*, which includes in its small orchestra a "nose flute." I had once supposed that the instrument had been brought back by Antheil from one of his North African expeditions, but I now hold Dulac responsible. There is a photograph of him performing upon a Polynesian nose flute.<sup>23</sup>

Dulac's music for *At the Hawk's Well* is minimal: as he explains, "it was necessary to use instruments that anyone with a fair idea of music could learn in a few days," music that provides merely "a sufficient background of simple sounds."<sup>24</sup> It was so minimal, in fact, that one professional musician hired for the first performance rebelled, refused to play the instrument Dulac gave her, and insisted on her own guitar, which Dulac in desperation fitted with cardboard to make it look like a psaltery. Before the second performance, she was fired.<sup>25</sup> Dulac's music has not won much approval from latter-day critics: it has been described as "tedious" and has been faulted for not resembling the genuine music of the Noh stage. But whatever its inherent value, the significant fact is that it was effective enough in performance not only to delight both Yeats and Pound, but to win approval from Rummel and Beecham.<sup>26</sup> It is not exactly an Orientalization of Florence Farr's cantillations, but it comes close and fulfils similar ideals. It is scored for three musicians (not the traditional four of Noh) who play a bamboo flute (one of Dulac's, tuned to an Oriental scale), a plucked instrument (variously described as a harp, zither, psaltery or, alas, guitar), and percussion (drum and gong). The opening and closing numbers are for voice unaccompanied, singing a recitative in the Oriental scale, measured to the verbal rhythms in wandering, asymmetrical phrases. The plucked instrument and percussion are further links to Pound's orchestration in *Le Testament*. The

23. Colin White, *Edmund Dulac* (London: Studio Vista, 1976) 111; the nose-flute photograph is reproduced. Robert Hughes informs me that nose flutes were also common children's toys in France during the 1920s, and that, while preparing his performance of *Le Testament*, he was able to purchase such toys in the U.S., one of which is heard in the recording. I am grateful to Hughes for this and other suggestions for this article.

24. Yeats, *Four Plays for Dancers* 90.

25. White 81-4; cf. Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* 609-11.

26. For discussion of Dulac's music, largely negative, see Edward Malins, *Yeats and Music* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1968) 502; Peter Davidson, "Music in Translation: Yeats; Pound; Rummel; Dulac," in Masaru Sekine and Christopher Murray, eds., *Yeats and the Noh: A Comparative Study* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990) 137-44; and White, *Edmund Dulac* 83-4.

18. *Translations* 214, 242.

19. *Translations* 216, 243.

20. *Translations* 213-14.

21. Yeats, *Four Plays for Dancers* (London: Macmillan, 1921), and *Plays and Controversies* (London: Macmillan, 1923).

22. Liam Miller, *The Noble Drama of W. B. Yeats* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1977) 240-41. For information about Rummel see C. H., "Mr. Walter Rummel," *Spectator* (July 1, 1922), and Charles Timbrell, "Walter Morse Rummel, Debussy's 'Prince of Virtuosos,'" *Cahiers Debussy* (Geneva: Editions Minkoff, 1987) 24-33.

entire project, in fact, seems an enabling model for *Le Testament*. After all, if Pound had wanted to write an opera that competed with Puccini on his own ground, he would have despaired for lack of know-how; but if his model was Dulac, an amateur who yet composed effective theatrical music, music that was subordinate to the words yet heightened them, music simple enough to pick out on the keyboard—that was a model he could hope to emulate.

## II

Turning from this background to the operas themselves, I would draw two further connections: One involves Pound's instructions for the staging of *Le Testament*, the other a crucial supernatural element in the plots of both operas.

I once thought of Pound's two operas as his only original writings for the theatre. But in 1987, Donald Gallup published a limited edition of four brief plays that Pound wrote while staying with Yeats at Stone Cottage—four plays “modelled on the Noh.”<sup>27</sup> These plays, unpublished and unperformed, throw interesting light on the operas. One feature of *Le Testament* that would at first seem to be farthest removed from the Noh model is the spoken dialogue, cast in a kind of Poundian synthetic cockney and first used in the 1931 BBC broadcast (the dialogue here refers to the brothel):

*Watch*: Ow! a little bit of awl right. I suppose ... eh ... quite handy, booze to the left, sir, and no distance to dram'em, and that nice little chune from Miss Catherine's.

*Captain*: And no place for you, Heiney.

*Watch*: They have got a nerve on'em, buildin' it next to St. Julian's.

*2d Watch*: And next to the jug.

*1st Watch (aside)*: For the benefit of the clergy?

The plays modelled on the Noh—or more specifically, on the comic Noh interludes—use a similar demotic speech, a dialect fashioned, as James Longenbach points out, in imitation of Synge.<sup>28</sup> Pound's first play, *The Protagonist*, is in fact set in a Dublin underworld not unlike that of François Villon's Paris:

27. Ezra Pound, *Four Plays Modelled on the Noh* (1916), ed. Donald C. Gallup (Toledo: Friends of the U of Toledo Libraries, 1987). In a letter to Margaret Anderson, 8 February 1917, Pound mentions four one-act plays, dismissing them as “DAMN BAD;” see *Pound/The Little Review* 16.

28. James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 209-12. Longenbach says that Pound's *The Consolations of Matrimony* was written to be performed as a comic companion to *At the Hawk's Well*, but it was never used.

*Boy 2*: A forger, are you mooney? Would a forger be like that, a great thick lump of a man? It's only small men with smooth oily faces they take up for forgers. A forger would have better clothes on than this feller. (*The second cop backs to the door, after considerable bother in wheeling the prisoner, begins kicking with his heel, yelling.*)

*John*: Shawn, you ongainly devil, is it you're drunk yourself?<sup>29</sup>

This use of vulgar speech, however, is not intended to signal a convention of theatrical naturalism in the manner of, say, Sean O'Casey, any more than similar language does in his version of *The Women of Trachis*; the conventions are still those of the Noh—albeit of the comic interlude—and still, apparently, indicate a Noh-influenced, stylized mode of staging (including masks) and delivery.

Secondly, these plays were designed for performance before a carefully restricted and elite audience. Yeats, after years of frustration attempting to forge a “people's theater” in Ireland, turned to the dance plays with his famous paradoxical outburst, “I want to create for myself an unpopular theater.” Pound, too (writing to his father in 1916), saw advantages in a “new dramatic movement, plays which won't need a stage, and which won't need a thousand people for 150 nights to pay the expenses of production.”<sup>30</sup> Though Pound conceives his operas for presentation on stage rather than in a drawing room, his comments consistently underplay the elaboration and expense of their scenic requirements; and the intention of presenting Villon or Cavalcanti through this peculiar medium hovers oddly between a hope for public education and an appeal to an already instructed elite.

For both Pound and Yeats, this attitude of elitism was closely related to the supernatural content of their works. In his preface to a version of Alfred de Musset's *A Supper at the House of Mademoiselle Rachel*, Pound writes:

Now in my little 'play,' if we must call it a play, there is very little drama, there is only a reconstruction. You will all have to be pilgrims, or something of that sort. These scenes can only be real for those who desire to see them.... You might well ask why I have chosen my subject. I wished to show for an instant, an instant, illusion. Yet an illusion that should not be quite an illusion.<sup>31</sup>

29. *Four Plays Modelled on the Noh* 3.

30. Yeats, *Explorations* 254; Pound, cited in Longenbach, *Stone Cottage* 205.

31. *Four Plays Modelled on the Noh* 23-4.

James Longenbach relates this work, which dramatizes the conjuration of Racine's ghost, to the popular occult book *An Adventure* (1911), by Anne Moberly and Eleanor Jourdain recounting their inexplicable encounter with the ghost of Marie Antoinette in the gardens of Versailles.<sup>32</sup> Pound's theatrical "reconstruction," then, can be conceived as an occultist conjuration of ghosts from the past—a séance like that in Canto I summoning the ghost of Tiresias, with the difference that the theatrical mode of presentation eliminates the narrative presence of Pound altogether and conjures the person directly. It is clear that the interest of both Pound and Yeats in the Noh was focused almost exclusively on the type of Noh which Pound describes as the "Noh of spirits," "the most interesting," he says, "because of their profound and subtle psychology and because of situations entirely foreign to our Western drama, if not to our folk-lore and legend."<sup>33</sup> Pound's operas, which both conclude with supernatural manifestations, seem closely related to these Noh spirit plays. They represent an effort to use theater in a visionary way to conjure up the presence of Villon or Cavalcanti before an elite audience capable of receiving such illusions that are not quite illusions.

Finally, as if to underscore the relationship between these plays modelled on the Noh and opera, Pound (returning to material he had treated in his early poem "Threnos") wrote his own version of *Tristan*. Donald Gallup suggests that Pound, having heard Beecham conduct Wagner's five-hour version on 19 June 1916, decided to try his own. The result is a Noh spirit play (modelled like Yeats's *Dreaming of the Bones* on the *Nishikigi*) in which a visitor to Cornwall sees in the blossoms of a quince tree an apparition of the ghosts of Tristan and Iseult.<sup>34</sup> Pound's supernatural version condenses the Wagnerian legend into six pages of text.

The earliest record of Pound's attempt to compose an opera dates from just about this time. His first collaborator

32. See Longenbach 222-27. *An Adventure* is source of John Corigliano's recent operatic success *The Ghosts of Versailles*.

33. *Translations* 220. Not one of the recognized five categories of Noh tradition, the category "Noh of spirits" was perhaps invented by Fenollosa; see Akiko Miyake et al., eds., *Guide to Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa's Classic Noh Theatre of Japan* (Orono: Univ. of Maine, 1994) 317.

34. Pound reviewed a Beecham performance of Wagner's *Tristan* in the *New Age* for 6 December 1917; see *Ezra Pound and Music* 64-5, where he comments on Wagner unfavourably:

"One can sit through these Mozart, or musically formed, operas time after time, whereas in a dramatically formed opera, as in the Wagnerian, which has an emotional rather than musical structure, the effect of the piece diminishes the more often one hears it."

was not—as previously thought—Agnes Bedford, who helped bring the first version of *Le Testament* into existence in 1921, but a singer, otherwise obscure, named Grace Crawford. Agnes Bedford herself, learning of this only late in her life, recorded her discovery in a letter to Dorothy Pound dated 6 January 1968:

I was surprised to find he had made a start with Grace Crawford—do you remember her?—a singer who married Lovat Fraser later. Many years before I knew him she was trying to notate his compositions. What she described was exactly what I remember—the difficulty of interpreting the sounds he [sang?] & the picking out notes on the piano & the impossibility of barring his rhythms. Certainly my efforts were the more successful as they did result in the *Villon*, but I had no idea he had tried to get his thoughts on paper before.<sup>35</sup>

Pound, as reviewer William Atheling, met Agnes Bedford, an English pianist with many musical connections, in 1919, collaborated with her in an edition of five troubadour songs for Boosey & Hawkes in 1920, and then they turned their attention to Villon. This version became the basis of the score subsequently notated by George Antheil, completed, according to a note in the score, at midnight, 31 December 1923.

When Pound wrote to Yeats in June 1924 trying to get a production of his opera at the Abbey Theatre, he described it not as a dance play but as a drama on the "greek model." But the conventions of Greek tragedy and the Noh are strikingly similar, and Pound seems hardly to have distinguished between the primitive ritual drama of the two cultures. His translation of *The Women of Trachis* is dedicated to his Japanese correspondent Kitasono Katue, "hoping he will use it on my dear old friend Miscio Ito, or take it to the Minoru, if they can be persuaded to add it to their repertoire."<sup>36</sup> After spelling out requirements for musicians, he says to Yeats, "I guarantee that the drama is O.K.; greek model, one act and final tableau; but

35. Lilly Library. Pound's massive correspondence to Agnes Bedford during the writing of the opera survives at the Lilly; she was in London except for two weeks when she visited Pound in Paris. Many of her letters replying to Pound's are at the Beinecke; her later letters to Pound and Dorothy Pound—she became a devoted lifelong friend—are at the Lilly.

36. Ezra Pound, *The Women of Trachis* (New York: New Directions, 1957) 3; Pound's only known appearance as a performer in the theatre was in 1903, in the chorus of Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*; see John Tytell, *Ezra Pound: The Solitary Volcano* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987) 21 and photograph. It is well known that Ito, a student of Western ballet, was at first not interested in the Noh; it is less well known that his subsequent career as a dancer, choreographer and director, was deeply influenced by his experience with Pound. Katherine Ruth Heyman, in *The Relation of Ultra-modern to Archaic Music*, includes discussion of the Noh-based ballet-pantomime *Sho-Jo, or The Spirit of Wine*, written for Ito in 1917 by Charles Tomlinson Griffes (91-3). For Ito's career, see Helen Caldwell, *Michio Ito: The Dancer and His Dances* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1977). Sanehide Kodama, ed. *Ezra Pound and Japan: Letters and Essays* (Redding Ridge, Connecticut: Black Swan Books, 1987), also contains material of interest.

the play is O.K. and reinforces the sung text.... I insist on masks; the decor can be almost any old thing, one set with a drop curtain, that lifts, and comes down again,.... This show is the best thing I have *finished* up to the present. Possibly less important than the cantos;...."<sup>37</sup>

Pound was preoccupied with Greek drama in 1923, the year he completed *Le Testament*, but he also complained of its deficiencies: I personally believe, he wrote in the *Dial*, " 'the theatre' in general is no good, that plays are no good.... Most plays are bad, even Greek plays.... The Greek play is an *ignis fatuus*. Cocteau has made an heroic attempt with *Antigone* [but] poetry is immortal, drama isn't. The *Antigone* of Sophocles contains great antitheses. It also contains stucco."<sup>38</sup> Pound's interest in theater is lyrical, not theatrical, just as it was in 1908 when he described his dramatic lyrics to Williams as "the poetic part of the drama" with the prose part left out.<sup>39</sup> *Le Testament* presents the lyrics of Villon, woven loosely into a dramatic plot, with as little "stucco" as possible.

Pound's instructions for the acting and stage design support this scheme for a lyrical theater by reducing the visual element drastically. An undated note in the Beinecke Library contains the following jottings:

This play was written for masks, that is for the principal characters. These masks would have heightened the upper part of the face, been flexible at the side, waxed to the cheeks but leaving the jaw free.... The characters must be zoned:

- A. The IMMOBILE.
- B. The fidgety.

Villon is completely immobile from start to finish. Beauté moves only to close a shutter. The Pornoboskos oscillates but does not move, save for jerking thumb over shoulder. In general, actors CEASE moving when they go out of action. They are theoretically invisible at such times.... The general hurly-burly of the *Pere Noé*, maximum confusion.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, there is to be stasis or meaningful movement, with nothing in between. This recalls the emphasis on deliberate, stylized gesture in the performance of Noh—though it also recalls Jean Cocteau's innovative staging with masks, stylized

37. Quoted in Stock, *The Life of Ezra Pound* 255.

38. "Paris Letter," *Dial* 74 (March 1923): 77-8. Pound discusses his own attempt to translate Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: "I tried every possible dodge, making the watchman a negro, and giving him a *fihr Géogiah voyce*; making the chorus talk cockney, et cetera."

39. Ezra Pound, *The Letters of Ezra Pound*, ed. D.D. Paige (New York: Harcourt, 1950) 3-4.

40. Beinecke papers, file 5086.

gesture, and immobility, in his own *Antigone* and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*.<sup>41</sup>

One other note, attached to the *Le Testament* manuscript, draws yet another theatrical parallel: "Such gestures as are made are not to be puppet gestures," says Pound, "though the general convention is very nearly that of a puppet play. But there are to be no superfluous gestures. The actors stand STILL save when specifically moving. All save fidgety ones, at given moments ... as contrast to V's intense immobility." The puppet play, too, is an art of conscious, controlled gesture, and Yeats had also appealed to the similarity with the Noh, commenting that "the most famous of all Japanese dramatists composed entirely for puppets," and asking that the actors' movements in *At the Hawk's Well* should "suggest a marionette."<sup>42</sup> Though Pound's note rejects puppet gestures, it welcomes the non-naturalistic, puppet-like acting imposed by the masks. As he wrote in an article for *Theatre-Craft* in 1919, "The mask demands an art of adequate gesture; an art of holding the body. I have seen this in Sarah Bernhardt, in Itow, and in a private Japanese gentleman who had acted before the Mikado...."<sup>43</sup> Pound's concept for the staging of *Le Testament* reflects, then, a number of theatrical conventions; but it seems clear that it is most strongly conditioned by his experience with the Noh and Yeats's dance plays.

One final connection between Noh and the operas involves the conclusions. Like the Noh spirit plays, both of Pound's two operas end with supernatural manifestations. In *Le Testament*, after the boisterous crowd number "*Pere Noé*," the drop curtain rises to reveal a gibbet with six hanged men. They join in a six-voice motet—Villon's great "*Ballade des Pendus*"—and Pound's setting, despite its craggy and amateurish voice-leading, is eerily moving. The magical transition from one scene to the next could be very effective theater.

Similarly, at the end of *Cavalcanti*, the poet, dying in exile, is trying to teach his last song to his pupil Ricco. Guido breathes his last, and Ricco sobs hysterically, "Guido, I haven't learned it." The seneschal comforts him, saying "But it's written." Ricco replies, "The words, yes, but the music." The seneschal "emits some kind of startled noise, and begins the *Io*

41. In the crowd scene of *Le Testament*, Pound's score substitutes the name "Jean Cocteau" for Villon's "Jean Cotard."

42. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* 230; *Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1952) 210.

43. "To Discriminate," *Theatre Craft* 1 (Spring 1919): 33. This comment suggests a possible contact for Pound with the Japanese theater during this period beyond Michio Ito's limited knowledge of Noh.



son la donna,' dazed voice, as if wholly unconscious of what he is saying.... The Voice of the Statue." The statue is the goddess Fortuna, who sings the canzone (probably not Cavalcanti's) "*Io son la donna che volge la rota.*"<sup>44</sup> Now the device of a statue coming to life on stage is probably not as original a *coup de théâtre* as the motet from the gibbet, but both Shakespeare and Mozart have at least proved it to be stageworthy.

Both of Pound's operas, then, appear to be strongly marked by his experience with the Japanese Noh and with Yeats's dance plays. The operas, to be sure, are more complex: they are somewhat longer in performance and require more characters and more instruments, and they are meant to be performed in a full-sized theatre or opera house. Pound thought of them as operas, deliberate attempts to reform the genre, and he sought performance for them not only at the Abbey Theatre but at the Paris Opéra and at the Met. But they are still chamber works, and short by operatic standards. Without the model of *At the Hawk's Well* in performance with Dulac's music, I doubt if Pound would ever have attempted to compose them. And both are marked by the stylized, ritualistic staging, as well as the supernatural subject matter, that attracted Yeats's interest in the Japanese theater.

## TIMOTHY MATERER

### THE ALCHEMY OF MYTH IN TED HUGHES'S CAVE BIRDS

Ted Hughes described the poetic development of Sylvia Plath as "a process of alchemy. Her apprentice writings were like impurities thrown off from the various stages of the inner transformation, by products of the internal work."<sup>1</sup> Writing of the "unity of her opus," he said that its language "is the product of an alchemy on the noblest scale."<sup>2</sup> Some lines in Plath's "Lady Lazarus" read like a scornful disclaimer to this interpretation of her work as an *opus alchemicum*. It is doubtful that Plath would agree with an interpretation that implies that "I am your opus, / I am your valuable, / The pure gold baby...."<sup>3</sup> Hughes's comments are in fact more relevant to his own work than to Plath's. Alchemical references are found from Hughes's *Crow* (1970) through *River* (1983).<sup>4</sup> Of *Moortown* (1979), he said that "the whole drift is an alchemizing of a phoenix out of a serpent,"<sup>5</sup> and *Cave Birds* (1978) is subtitled "An Alchemical Cave Drama."

Although Hughes has read widely in the alchemical texts, not only much of his knowledge but also his interpretation of alchemy derive from Carl Jung, about whom Hughes said "I met Jung early, and ... have read all the translated volumes...."<sup>6</sup> For example, Hughes wrote in 1976 that the failure of the Christian religion left nothing to humanize "the archaic energies of instinct and feeling," with the result that "The whole inner world has become elemental, chaotic, continually more primitive and

1. "Preface," *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, eds. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough (New York: Ballantine, 1982) xiii.

2. Ekbert Fass, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe. With Selected Critical Writings by Ted Hughes & Two Interviews* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1980) 181.

3. Fass 246.

4. The following works by Hughes are discussed in this paper: *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama*, drawings by Leonard Baskin (New York: Viking, 1978); *Crow: From the Life of Songs of the Crow* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); *Gaudete* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977); and *Woodwo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). References to *Cave Birds* are hereafter cited parenthetically in the text with page number(s).

5. Keith Sagar with Stephen Tabor, *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography, 1946-80* (London: Mansell, 1983) 90.

6. Fass 37.