Formal and Linguistic Problems in Translating a Noh Play

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Though not commonly mentioned, Kiichi Hirata was important in the preparation of the book, *Noh, or Accomplishment,* which Ezra Pound published in 1916. Letters from Professor Fenollosa to Mr. Hirata between 1899 and 1901 indicate that the latter frequently visited Fenollosa at his house, primarily for the purpose of helping him understand the monthly performance of noh plays given by the Umewaka school of noh acting. As transcribed or rewritten from Fenollosa's notes, the essay sections of *Noh, or Accomplishment* refer to Mr. Hirata twice by name and once as one of the "native scholars" who helped Fenollosa prepare "translations of some fifty of the texts."[1] He accompanied the Fenellosas to the noh singing lessons described in Mrs. Fenollosa's introduction to *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art.*[2] And, in a letter which Professor Hojin Yano quotes in his *Fireside Chats about English Literature,* he was asked by Fenollosa in 1901 to "finish the noh book as soon as possible, and get a copy of *Kiso* with commentary." (One may wonder what happened to the translation of *Kiso* apparently being worked on, as well as to the other thirty noh translations which were never published.) This is the same Mr. Hirata who became famous in his own right under the pseudonym of Tokuboku, as a critic and translator of many English works. It is appropriate that the cycle of influence should have made a complete turn: it was also Mr. Hirata who translated Yeat's play *At the Hawk's Well* (so much influenced by the noh) into Japanese and, according to Professor Yano, saw it produced by Michio Ito in Tokyo in 1939.[3]

Hirata's name is thus, important in a consideration of these translations, but we have no way of knowing to what extent. In a given play we do not know how much or what part of the final version is the work of Hirata, Fenollosa, or Pound. Mr. Hisashi Furukawa makes this point in the first of two articles on "The Westerners' Studies of the Noh Play."[4] In my own research I have been able to find only part of one play published by Fenollosa himself.[5] By comparing this with the version in *Noh, or Accomplishment,* we can judge something of the changes Pound made in preparing the final version of this play. Yet even here caution is necessary, for Pound may have had only Fenollosa's notes, not the more published form Fenollosa prepared for publication. And in any case, this one fragment is probably quite different from the remainder of the notes in the very fact that it had been worked over for publication, and possibly was not at all representative of the papers Mrs. Fenollosa gave to Pound in 1913. Perhaps, if speculation be allowed, some of those papers were Hirata's drafts presented to Fenollosa without any revision at all.

In a note prefixed to *Tamura,* Pound refers to the "fragments" and the "long cuts" in the translation;[6] and in another note, added to *Kayoi Komachi,* he says, "This eclogue is very incomplete."[7] Moreover, among his published *Letters* are some which suggest Pound's dissatisfaction with the manuscripts, since he asks a friend for help in finding some Japanese acquainted with the noh drama.[8] Japanese critics referred to by Mr. Furukawa in his article, and by Mr. Furukawa himself, often described these translations as "fragmentary."[9] In an earlier paper I have estimated that about one-third of the original play is given,[10] an estimate anyone can check by inference if he compares the length of the Pound-Fenollosa-Hirata version of a particular play with that by such translators as Arthur Waley. So far as I know only one other English translation has been made of *Kayoi Komachi.* This, by a Mr. Minagawa, appeared in a little-known Japanese tourist magazine,[11] competent but scarcely satisfying to present-day literary taste. For this reason I have chosen *Kayoi Komachi* to retranslate, and in the process have prepared this paper.

It is not my purpose to be or seem to be over-critical of the

Pound-Fenollosa-Hirata versions. Yet one cannot overlook the fact that they are widely sold in a paperback edition, thus generally accepted and even on occasion defended as accurate translations by those who should know better. Certainly we can scarcely be over-grateful to Pound for the fact that he immediately recognized the literary values of the noh plays he read in the Fenollosa-Hirata drafts, and that he enthusiastically recommended them to his employer, W. B. Yeats. That a far wider audience thus came to know of the noh play than Japanologists had reached in several decades of translation cannot be denied. Nevertheless, these fragmentary and often mistaken versions in *Noh, or Accomplishment* should be recognized for what they are. Whether Waley's translations, published about five years later, would have reached as wide an audience without the groundwork having been laid by Pound, is a matter of speculation. Having the advantage of constant communication with literary periodicals in the United States, Pound arranged to have several of the plays published in them before bringing out the book.

One general formal criticism of the Hirata-Fenollosa-Pound versions is that the original distinction between prose and verse is not preserved. In his discussion of the form Pound wrote: "The plays are written in a mixture of prose and verse. The finest parts are in verse; ordinary conversation lapses into prose; the choruses are always in verse."[17] No doubt where the notes clearly indicated prose and verse Pound kept the two separate, but there is very frequent confusion. In another passage appears the statement: "The plays have . . . a very severe construction of their own, a sort of musical construction."[18] This is by no means clear and, unfortunately, is not elsewhere clarified in Pound's discussion of form. In fact, the noh plays we have are the libretti of theatrical pieces which are danced and sung. Like the libretti of *opéra comique,* noh plays are a series of prose recitatives, solo songs, and choral songs, the latter varying in length and poetic form. Among the Hirata-Fenollosa-Pound versions, perhaps *Kakitsubata* most nearly gives this impression though, unlike *Kayoi Komachi,* there are additions rather than subtractions.

It has always seemed to me that translations of noh plays

ought to strive, on occasion at least, to match the original meters, so that they might be performed with the same music in English as in Japanese. This, on the one hand, would add an almost insuperable difficulty to the already difficult matter of translating noh plays, yet, on the other hand, would bring the noh play as a form right into our midst, if successful. Instead of being an esoteric poetic fragment from the inscrutable East, the noh play would be a performable piece of theater, as it is still constantly being performed in Japan. It may be too extreme, yet it is true in a sense to say that noh plays can never be rightly understood in this country unless some sort of translation for performance is achieved.

A glance at the Hirata-Fenollosa-Pound version of *Kayoi Komachi* does not immediately reveal how many of the lines are or are intended to be in verse form, but it would be difficult to select more than a dozen or so lines which are unmistakably verse. In the original Japanese, in the *utaibon* or singing-text, for example, of some 118 columns less than thirty are in prose. The remainder, roughly three-quarters of it, is a series of songs: *shidai, issei, sashi, age-uta,* and *rongi.*

The first of these, the *shidai* sung by the old woman when she enters the stage for the first time, is omitted in the Hirata-Fenollosa-Pound version. It is a short song, made up of three lines: one twelve-syllable line, a repetition of this line plus four additional syllables, and a final line of seven syllables. In a note elsewhere on the music—which runs, "The musical bar is a sort of double bar made up of five notes and seven notes, or of seven notes and then seven more notes, the fourteen being sung in the same time as the twelve first ones . . ."[14]—Pound gives an inaccurate glimpse of the relationship of verse and musical rhythms. Briefly stated, the sequence of five-syllable and seven-syllable groups in various combinations has been a characteristic of Japanese poetry from the time of the great *Manyō Anthology* on. It is quite natural that these basic patterns should be used in noh plays. The most common line is made up of five plus seven syllables, called the *hiranori,* which is sung to an eight beat musical bar. Variation is possible, the two commonest forms being the *chu* or *shuranori* and the *ōnori.* The former usually

has fourteen to sixteen syllables, and when sung has the musical beat on alternate syllables; the *ōnori* has only eight syllables, the musical beat thus falling on every syllable.[15] The resulting meters cannot be exactly compared to our English meters, but some sense of the difference may be gained by calling the *hiranori* or twelve-syllable line our English blank verse; the *chunori* or sixteen-syllable line our triple rhythm, and the *ōnori* our trochaic, or more exactly, our occasional spondaic rhythm. The one gives lightness and rapidity, the other slowness and weight. In addition, it might be mentioned that in the faster concluding songs of some plays (but not in *Kayoi Komachi*), syncopation is used dramatically, when groups of three or four or even more syllables are joined in a unit which is sung in the time usually given to a single syllable.

The *shidai* here as in many plays serves to set the tone of the play.[16] Literally, the first line means "the collected twigs and brushwood" plus the particle *no* which indicates that the whole phrase is a genitive or an adjectival modifier. The second line repeats this, adding four syllables of which the first two are the beginning of the noun *nioi* or "perfume." Suddenly, however, what one expects to be a noun turns into a verb, *niowanu*, or "not perfumed." One's eye or ear at once turns back to the word *takimono*, the last word before the particle in both the first and second line, and one realizes that it has two possible meanings, "firewood" or "incense." Moreover, the last three syllables are the word for "clothing," *kimono*. In the meantime the song has gone on, and "not perfumed" appears to modify the word "sleeve" in the last line of the song. This word, of course, is readily related to the submerged word for "clothing" and likewise related to the word *kanashiki*, "I am sad," which concludes the song, for one of the most constant clichés of Japanese poetry is the "sleeve made wet with tears" which is thus a symbol of sadness.

It is clear that we have of necessity now shifted from the problem of verse to that of linguistics. It is difficult enough that Japanese regularly places the verb at the end of the sentence, so that the translator must frequently use early in his version what the original has held back as a surprise or delayed emotional "punch," but after all we are familiar with that gramma-

tical problem in other languages, such as German. But what can the translator do with homonyms, or puns, which are so frequent and meaningful in Japanese poetry? And even more difficult, how can the translator manage that chameleon device, the *kakekotoba,* in which a word concludes one phrase with one form or meaning, and then immediately—before really finishing anything—goes on to start a new phrase or serve a new function? This is the word *niowanu* which starts out as "the smell" (of incense or firewood) and goes on as "not-perfumed" sleeves. Certainly this is extremely difficult, the linguistic structure of the two languages being so different, but it is surely "treacherous" translation to make no attempt, to pretend these linguistic and poetic devices don't exist. By repeating only a part of the first line and by playing on the similarity of sound of the noun "incense" and the verb "scents" I have tried to suggest the original, while still using the same number of syllables with something like the original rhythmical weighting of the lines:

> The twigs and brushwood I have gathered up to burn
> Were gathered but to burn; yet none of their fragrant smell, like incense,
> Scents my sleeves, how filled with sadness!

The final word of this song may be said to set the tone of this play. And this would be enough to say of the *shidai* of some noh plays, but more needs to be said here, it seems to me, for this is a very great play in which every part has its significance. Some authorities say it was written by Kannami Kiyotsugu (1333–1384), some say by his son Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443). Still others suggest that Zeami rewrote or retouched his father's play. Asaji Nose, for example, suggests that the play *Shii no Shosho* ascribed to Kannami in his son's *Sarugaku Dangi* (Conversations About Noh Plays), is really the same as Zeami's *Kayoi Komachi.*[11] That is, the play called *General Shii* is reworked and takes the new title, *The Nightly Courting of Komachi,* in which General Shii is the lover who visits the great lady. Certainly the dramatic force of the play suggests the father's hand, and the brilliant poetic texture could only be from Zeami's pen. It may be an exaggeration to say that Zeami (a contemporary of Chaucer) is the equal

of Shakespeare in the art of poetry, but merely to say it is at least one way of emphasizing his greatness. Unfortunately, not enough first-rate translations of Zeami's plays, nor studies of their literary qualities, have appeared in Western languages to make this greatness clear. It seems to me that this play has more dramatic intensity than *Sotoba Komachi* which has several times been translated (by Waley and Péri, to mention only the most famous). It tells the story of General Shii's ninety-nine unrewarded visits to the poetess Komachi, who spurned him, not realizing he would die before the hoped-for triumphant hundredth visit. She herself, according to legend, lived on through her hundredth year, long after her fame and beauty had faded, an old hag on the hillside who left behind only a skull through which the pampas grass waved, and a handful of remarkable poems closely linked with her legend.

This *shidai* as Zeami wrote it suggests the whole tale of Komachi: shifting from the old crone who collects firewood, to the fragrance of a court lady's perfumed sleeves, to a lover's tear-wet sleeve, thus evoking the sadness of the two lovers, being long dead but still unable to rest because their souls are tied to earth by their passions. Not to have these three lines is a slight loss quantitatively, but a great one poetically. In the sense that they evoke the whole play, the loss of these lines is a great loss structurally as well.

After a prose passage in which the old woman introduces herself, there comes a brilliant passage which is a *tour de force* of poetry almost impossible to translate, and represented by Hirata-Fenollosa-Pound by this short prose passage:

> "What sort of fruit have you there?" asks the priest, and she replies:
> "I've nuts and kaki and chestnuts and plums and peaches, and big
> and little oranges, and a bunch of tachibana, which reminds me
> of days that are gone."

How different this is from the original! There all the fruits are either taken from the trees of famous poets or are subtle reminders of the great love affair. Line after line mentions or quotes the famous poets in a dazzling poetic display of puns and allusions, ending with references to the *shii* or oak tree, which is a

homonym of the name of the gallant general. My first impression when I was learning to sing the play was that the passage is a sort of excrescence, technically difficult and beautiful in its way, but not dramatically useful. Now I have changed my mind. This is in fact Zeami's way of establishing the character of the poetess, and the passage does so unmistakably: brilliant, dazzling, heartless, yet concluding with a note of passion. There is also the ambiguity of the final phrase concerning the single branch of orange blossom: it is itself, yet at one moment it seems to represent the single night the general had yet to visit the poetess—but failed—at another moment it seems the lonely old hag herself.

Rhythmically, this fifteen-line song most often uses the *hiranori* or twelve-syllable line, but there is a striking sequence of two five-syllable lines in the middle, one sung by the chorus, one by the old woman. Linguistically, the puns based on poets' names represent a problem already discussed, here quite insuperable of solution without notes, for no American or European audience could be expected to know that the *kaki* or "persimmon" refers to the unmentioned part of Hitomaro's name, on which it is a pun, nor that the other name of Akahito means "mountainside." Indeed, they could scarcely be expected to recognize the names as being among the greatest in the *Manyō Anthology,* which is one of the great collections of early poetry in world literature. Two further devices appear in this passage: the use of the *jo* or "preface" in which several syllables serve only to introduce an important word, and the pun which is also a *kakekotoba.* In the one case "cherry hemp" serves simply to modify the word "pears" and is itself preceded by the phrase "having famous flowers" which can then modify either or both cherries and/or pears. The word "pears" is a pun on "not" or "nonexistent," applied here to the beach whose name immediately precedes it. In various ways I have tried to represent all these devices:

OLD WOMAN: The fruits I've brought are these and those and such and such.
CHORUS: The fruits she's brought are these and those and such and such.
OLD WOMAN: How well accustomed I was once

To count and recount his cart's comings,
numerous as these gale-blown acorns.

CHORUS: Among these fruits from the great poets' gardens are

OLD WOMAN: These persimmons here, from Hitomaro's hedge;
And bamboo chestnuts from Yamabe's mountainside;

CHORUS: Plums near the window;

OLD WOMAN: Peaches from the yard;
Named from the most famous of all flowers, the "cherry hemp"
Pears from the "pearless"—no—the "peerless" beach of Uo
(There grows the fragrant, ah! the true love oak!);
These big and little oranges, these kumquats,
And added to these, to show the sadness of all great old loves, orange blossoms,
A single spray of orange blossoms, only a single spray . . .

Impossible though it is to produce a translation poetically equal to the original, surely it is a travesty to make no attempt, to transform this—as has been done in the Hirata-Fenollosa-Pound version—into bald prose.

In addition, the passage contains phrases quoted from older poetry. Ideally, a relevant quotation should occur to the translator. For example, once in translating a *tanka* by Kiyowara no Motsuke a quotation from Burns seemed to fit perfectly,

We pledged our love,
Making each others' sleeves
All wringing wet with tears.
"Till all the seas run dry," we said,
"Till waves drown Suë's pines."

Unfortunately, in the passage above the best I could do with two lines quoted from earlier poetry was "Plums near the window;/Peaches from the yard . . ." which remind me somewhat of lines about "gay Tom Becket of London" in *Murder in the Cathedral,* but which are not likely to recall the passage to anyone else's mind.

While these are not all, yet they are the major problems (or suggest the major problems) to be met by the translator in the

verse part of this noh play. Almost equally difficult is the treatment of the prose portions. The linguistic problem is the fact that the *sōrō* verbal system used throughout is an archaic one. Until the war, certain formal letters of the "old school" still used this verbal system, but there must be few, if any, who use it now. Even in the *kyogen* or noh comedies roughly contemporary with Zeami the *gozaru* form was used, a system which has at least left its traces in modern colloquial Japanese. Was Zeami himself using a deliberately dignified, slightly antiquated form? What is the translator to do? A passage filled with "thee" and "thou" and verbs in "eth" and "ist" would seem to be the nearest equivalent, but it is questionable whether this is tolerable today. In addition, as prose it seems rather verbose, since the very word *sōrō* counts as four syllables, and our English copula rarely has more than one or two syllables. However, this is a problem which may be quickly solved, for the prose passages, though definitely intoned like our almost defunct recitative, are always unaccompanied, so the matching of prose and musical rhythms is unnecessary.

But there is a deeper problem here. Pound has used a kind of Irish dialect in many of the prose passages. Certainly no one would question the beauty of this dialect in the works of J. M. Synge, or in Lady Gregory's work. And there can be little doubt that Pound was influenced in this by Yeats. But can this use of Irish dialect, even restrained as it is in these translations, suggest the great poetess and her aristocratic lover? Does a sentence like "I've a sad heart to see you looking up to Buddha, you who left me alone, I diving in the black rivers of hell. . ." (neglecting inaccuracies and the fact that it should be verse rather than prose)—suggest the ceremonies chanting in the noh theater, or the elevated religious discussion of the text? No, the tone is clearly mistaken.

As bad or worse is the use of Irish folklore to interpret the situations which occur in these plays. To assume that Komachi is trying to convert the general to Buddhism, like an Irish lassie and her wayward lover, is to misread this situation as badly as the Hirata-Fenollosa-Pound version of *Awoi no Uye* misreads the jealousy theme there. A knowledge of general classification helps here. Formally, this is a play of the fourth class, which

commonly deals with relatively "down-to-earth" situations, treating them as occurring in the present, hence sometimes called *genzai mono* or "present-day things." Not quite true to its class, this play has characters who are spirits re-enacting a scene from their earthly life, while the priest watches them and then recites prayers to help them forward on the way to salvation. Furthermore, the play belongs to a well-recognized group within the fourth class, in which the chief character or characters cannot attain salvation because of their bitter recollections of their earthly life. The confession and re-enactment of their sins, or some particular episode, is usually followed by a Buddhist priest's fervent prayers. Then at last salvation is possible; they become Buddhas, or enter the Way. Had this basic concept been clear, a number of mistranslations in the latter half might have been avoided. Thus formal classification, though sometimes apparently trivial, can be of help to the translator.

Descriptions of such aspects of the production as costume and dance are likewise misleading in the Hirata-Fenollosa-Pound versions. It seems strange that Fenollosa, who is said to have watched and studied noh plays for twenty years, would have left inadequate descriptions. Instead of "astral body" for the general's appearance, the Hirata-Fenollosa-Pound version should have a description of the brilliant costume with those special features which denote the warrior ghost. And rather than "dance" the more appropriate term "pantomime" or "mining" might well have been used. Unlike plays of the third or "woman" class and the fifth or "spirit" class, such a fourth-class play as this rarely has dancing in the ordinary sense. The usual *chu no mai, jo no mai*, etc., are replaced here by the *iroe* which is rather miming than dancing. Of course it is still graceful, elegant, and stylized, never realistic, yet it does represent action in its own way. To call it dance is misleading. Once more, a knowledge of formal classification might have helped in understanding the play as a whole. Translations like the three-volume set published by the Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai,[18] with the Kwanze text line drawings and brief descriptions of actors' movements, are the best solution to date of the problem of suggesting this aspect of the form of noh plays to Western readers.

In an absolute sense, translation is impossible, and surely a theatrical piece cannot be conveyed in all its richness by a written form. However, I am convinced that frank examination of the formal and linguistic problems facing the translator of a noh play can lead to the kind of serious, intelligent attempts to solve them which result in more satisfactory translations.

NOTES

1. Ezra Pound, *Translations* (New York, 1953), p. 272.
2. Ernest Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (New York, n.d.), pp. xvi and xxi.
3. Hojin Yano, *Fireside Chats About English Literature* (Tokyo, 1955). This information, together with that in the first part of the paragraph, is available to me now only in an English synopsis which Professor Yano kindly sent me.
4. Hisashi Furukawa, "The Westerners' Studies of the Noh Play," *Hikaku Bungaku Kenkyujo Kiyo* (Publications of the Institute for Comparative Studies of Culture), I (1955), pp. 5–40.
5. Ernest Fenollosa, "Notes on the Japanese Lyric Drama," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, XXIII (1901), 129 and 137.
6. Pound, *op. cit.*, p. 259.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
8. D. D. Paige, ed., *The Letters of Ezra Pound* (New York, 1950), pp. 27, 30, 214.
9. Furukawa, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–28.
10. Roy E. Teele, "Translations of Noh Plays," *Comparative Literature*, IX (1957), 351.
11. M. Minagawa, "Kayoi Komachi," *Tourist*, XX (1932), 59–66.
12. Pound, *op. cit.*, p. 277.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 242–43.
15. K. Miyake, *Hyoshi Seikai* (Commentary on Noh Rhythms) (Tokyo, 1954). This is a good general exposition of the subject by a scholar in the Kwanze tradition, quoting numerous examples.
16. For this study and my translation I have referred to three texts: (1) a 1960 printing of the Kwanze School's "singing text"; (2) Toyoichiro Nogami's *Yokyoku Zenshu* (Complete Noh Texts) IV (Tokyo, 1921), 253–64; and (3) Kentaro Sanari's *Yokyoku Taikan* (General Survey of Noh Plays), II, 3rd printing (Tokyo, 1933), 761–74.
17. Asaji Nose, *Nogaku Genryu Ko* (Treatise on the Origins of the Noh Theatre) 3rd printing (Tokyo, 1956), pp. 1352–53.
18. *Japanese Noh Drama* (Ten Plays): Vol. I (Tokyo, 1955); Vol. II (Tokyo, 1959); Vol. III (Tokyo, 1960).