

Postgraduate English  
www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

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Issue 25

September 2012

Editors: Kaja Marczewska & Avishek Parui

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*A Japan of the Mind: Basil Bunting's  
Modernist Adaptation of Chōmei's  
“Hōjōki”*

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## A JAPAN OF THE MIND:

### BASIL BUNTING'S MODERNIST ADAPTATION OF CHŌMEI'S *HŌJŌKI*

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Postgraduate English, Issue 25, September 2012

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'In old Japan, by creek and bay,  
The blue plum-blossoms blow,  
Where birds with sea-blue plumage gay  
Through sea-blue branches go:  
Dragons are coiling down below  
Like dragons on a fan;  
And pig-tailed sailors lurching slow  
Through streets of old Japan.'<sup>1</sup>

Alfred Noyes, *Old Japan* (1902), ll. 1-8

Kimonos of the finest silk, worn by white-faced, black-haired geishas, pouring steaming green tea in tiny cups of flowery China-ware and smiling mysteriously behind embellished Oriental screens: a common, perhaps stereotyped image of a Japan that used to be, and that probably still exists, somewhere in that surprising country.

Roland Barthes, in his book *Empire of Signs*, imagines he can invent a fictive nation, form a new system of signs, and call it 'Japan'.<sup>2</sup> Japan is thus to him the imaginary country *par excellence*. To most Western authors, Japan has represented –and still represents– one of the highest peaks of exoticism, an irresistibly attractive country, mainly for its difficult accessibility – not just spatial but also cultural. Of all the imaginary and fantastic countries described in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance, only one bears the name of an actual place on the geographical map of the world, both at those times and nowadays, and this

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Noyes, 'Old Japan', as in *Emerging from Absence: An Archive of Japan in English-Language Verse*, ed. Professor David Ewick and Dr. Irene De Angelis, <http://themargins.net/archive.html> (last viewed: 14th August 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 3.

is precisely Japan.<sup>3</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, one of the first mediators between Japanese and European culture, upon his arrival in this Far Eastern country in 1890 described it as a ‘fairy-land’,<sup>4</sup> where everything looked ‘elvish’<sup>5</sup> to the stranger’s eyes, and eventually got so fascinated with Japanese ghost stories that decided to translate some of them into English, and thus make them accessible to the common Westerner, with renowned collections of short stories such as *In Ghostly Japan* (1899) and *Kwaidan* (1904). William Butler Yeats, who had never been to Japan, still managed to feel haunted by Japanese ghosts across the seas, and eventually decided to use them for some of his drama: the Japanese Noh theatre revived in him images of an ‘anti-world’ of spirits, which he used to call ‘Faeryland’.<sup>6</sup> Ezra Pound himself was very much influenced by Chinese and Japanese literature, especially through the notes of the American scholar Ernest Fenollosa.<sup>7</sup> Even T. S. Eliot wanted to describe the miserable, frustrated typist from ‘The Fire Sermon’ as wearing ‘a bright kimono’<sup>8</sup> and as the owner of a ‘false Japanese print, purchased in Oxford Street’,<sup>9</sup> but in the end *il miglior fabbro* Ezra Pound decided to extirpate those Oriental lines as not very appropriate for what he defined as the typist’s ‘lodging house’.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Swift entitles Part Three of *Gulliver’s Travels* ‘A Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbudrib, and Japan’, in Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), xii, 161. See also Irene De Angelis, ‘Introduction’, in *The Japanese Effect in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2.

<sup>4</sup> In Lafcadio Hearn’s own words: ‘[...] the stranger finds himself thinking of fairy-land. [...] everybody describing the sensations of his first Japanese day talks of the land as a fairy-land, and of its people as fairy-folk. [...] To find one’s self suddenly in a world where everything is upon a smaller and daintier scale than with us – a world of lesser and seemingly kindlier beings, all smiling at you as if to wish you well – a world where all movement is slow and soft, and voices are hushed – a world where land, life and sky are unlike all that one has known elsewhere – this is surely the realization, for imaginations nourished with English folklore, of the old dream of a World of Elves.’ in Lafcadio Hearn, ‘My First Day in the Orient’, in *Writings from Japan: An Anthology*, ed. Francis King (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, 20: ‘Elfish everything seems; for everything as well as everybody is small, and queer, and mysterious: the little houses under their blue roofs, the little shop-fronts hung with blue, and the smiling little people in their blue costumes.’

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Albright, ‘Pound, Yeats, and the Noh Theater’, *The Iowa Review*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1985), 34-50 (p. 41).

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, 35.

<sup>8</sup> T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), 33 (l. 137).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, (l. 140).

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, 45.

Up to September 1868, the beginning of the Meiji era, in Japanese *Meiji-jidai* 明治時代, a period of enlightenment as the character *mei* 明 ('bright') itself suggests,<sup>11</sup> Japan had opted for isolation from the rest of the world.<sup>12</sup> Until then it had been extremely difficult, and most of the times impossible, for Westerners to be granted access into Japan, and to get any detailed sort of information about the mysterious archipelago of the Far East. Thus Japan managed to hold its status of a dreamlike, imaginary country for a long, long time: even after the Japanese Empire's opening to business and trade with the rest of the world, many Western authors still considered Japan as a fairy-tale place, whose existence itself is even hard to believe, and whose culture still needs interpretation. Thus Japan appeared to be the perfect country to be idealized in literature.

How does Basil Bunting's poem *Chōmei at Toyama* fit in this early 20<sup>th</sup> century trend of admiration and curiosity towards Japan? At a first glance, his choice of adapting a medieval Japanese essay into an English poem seems to prove his interest for this new, Modernist feature: Pound had suggested him to transpose the past into the present, mainly by referring to other authors, other times and other cultures, often through translation<sup>13</sup>. Bunting unfortunately could not read Kamo-no-Chōmei's *Hōjōki* in the original Japanese, but found a good substitute in the Italian translation from 1930 by Marcello Muccioli, a ground-breaking academic for Japanese Studies in Italy, who taught Japanese at both Rome University and Naples Eastern University, and thus decided to translate Chōmei's voice from Italian into English, rather than from Japanese into English. Besides, the presence of both W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound (whose influence was particularly strong on Bunting in those years)<sup>14</sup> in the

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<sup>11</sup> Janet Hunter, *Concise Dictionary of Modern Japanese History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 126.

<sup>12</sup> Akira Iriye, 'Japan's Drive to Great-Power Status', in *Meiji Japan: Political, Economic and Social History 1868-1912*, ed. Peter F. Kornicki (London: Routledge, 1998), 25-76 (p. 36).

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Suter and Basil Bunting, 'Time and the Literary Past in the Poetry of Basil Bunting', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1971), 510-526 (pp. 511-2).

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, 511.

Ligurian city of Rapallo<sup>15</sup> might have led him to consider Japanese literature: Keith Tuma remarks how Bunting's poem was originally dedicated to William Butler Yeats, whom he had met precisely in Rapallo in the early thirties, partly because of the Irish poet's interest in Japanese literature, but partly also because in those years Yeats was a kind of exile, being away from Ireland and its political life.<sup>16</sup> Chōmei himself was a hermit, and Bunting himself described him as somebody who had 'got sick of public life and retired to a kind of mixture of hermitage and country cottage at Toyama on Mount Hino'.<sup>17</sup> The *Hōjōki* is considered one of the masterpieces of *inja bungaku*, 隱者文学, the Japanese term for 'recluse literature', a literary genre particularly common in Japan between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and typical of the *inja*, meaning 'those who hide themselves' (deriving from the Chinese term *yinzhe*, 隱者).<sup>18</sup> The word *Inja* in this case identifies both those who were prompted to abandon their own society by more hedonistic ideals (for instance, in order to follow Tao's Way of Nature) and those who chose to retire from the world for ethical reasons (such as protests against a corrupted government or ruler):<sup>19</sup> in the latter case, the parallel between Yeats and Chōmei can be thus easily drawn.

At the same time, though, at a closer look, Chōmei seems to represent more Bunting's personality and state of mind at the time than that of Yeats. Also, the reader who approaches the poem for the first time, and expects to find there an atmosphere of flowery parasols, bamboo sticks, and raw fish, will be very much disappointed: there is, in fact, not much of all this. Japanese places, such as for instance Kyoto, the capital city, or Toyama, Chōmei's retreat, do recur throughout the poem, but if we took off all the names of Japanese places

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<sup>15</sup> Keith Tuma, 'Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Auden and Basil Bunting in the Thirties' (Orono: University of Maine at Orono, 1991), 99, 113.

<sup>16</sup> Tuma, 'Pound, Eliot...', 113.

<sup>17</sup> Basil Bunting, 'News Notes', *Poetry*, vol. 42, no. 6 (1933), 356-360 (p. 357).

<sup>18</sup> Francesca Fraccaro, 'Introduzione', in Kamo no Chōmei, *Ricordi di un eremo – Hōjōki* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1991), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, 10-11.

within Bunting's poem, and substituted them with those of ancient Roman towns, for instance, *Chōmei at Toyama* might appear less charming for some but would still stand, somehow. Bunting does use some typically Japanese images, especially describing a more exotic, more Japanese kind of nature, but they do not recur very often, as there is barely one for each page:

‘Dewy hibiscus dries: though dew / outlast the petals’ (ll. 17-18);<sup>20</sup>

‘Jewels / sold for a handful of rice.’ (ll. 84-5, *CP* 87);

‘O to be birds and fly or dragons and ride on a cloud!’ (l. 105, *CP* 88);

‘a house to suit myself: / one bamboo room’ (ll. 148-9, *CP* 89);

‘an old / silkworm’s cocoon’ (ll. 163-4, *CP* 89);

‘my bamboo balcony’ (l. 177, *CP* 90);

‘bamboo pipes’ (ll. 184-5);

‘chewing tsubana buds, / [...] persimmon, pricklypear, / ears of sweetcorn  
pilfered from Valley Farm’ (ll. 216-218, *CP* 91);

‘Not empyhanded, with cherryblossom, with red maple, / as the season gives it  
to decorate my Buddha / or offer a sprig at a time to chancecomers, home!’  
(ll. 231-233).

In *Chōmei at Toyama* Bunting thus sometimes mentions tropical flowers and fruit, together with the stereotypically Japanese bamboo, rice, and cherryblossoms, and even hints at Japanese silk: the recreation of a Japanese setting is indeed present in the poem, but it would be hard to define this very luxuriant. In his book on the Northumbrian poet, Peter Makin suggests the lack of ‘oriental lushness’ in the poem must have had to do with the fact that *Chōmei at Toyama* was created out of an Italian translation instead of the original Japanese:<sup>21</sup> this obviously must have played a role in Bunting’s mind while adapting the poem, but somehow Makin’s explanation cannot be considered fully convincing. In fact, good translations can still show most of the original text’s flavour and atmospheres. When one

<sup>20</sup> Basil Bunting, *Complete Poems*, ed. Richard Caddel (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), 85. All further references to this edition will be shown in the text as *CP*, followed by page number.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Makin, *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 67.

reads C. P. Cavafy's poems in an English translation, for example, some of the original Greek text is undoubtedly and sadly lost, but, if the poems are well translated into English, most of their Alexandrian Greekness can still reach the foreign reader. In the same way, Muccioli was an Orientalist and a scholar, and so he was very much aware of Kamo-no-Chōmei's own Japanese background, his use of language and figures of speech, as his long and detailed footnotes in the 1930 edition confirm: the Italian text thus still contains much of its Japanese essence. Basil Bunting himself adopts most of his references to Japanese atmospheres directly from the Italian translation. At the beginning of his essay, Chōmei precisely compares human transience with dew on hibiscus, stating:

‘Le case e i loro padroni passano gareggiando in transitorietà. Essi non sono dissimili dalla rugiada sul convolvulo: talvolta la rugiada è caduta e sono rimasti i fiori; ma questi, benché rimasti, si seccano al sole del mattino; talvolta i fiori appassiscono e la rugiada resta, ma pur restando, essa non giunge alla sera.’<sup>22</sup>

‘Houses and their owners pass away while fighting for their own transience. They are not different from the dew on convolvulus: sometimes dew has gone and flowers live on; but the flowers, although they have survived for a while, will dry out with the morning sun; some other times, flowers fade and dew stays on, but in spite of its outlasting the flowers, it will not last until evening.’<sup>23</sup>

Although the image in Bunting's poem is shortened in two lines, it is still decidedly part of the same image which appears in Chōmei's essay. Bunting must have read Muccioli's notes very carefully, as the Italian academic comments this passage saying how the Japanese word *asagao* 朝顔 used to mean hibiscus, but now refers to convolvulus.<sup>24</sup> Bunting probably decided to opt for the better known, and more exotic-sounding, flower, the hibiscus, and at the same time to show accuracy towards the original text through Muccioli's explanatory words.

<sup>22</sup> Kamo-no-Chōmei, *Hōjōki*, trad. Marcello Muccioli (Lanciano: G. Carabba, 1930), 9.

<sup>23</sup> My translation.

<sup>24</sup> Marcello Muccioli, ‘Note’, in Kamo-no-Chōmei, *Hōjōki* (Lanciano: G. Carabba, 1930), 9.

Similarly, the other above mentioned images of Japanese atmosphere and nature are also present in Chōmei's essay. A reference to the jewels exchanged for rice can be found, in Muccioli's words, as 'Quei rari che comperavano disprezzavano l'oro ed apprezzavano i cereali.'<sup>25</sup> ('The few people who could buy something despised gold but valued grain'):<sup>26</sup> the more general word 'grain' is changed into 'rice' by Bunting, as it was the cereal which could be naturally more easily associated with Japan. Moreover, Bunting's desire to be a bird or a dragon in order to fly or ride on clouds is drawn from Chōmei's milder consideration 'Non avendo ali non era possibile innalzarsi in aria e non essendo draghi non si poteva salire sulle nuvole.'<sup>27</sup> ('Without wings, we could not fly up to the sky and not being dragons we could not climb up the clouds')<sup>28</sup>. The image of Kamo-no-Chōmei collecting cherryblossoms and red maple leaves together with his much younger companion synthesizes the following passage:

'Al ritorno, a seconda della stagione, facciamo raccolta di fiori di ciliegio o cerchiamo foglie d'acero, oppure spezziamo dei warabi o raccogliamo dei frutti d'albero, e li offriamo a Budda o li portiamo a casa per farne regali.'<sup>29</sup>

'On the way back, according to the season, we pick cherryblossoms or look for red maple leaves, or break some warabi, or collect fruit from the trees, and we either offer them to Buddha or take them home to give them away as presents.'<sup>30</sup>

Bunting selects the images to include in his poem carefully: from the very beginning, *Chōmei at Toyama* was intended, in Bunting's own words, as 'a condensation' of the original essay *Hōjōki*:<sup>31</sup> therefore, for reasons of synthesis, he can obviously use only a few of the many recurring Japanese metaphors or descriptions of Japanese settings from Chōmei's essay. On *Poetry*, in 1933 Bunting also stated that:

<sup>25</sup> Kamo-no-Chōmei, *Hōjōki*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> My translation.

<sup>27</sup> Kamo-no-Chōmei, *Hōjōki*, 38.

<sup>28</sup> My translation.

<sup>29</sup> Kamo-no-Chōmei, *Hōjōki*, 73.

<sup>30</sup> My translation.

<sup>31</sup> Bunting, 'News Notes' (p. 357).



‘The *Hōjōki* is in prose, but the careful proportion and balance of its parts, the leit-motif of the House running through it, and some other indications, suggest that he intended a poem, more or less elegiac; but had not time, nor possibly energy, at his then age, to work out what would have been for Japan an entirely new form, nor to condense his material sufficiently. This I have attempted to do for him.’<sup>32</sup>

Some parts of the *Hōjōki* led him thus to think that those words originally expressed in a prosaic form were actually meant to be poetry: therefore this could explain why Bunting decided to keep and adapt those Japanese images used by Chōmei that had conjured up visions of poetry in his mind while reading Muccioli’s translation of the *Hōjōki*, such as dragons riding on clouds, or cherryblossoms and red maple leaves. Still, although Bunting chose to keep some images of poetic Japanese atmospheres in his ‘condensation’, he also made a choice of restriction. For this reason, Basil Bunting’s limited exoticism in *Chōmei at Toyama* can only be justified by his own identification with the Japanese hermit. Although Bunting denied that the poem should be considered as an autobiography<sup>33</sup> (and the original dedication to W. B. Yeats would also support this), critics have also argued that Chōmei’s essay expresses Basil Bunting more exactly than any other text:<sup>34</sup> the retirement from the world is indeed a theme that consistently reappears in Bunting’s opus, and, as Peter Makin suggests, it makes one of its first appearances precisely in *Chōmei at Toyama*.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the years, Bunting must have developed a preference for authors who experienced either imprisonment or exile, both in literal and metaphorical terms: he often refers to this as ‘The Slowworm’, meaning ‘a harmless, beautiful and very shy lizard’, which enjoys spending its time in the sun in solitude or hiding itself under hedges.<sup>36</sup> The image of the Slowworm embodies an attitude of life which is very similar to that of Epicurus and Lucretius, but also of Chōmei, who chose to retire and build his ‘silkworm’s cocoon’ (l. 164, *CP* 89) on mount

<sup>32</sup> Bunting, ‘News Notes’ (p. 357).

<sup>33</sup> Makin, *Bunting...*, 70.

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, 65.

<sup>35</sup> Ivi, 66.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem.

Toyama, faraway from ancient Kyoto's madding crowd: the serenity offered by simple things is preferred over the world's arrogance, pomposity and vanity. It is interesting how this theme also recurs in other authors that Bunting considered important sources of inspiration, such as Dante, who was exiled from his beloved hometown Florence for political reasons, and begged for hospitality elsewhere for the rest of his life; Villon, who experienced physical imprisonment, like Bunting himself in 1918;<sup>37</sup> and Wordsworth, who created a romantic image of the hermit, secluded in a cave and seeking shelter in Nature.<sup>38</sup> Chōmei is a hermit, and Bunting must have felt much like one too in the house of Montallegro, a most beautiful but also quite remote location in the hills above Rapallo.

By reducing the references to Japan, Bunting is making his self-identification with the medieval Japanese author much easier. For instance, he avoids most names of Japanese rulers and eras, which are instead present in Chōmei's account of the earthquake and of his retire to a quieter life, as that is the Japanese way of counting and measuring time,<sup>39</sup> whereas our poet from the 20<sup>th</sup> century naturally chooses a Western and modern way to place things in time. At the very beginning of the poem, the narrative persona states that that is the day 'twentyseventh May' of the year 'eleven hundred and seventyseven', time 'eight p.m.' (ll. 20-21, *CP* 85), when the first fire broke out in Kyoto. The 'very simpatico ole Jap'<sup>40</sup> (as Bunting himself referred to the Japanese recluse once) does indeed give us a detailed information of time too, but he does it in the Japanese fashion of the time, which is, according to the Italian translation, 'il 28° giorno della quarta lunazione del terzo anno della scorsa èra Angen [...]

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<sup>37</sup> Anthony Suter and Basil Bunting, 'Time and the Literary Past in the Poetry of Basil Bunting', 514. See also: Keith Alldritt, 'Basil Bunting in Transit', in *Modernism in the Second World War: The Later Poetry of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Basil Bunting and Hugh MacDiarmid* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 77.

<sup>38</sup> 'Once again I see / These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms, / Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke / Sent up, in silence, from among the trees! / With some uncertain notice, as might seem / Of vagrant dwellers in the housless woods, / Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire / The Hermit sits alone.' (ll. 14-22), from William Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011), 1432.

<sup>39</sup> Muccioli, 'Note', 11.

<sup>40</sup> Victoria Forde, *The Poetry of Basil Bunting* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1991), 136.

verso le otto della sera'<sup>41</sup> (in English, 'the 28<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> lunar month of the third year of the past era called Angen, around 8pm'),<sup>42</sup> along with the Western date of 27<sup>th</sup> May 1177 in the notes.<sup>43</sup> At any rate, opting for a Western time and date gives Bunting the chance to break away from the original text, and at the same time to be faithful to it by adapting the same concept in a modern way: he operates similarly again later when he changes 'il 29° giorno della quarta lunazione del quarto anno dell'era *Jishō* (24 maggio 1180)'<sup>44</sup> (in English, 'the 29<sup>th</sup> day of the fourth lunar month of the fourth year of the *Jishō* era')<sup>45</sup> with 'Three years less three days later' (l. 35, *CP* 86). The repetition of a same number is kept, mainly for reasons of rhythm and sound, but the reference to the Japanese year *Jishō* has been completely taken off, turning it into something more understandable for the Western reader. The mention of the number four ('fourth month', and then again 'fourth month of the fourth year'), which for the Japanese is connected with death, as the Japanese character for 'four' has two readings,<sup>46</sup> one of which is pronounced "shi" and coincides with the Japanese character meaning 'death'.<sup>47</sup> The fact that destruction of both houses and human beings should start in the fourth month, and get worse again in the fourth month of the fourth year, would have struck a superstitious Japanese mind, but decidedly not a Western one with little or no knowledge of Japanese culture and language, and thus Bunting – probably unaware of the importance of number four – deletes it completely.

In the same passage, he continues his adaptation of Chōmei's world opting for what it looks like an Americanized expression, stating that the wind broke 'a path a quarter mile / across to Sixth Avenue.' (ll. 37-8, *CP* 86) instead of mentioning the areas of Naka-no-mikado,

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<sup>41</sup> Kamo-no-Chōmei, *Hōjōki*, 11-12.

<sup>42</sup> My translation.

<sup>43</sup> Muccioli, 'Note', 11.

<sup>44</sup> Kamo-no-Chōmei, *Hōjōki*, 17.

<sup>45</sup> My translation.

<sup>46</sup> Most Japanese characters have two readings, one is called *kunyomi* 訓読み (native Japanese reading) and the other one *onyomi* 音読み (reading derived from classical Chinese).

<sup>47</sup> For more on four as unlucky number in China and Japan, please see: Ju Brown, *China, Japan, Korea: Culture and Customs* (North Charleston: BookSurge, 2006), 60.

Kyōgoku and Rokujō as in the original text.<sup>48</sup> Thomas Cole, in his essay published on *Poetry* in 1951, argues how the mention of Sixth Avenue here would lead to draw a prophetic parallel of ‘decay and destruction’ between ancient Kyoto and contemporary New York.<sup>49</sup> Still, one of the places mentioned by Chōmei is Rokujō, 六条, which means precisely ‘Sixth Street’ or ‘Sixth Avenue’ in Japanese, and in this context it refers to an important arterial road, the sixth east-west street in ancient Kyoto.<sup>50</sup> So if Bunting cuts down on exotic names of places, it is in favour of simplification, having both himself (as he was not a great expert in Japanese literature)<sup>51</sup> and the Western reader in mind, facilitating the whole self-identification with the poem’s setting and its speaking persona. Where the Italian translation has ‘6° Jō’,<sup>52</sup> which is ‘Sixth Jō’, and then a lengthy footnote on streets in Kyoto at Chōmei’s times, Bunting uses the expression of ‘Sixth Avenue’ – much less exotic, but immediately comprehensible to the Western reader. In this way, Bunting manages to stick to Chōmei’s account of Kyoto’s destruction, and at the same time to shape it into a more Western, more modern expression.

Bunting acts similarly when he translates Muccioli’s words ‘Sul greto del fiume, [per l’ingombro dei cadaveri,] non c’era posto per far passare neppure un cavallo o un carro.’<sup>53</sup> (‘On the river shore, [as the corpses blocked the way,] there was no room for either a horse or a cart.’)<sup>54</sup> with ‘Dead stank / on the curb, lay so thick on / Riverside Drive a car couldnt pass.’ (ll. 85-87, *CP* 87). Riverside Drive is definitely not a busy street of ancient Kyoto where Kamo-no-Chōmei used to go for a walk, but obviously a popular boulevard in Manhattan,

<sup>48</sup> Muccioli translates it as ‘[...] il 29° giorno della quarta lunazione del quarto anno dell’era *Jishō* (24 maggio 1180) in prossimità della via Naka-no-Mikado dalla parte di Kyōgoku, scoppiò un grosso ciclone che soffiando violentemente si estese fino al 6° *jō*.’ in Chōmei, *Hōjōki*, 17-18. (My translation: on the 29th day of the fourth lunar month of the fourth year of the *Jishō* era (24<sup>th</sup> May 1180), near Naka-no-Mikado street on Kyōgoku’s side, a big windstorm burst out, which blowing heavily reached the 6<sup>th</sup> *jō*.)

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Cole, ‘Bunting: Formal Aspects’, *Poetry*, vol. 78, no. 6 (1951), 366-369 (p. 367).

<sup>50</sup> Muccioli, ‘Note’, 17-18.

<sup>51</sup> Bunting himself admitted: ‘Where Chomei merely refers to a Chinese quotation you or I wouldn’t get at all without the notes, I translated the Chinese from the Italian into English.’, in Makin, *Bunting...*, 69.

<sup>52</sup> Kamo-no-Chōmei, *Hōjōki*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Ivi, 32.

<sup>54</sup> My translation.

New York, along the Hudson river. Bunting again here opts for a more Westernized, more modern adaptation of an old Japanese street: in a similar way as the river in New York City, Kamo river in Kyoto runs from north to south, dividing the whole city in two. Although it is true that Muccioli's words 'river shore' themselves do not make it excessively clear whether the street along the river in ancient Kyoto were very wide or not, when Bunting chooses to use 'Riverside Drive', he acknowledges Kyoto (as capital city of Japan at Chōmei's times) the same importance and same popularity as New York in the 1930s for Western culture. Ancient Kyoto had a very orderly topography, which is partly still preserved nowadays: the city itself was in the shape of a rectangle, containing nine big east-west avenues (the aforementioned *jō*) and four north-south ones, which crossed each other perpendicularly.<sup>55</sup> For the second time in the poem, Bunting opts for a Westernization of the Japanese scene, and at the same time for a modernization of medieval Japan: once again, he means to facilitate the process of self-identification for himself, and the reader, preoccupied as he was with condensing a medieval essay into a 20<sup>th</sup>-century poem.

His own decisions, while adapting the original essay, on which images, moments and ideas he thought relevant for his poem and which ones, on the other hand, he thought better to remove show Bunting's own taste and feeling towards poetry. For instance, it is curious to notice how most of the Japanese names in the *Hōjōki* are not exactly the same ones Bunting chooses to use in the poem: the eras Angen and Jishō<sup>56</sup> are not included, but on the other hand he decides to mention that of Genryaku, when a big earthquake occurred in the area of the old capital Kyoto.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Bunting reports some Japanese geographical places in his poem, but omits many others, probably for reasons of both synthesis and music. Some of them are indeed quite long and not very comfortable to pronounce either, such as Sūzaku-

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<sup>55</sup> Muccioli, 'Note', 17-18.

<sup>56</sup> Kamo-no-Chōmei, *Hōjōki*, 11, 17.

<sup>57</sup> Ivi, 37.

mon and Daigyokuden,<sup>58</sup> and Bunting must have felt the necessity to remove most of these in order to be able to produce a ten-page poem out of a ninety-four-page essay. At the same time, we all know, from his famous ‘Preface’ to his own *Collected Poems*, that he felt he had ‘an ear open to melodic analogies’, comparing his act of choosing the right words for each poem to that of the musician pricking his score (*CP* 21). If his poems are so deeply entwined with musicality and sense of rhythm, then it seems only natural that Bunting should not accept words like Daigakuryō,<sup>59</sup> for instance, so far away from Western ears – and Western understanding.

Bunting’s voice comes out as loud, as distinct as ever in *Chōmei at Toyama*: each choice in imagery, style and vocabulary defines him, and distinguishes him from Chōmei’s essay and Muccioli’s translation. His first-person tone is very different from Chōmei’s more moralizing and less emotional voice:<sup>60</sup> Muccioli’s Chōmei can be indeed considered more Japanese in attitude, more concerned with his age’s change of morals, and with the natural disasters he was actually witnessing, and full of a resignation which then leads him to a more simple and more secluded life. Bunting’s Chōmei, on the contrary, in spite of his retirement to an isolated ten-foot hut, shouts and flails in the midst of a Dantean *bufera infernal*.<sup>61</sup> A good example of this attitude is represented by the lines concerning Chōmei’s work for the Imperial Anthology (*CP* 92): it has been historically proved that the Japanese poet and essayist contributed to the Imperial Anthology’s editing, but Bunting attributes resentful feelings to it on Chōmei’s behalf, and these are his own invention, identifying himself with his own reluctance towards some editing work for a special issue of *Poetry*, and thus letting bits of his own life show through the Japanese author’s persona.<sup>62</sup> Besides, harsh comments about human transience and vanity, are nearly always followed by exclamation marks (which

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<sup>58</sup> Kamo-no-Chōmei, *Hōjōki*, 12.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>60</sup> Tuma, ‘Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Auden and Basil Bunting..’, 112.

<sup>61</sup> Dante Alighieri, Canto V, ‘Inferno’, *La Divina Commedia* (Napoli: Giuseppe Cioffi, 1839), 103 (l. 11).

<sup>62</sup> Tuma, ‘Pound, Eliot, ...’, 103-4.

Muccioli's *Chōmei*, on the other hand, hardly ever uses) and thus betray once more Bunting's more Western and more modern attitude towards the world, together with his much younger age.<sup>63</sup>

If critics consider *Chōmei at Toyama* Bunting's best translation and adaptation,<sup>64</sup> it is because Bunting successfully managed to write a poem which combines both personal interpretations of the Japanese hermit's character and at the same time faithful references to the original *Hōjōki*: thus it is not a mere translation of a medieval Japanese essay, which might result too distant to modern readers, but a clever, new version which interestingly combines elements of medieval Kyoto with those of contemporary Western civilization, giving the ancient text a new flavour and possibly a better understanding to readers from much later centuries. Still, even though Bunting's own reconstruction of a Japanese setting might appear less exotic or less Oriental, if compared to other works on Japan, such as for instance Lafcadio Hearn's short stories, as it has little or unimportant references to Japan and even some moments of Westernization, his is still an idealized version of the same Far Eastern country. The poet's character hides itself behind cherry blossoms, Buddhas, and Imperial anthologies: his carefully selected references to Japan should detach himself from the speaking persona, but his choices, on the contrary, only make his personality stand out even more. By the end of the poem, Japan has acquired for the poet a more metaphorical meaning: it is a faraway place, and also a place of the mind, where people are free to turn down the Emperor's offers and invitations, and opt for a more honest, more spiritual, and more secluded life, distancing themselves from this world's obligations, trivialities, and wrongs, for the sake of their own personal ideals.

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<sup>63</sup> Basil Bunting was in his thirties when he wrote *Chōmei at Toyama* in Rapallo.

<sup>64</sup> Forde, *The Poetry of Basil Bunting*, 146.