

John Walter de Gruchy. *Orienting Arthur Waley: Japonism, Orientalism, and the Creation of Japanese Literature in English*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003. 208 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2567-6.



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The World of the Shining Translator: Waley's "Genji", Orientalism, and the birth of Japanese Literary Studies

Arthur Waley's rich English translation of *The Tale of Genji* captivated the hearts and minds of readers for generations and introduced them—to borrow the words of Ivan Morris—to the world of the Shining Prince. The story of Waley (1889-1966), one of the first twentieth-century translators of Japanese and Chinese, is a fascinating one. Waley, born Arthur David Schloss, was a member of an elite Anglo-Jewish family, educated at Rugby and Cambridge (as opposed to London University, which was "more amenable to the Jewish community"), and a younger member of the Bloomsbury Group (p. 37). His friends included such notables as Rupert Brook, Lytton Strachey, Hugh Dalton, and Ben Keeling. He was a frequent contributor to *The New Statesman*, and instrumental in the institutionalization of "Oriental studies" in England. While Waley's translation of *The Tale of Genji* remains in print, his story has been largely forgotten by scholars of both Japanese literature and the Bloomsbury movement alike. It is as though Waley as translator was merely a medium, or a "transparent window to the cultures and societies of the Far East." (p. 5). John Walter de Gruchy's important new book *Orienting Arthur Waley: Japonism, Orientalism, and the Creation of Japanese Literature in English* tells the story of Arthur Waley.

He situates Waley in the sociopolitical context of Anglo-Japanese relations of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. De Gruchy contends that Waley's own Japanese translations (*Japanese Poetry: The Uta*, 1919; *The No Plays of Japan*, 1921; and *The Tale of Genji*, 6 vols., 1919-1933) mimic the development of Japanese studies in Europe. He maintains that Waley's interest in Japanese literature was a product of nineteenth-century japonism and Anglo-Japanese imperialisms, as well as of three aspects of his identity: his Judaism, ambiguous sexuality, and socialist leanings. Rather than read Waley's translations simply as Japanese literature (translated), de Gruchy reads them—especially *The Tale of Genji*—as a particular type of English literature that filled an important role in literature and culture in the interwar years. In de Gruchy's words, "Waley's *Tale of Genji* is an English novel in its own right, a romantic escape, in prose, from the aftershock of war into an aestheticized realm of sensitive, effeminate manners and highly cultivated aesthetic tastes" (p. 12). His subtly nuanced reading is elegant and convincing.

The first chapter, "The Institutionalization of Japonism in Britain," provides an overview of two seemingly unrelated developments around the turn of the twentieth-

eth century. These are, firstly, the socio-historical developments in Japan, which resulted in its recognition as a powerful nation state in the world arena, and secondly, the cultural transition in Britain from aestheticism to early modernism that occurred at roughly the same time. De Gruchy shows how these two developments were significant. He explores how particular images of Japan were utilized by the people in Britain for various reasons. At times, these same images were employed by the Japanese themselves. In general, it can be said that these images of Japan helped support the aims of Anglo-Japanese imperialism. Following the forced opening of Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, Japan appeared to many European aesthetes as a beacon, an exotic land that had developed independently of and untainted by the west, and in communion with nature. They contrasted their idealized image of Japan with Western civilization, which they saw as “ugly, corrupt, and decaying” (p. 17). Japanese art was heralded for its beauty and its supposed purity. It had dual functions to Western viewers: On the one hand, it pointed out the limits of Western civilization (physically and symbolically); on the other, its perceived “quaintness” and “purity” in comparison with Western art, “affirm[ed] the power and authority of the empire-nation and testif[ied] to Western supremacy and world domination” and confirmed to these western viewers the degradation of Western culture. Oscar Wilde aside, most Western viewers saw in Japanese art representations of what they romantically understood to be the mirror of Japanese reality (p. 19).[1]

De Gruchy relates the instrumental role played by the Japan Society of London (established 1892) in simultaneously promoting these understandings through the implicit linking of japonism and economic imperialism. The Japan Society was an elite Anglo-Japanese old-boys club, which included such illustrious (or in some cases infamous) members as Hugh Cortazzi, Sir Francis Pig-gott, Basil Hall Chamberlain, the then-current Japanese ambassador, Kakuzo Okakura, Baron Kencho Suematsu (in fact the first English translator of *Genji monogatari*) and Mamoru Shigemitsu, who was later indicted as a war criminal. Among its stated goals was “the promotion of mutual understanding and good feeling between the British and Japanese peoples, and the encouragement of the Social Life and Economic Condition of the Japanese People, Past and Present, and of Japanese matters generally” (p. 22). De Gruchy contends that the ways in which mutual understanding and good feeling were promoted fit firmly within the paradigm of aestheticism. Yet the display and admiration of Japanese things through

the Japan Society of London and other institutions like it also helped to “aestheticize the process of politics and economics in which Japan was playing an increasingly important part, and to encourage popular support for the military alliance” between Britain and Japan (p. 25). Japanese art demonstrated to elite Western viewers Western superiority, while to the Japanese, their own art and literature was seen to be the proving grounds upon which their “civilization” could be defined. Paradoxically, the institutionalization of japonism at the height of the late-nineteenth-century aesthetic movement coincided with recognition, in some parts, that Japan “was a serious economic competitor in the Far East that had to be known, and contained, without delay (p. 27).

In 1894, the now-powerful nation-state of Japan exercised its military might over China. Ten years later it defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War. These events in such swift succession caused Europeans to sit up and take notice. Many attributed the Japanese victories to the persistence of *bushido*, the way of the warrior, even in the face of westernization and modernization. Many thought that the British could learn something from bushido and thus it was added to the melange of orientalist japonism, but did not completely eliminate older mythic views of Japan. According to de Gruchy, conservatives tended to see this new muscular Japan as a threat, while leftists saw it as a positive stand against the evils of British imperialism: “Somehow Japan’s own role as colonizer in Formosa and Korea—’awakening,’ ’encouraging,’ and ’enlightening’ the natives—was seen as different from Western imperialism” (p. 30). This chapter sets the stage appropriately for de Gruchy’s discussion of Waley and his translations. Orientalist ideas were in vogue during Waley’s youth, and the art and culture of Japan appealed in a particular way to those who saw Britain’s Golden Age as past.

Chapter 2 provides a brief, but intriguing biography of Arthur Waley’s early years until he “became an orientalist and devote[d] his life to the study and translation of classical Asian Literature” (p. 35). De Gruchy limits his biographical sketch in this chapter to the early years, returning briefly in his final chapter to the disillusioned, older Waley. De Gruchy’s ability to write a detailed historical outline is hampered, as he relates in the introduction, by the paucity of materials on Waley’s life and letters. (There have been very few studies of Waley to date, either in English or in Japanese, and most of Waley’s personal papers were destroyed, either by Waley himself, or accidentally, in a move. Most of the remaining papers can be found at Rutgers University Libraries.)

To recap, de Gruchy links Waley's personal interest in Japan to his socialism, his Judaism, and his ambiguous sexuality. His socialism was fostered at home by his father, a progressive economist interested in social reform, and further developed by his association at Cambridge with the Cambridge Fabian Society and with other progressive movements. Though members of the society were of the social elite, participation required signing an oath (the Basis) that repudiated private ownership of land and industrial capital. De Gruchy writes, "The Fabians were among those who had been caught up in the passionate enthusiasm for Japan following the defeat of Russia in 1904-1905" in that they saw Japan, in the words of Beatrice Webb, as "the only coloured nation that could be compared favourably with any European race" (p. 41). In other words, radically progressive political ideals of the society were nevertheless colored, so to speak, by imperialistic and paternalistic views of Asia. Moreover, the Waley family tradition of providing social and material support to the underprivileged Jews in London provided Waley with a model for active social reform. His Jewish background, at a time of overt and subtler anti-Semitism, accustomed him to the role of the outsider, a "not quite not white" mediator between East and West, and conditioned him to identification with victims and the oppressed (p. 50). Awareness of his relative outsider status, according to de Gruchy, also led to Waley's gradually distancing himself from his more voluble companions. Lastly, de Gruchy maintains that Waley's ambiguous sexuality was a motivating factor in his decision to become an Orientalist. He states that Waley's social circle at Cambridge was either homosexual or bisexual; Waley himself was apparently bisexual. The open secret of his group's homosexuality found its way into their discourse in myriad ways. Japan, or the image of Japan that was promoted by aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde a generation earlier, was one such discourse. In Japan, it seemed, anything was possible, because Japan was "not so much a place as a state of mind, a deliberate, self-conscious creation, or appropriation" As such, it becomes a site of resistance to all forms of established authority, including heterosexuality" (p. 47). De Gruchy claims that Japan provided a place of acceptable homoerotic desire for Waley (and others of his group) because of what they saw as a cult of beauty, and because of how they interpreted the male-male interactions of the samurai. Later, when discussing Waley's translations, de Gruchy suggests that Waley tended to select texts with homoerotic undercurrents, and occasionally mistranslated others, to heighten the sense of homoerotic pleasure.

Before bringing the biographical sketch to a close, de Gruchy talks about how Waley turned a general interest in japonism (shared by many in his milieu) into his life's work through employment in the sub-department of Oriental Prints and Drawings as cataloguer at the British Museum, an institution whose collections "functioned as signifiers of national identity, instructing the British people in their national heritage of culture, as opposed to the cultures and heritages of others, and making clear the limits, or limitlessness, of national boundaries" (p. 57). It was here that Waley began the daunting task of teaching himself Japanese and Chinese. In the absence of clear evidence, de Gruchy can only speculate that Waley's success was related to his intelligence, his rigorous philological and analytical training at Rugby and Cambridge, and his familiarity with a number of other foreign languages. De Gruchy's admittedly limited biography provides a fascinating sketch of a man whose translation of *The Tale of Genji* captivated generations of readers. De Gruchy maintains that it was the confluence of historical and personal factors that made it possible for Waley to become the translator that he was, and for his translations, particularly *Genji*, to have the effect that they did.

In the following three chapters, de Gruchy discusses Waley's primary Japanese translations: *Japanese Poetry: The Uta* (1919); *The No Plays of Japan* (1921); and *The Tale of Genji* (6 vols., 1919-1933). He believes that Waley's own choice of texts to translate and his approach mimic the process of institutionalization of Japanese studies in Europe. His earliest translation from the Japanese, *Japanese Poetry: The Uta*, followed his translations of Chinese poetry and functioned as a kind of dictionary or grammar of Japanese, as well as a critical introduction to the field of Japanese studies. He did not intend his translations to be read as literature, though the volume was received—somewhat lukewarmly, as it turns out—as such. Later translations, such as the no plays, and especially *The Tale of Genji* were conceived of as literature, and were more "literary" in approach and language. Although *Japanese Poetry* functions best as a primer of classical Japanese, his introduction challenged "the uncritical admiration for Japanese things, and Japanese poetry in particular, that was held by most of Waley's modernist contemporaries" (p. 66). This strategic position helped to establish him as an authority and helped to promote the serious study of Japanese at the still-new School of Oriental and African Studies. De Gruchy contends that Waley's intent was to distance his work from both non-professional and overly lyrical translations, and thus figures as initial steps towards his more modernist work.

His dispassionate approach to Japanese poetry also distances him from writers whose essentializing views held that Japanese poetry was comprehensible only by the Japanese, a fairly conventional view of the time. Thus, de Gruchy believes that we see already in Waley's poetry translations an early critique of the idea of the "Japanese spirit" that would later be used in support of virulent ultra-nationalism.

In "No-ing the Japanese" de Gruchy presents Waley's translations of no plays as his defense of no (in opposition to many earlier scholars and writers who saw little of value in no) and as "ammunition for modernism in its battle against realism" (p. 12), especially against the elitist modernism favored by Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenellosa. "Waley's *No Plays*," writes de Gruchy, "challenged a prevailing Western attitude in which clear moral and class distinctions were made between the aristocratic 'high art' of the emperor and the noble samurai—the no—and the 'vulgar low art' of the common people, Kabuki" (p. 87). De Gruchy's discussion of Waley's no translations does not ignore the limitations of Waley's approach, including his overemphasis of the idea that no was a populist entertainment practice (as opposed to one that was patronized by the elite), and his overly simplistic treatment of Zen in no. While the discussion of the "recovery" and canonization of no following the Meiji restoration is an interesting one, and told well here, the discussion that I found particularly interesting is de Gruchy's contention that Waley's true aim in translating no plays was to present a case for a non-elitist modernism. Perhaps de Gruchy assumed that most of his readers would know the details of this turf war in English literature, because he does not tell it in great detail. This reader wished he had. Earlier translators (including Mitford, Aston, and Chamberlain) had declared no to be an entertainment practice of the elite, and morally superior to the immoral kabuki. Of Yeats's, Pound's, and Fenellosa's respective interest in no, de Gruchy writes, "I would add to the debate that Pound and Yeats were never really interested in the no, or in Japan so much as the use of Japanese culture for their own drama and culture program" (p. 96). He then quotes Adrian Pinnington, who has written extensively on Waley and on English modernists' use of Japanese drama. Pinnington claims that "no served the myth of Modernism itself; in this case the myth that Yeats desire to create an alternative to the naturalist drama of Europe was something startlingly new" (p. 96). De Gruchy demonstrates how Waley attempted to displace Pound and Fenellosa, not as poets (not that Fenellosa was a poet), but as "inferior orientalist" and elitists. As he had earlier presented himself

as an authority in translating poetry, he takes a similar approach in his translation of no plays, invoking his use of the treatises of Zeami, for example, as one reason why his translations are superior to others. What he fails to point out (which de Gruchy does) is that he is not the first Westerner to use these treatises. His translations are also an implicit critique of the elite modernism of Pound and Yeats, who were determined to create a theater for the initiated and the elite. Waley, by contrast, continually took pains to show any populist connections of no, quite often overstating these connections. Of interest to De Gruchy, however, is Waley's discussion of how classical allusions were made comprehensible to illiterate spectators through songbooks and adaptations. He contends, moreover, that Waley was much more attracted by the homoerotic element in no, especially as it relates to the conditions of production, and how it is reflected in the plays. The chapter provides an interesting exploration of the scholarship and politics of no translation in the early twentieth century.

At the center of de Gruchy's book is the chapter, "Whose Golden Age? The Tale of *The Tale of Genji*." In it, de Gruchy contends that Waley's *Genji*, by far his best translation from Japanese, is, to repeat, "a romantic escape, in prose, from the aftershock of war into an aestheticized realm of sensitive, effeminate manners and highly cultivated aesthetic tastes" as well as the successful use of modernist prose (p. 12). The text, according to de Gruchy, provided Waley with a suitable voice for his own experiments in prose and struck a chord with contemporary readers.

De Gruchy again: "Waley's translation of the *Genji* is not experimental in form, yet it presented to a contemporary Western audience a vision or fantasy of an alternative order, of everything the Modern West was not: a peaceful, civilized and non-industrial society in which natural beauty, the arts, and human relations appeared more important than politics or progress, without a hint of militarism, almost an idealized England at some imagined golden moment of the past" (p. 119).

This understanding of *The Tale of Genji* is borne out by the assortment of quotations from contemporary reviews of Waley's translation. This is not the *Genji* I have read, in either the original or more recent translations. "My" *Genji* is a text riddled with power politics played out against a backdrop of aesthetic concerns. To be sure, de Gruchy is well aware of this point. It is Waley himself who downplays this aspect of *Genji*. His aim is to explore the various reasons why *Genji* appealed to Waley

as translator, and why his translation was so attractive to readers when it was published.

De Gruchy begins the chapter by examining Western attitudes toward *Genji monogatari* prior to Waley's translation. He aptly demonstrates that the earlier reception of English-speaking critics was, for the most part, lukewarm at best, and that the first English translation (by Kencho Suematsu) was received as an example of scholarly translation, or as a quaint Japanese oddity, not as literature. Waley's translation of *The Tale of Genji* appeared as six volumes, between 1925-1933, though his interest in the text dated from some years earlier. Despite some minor criticisms, early volumes were almost universally well received, while the last volume, "The Bridge of Dreams," received a slightly more mixed review, perhaps because readers saw Waley's highly aestheticized spin on the text as outmoded in a time of increasing hostilities rather than the necessary escape that the earlier ones provided. The early volumes were praised for their escapist possibilities, the characters' modernity and civility, and the freshness of the narrative, as well as the novelty of the fact that a woman, "Lady Murasaki," in Waley's parlance, had written "one of the two or three greatest novels ever written" (p. 118). De Gruchy shows how reviewers were hard-pressed to admit that the artistry was in the original, which he ascribes to Orientalist beliefs in the superiority of the English language. At the same time, however, he readily admits that many of Waley's choices as translator were related more to "what he believed were the exotic and erotic demands of Western readers (himself included) than to the author, Murasaki Shikibu" and further states, quite romantically, that something in the text had enabled Waley to translate it so successfully: "Murasaki had allowed the shy and quiet translator to speak, providing him with images, sentiments and a story that may otherwise have been suppressed or displaced elsewhere" (pp. 118-119).

Foremost among the erotic demands that de Gruchy examines in detail are what contemporary readers saw as its escapist qualities, into an aesthetic realm in the Orient, away from the depressing qualities of England after the first World War. Moreover, Genji, according to de Gruchy was the perfect post-Edwardian hero, "an ideal, ever-youthful male hero, far removed from the despised manly type, and yet equally self-assured in his masculine identity. He is neither manned nor unmanned ... Attractive and attracted to both sexes, Genji is both a homosexual and a heterosexual Western ideal or fantasy in an age when such literary men were sorely wanting" (p. 146). His discussion of the homoerotic appeal of *The Tale of*

Genji is quite convincing. Genji, like the prototypical "effeminate post-war aesthete-hero who aspires to poetry, dancing, music and personal relation," thus fits into the aesthetic paradigm in that he is both beautiful and provided an example of resistance to a particularly oppressive type of masculinity (p. 48).

Aestheticism, of which there is much in *Genji monogatari* (a work which itself seems to suggest, and in a stronger voice as the tale continues, that the best days have passed), certainly appealed to Arthur Waley and other contemporaries schooled in modernism and disillusioned by their lives' experiences. The same can be said of the imagined freedoms of Heian period court life. In de Gruchy's words, "Waley's translation of *The Tale of Genji* was at once a successful translation and also a metaphor of England's own *temps perdu*, the endless summer or *belle époque* of the late-Edwardian period before the war broke out and ended that era, leaving a generation lost, disillusioned, and forever looking back with nostalgia at a golden age of youth, innocence and beauty" (p. 152).

In "Whose Golden Age," de Gruchy demonstrates how Genji's Heian epoch evoked for Waley the translator and many others of his generation their own glory days, the years before war broke out. Chapter 6, de Gruchy's conclusion, shows just how far the world would move from that supposed golden age. Following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and subsequent military actions in China, public opinion of Japan plummeted, though, as de Gruchy points out, actions against Japan were mitigated by a confluence of factors including the Depression, the growth of fascism, and Hitler's rise to power. Whereas earlier volumes in the translation had appealed to readers for the very reason that they evoked the lost golden age of England, his translation of the final chapters, "The Bridge of Dreams," was deemed irrelevant by at least one critic, albeit a technical masterpiece. De Gruchy suggests that aesthetic concerns had no place in a world that was so unsettled. Although, as de Gruchy had pointed out, the aesthetic attraction of Japan had been employed to support a variety of aims through the years, including Anglo-Japanese imperialists, modernists, and others who saw the West's greatest days as past, now, at least, the days of the reverential admiration for Japanese aestheticism were over. De Gruchy quotes one disillusioned, and conveniently forgetful, observer: "[T]he Japanese, long ago perceiving Western sentimentality about them, did their best, right up to 1941, to exploit it for the purposes of propaganda, and behind a barrage of cherry blossoms they gradually built up their heavy industries for their great design of conquering the world" (p. 158). Although

Waley did not become a vociferously outspoken critic of Japan, he too was disillusioned like many others, and after finishing his translation of *The Tale of Genji*, he elected not to translate Japanese literature until long after the Second World War had ended.

De Gruchy gleans, however, that Waley was rather unaware of his own complicity in promoting an aestheticized Japan. His disillusionment shows as well in Waley's wartime job censoring Japanese material and preparing political propaganda intended to help the British cause. After the war ended, the image of Japan as an "aesthetic fairyland" was revived (p. 162). Soon, Waley again began to translate Japanese literature. However he translated very little, and for the first time, most of what he chose to translate was from the modern period.

In his conclusion, de Gruchy repeats his claim that Waley, despite being a serious orientalist who did challenge some of the western attitudes toward Japan prevalent in the interwar years, nevertheless brought to his scholarship and translations all of the other baggage incumbent to orientalism: he was "part of an early, academic movement that legitimized or institutionalized that image" and he participated "in the great imperial project of knowledge about the East—at a time when knowledge of oriental languages was seen as an urgent imperial requirement" (pp. 164-165).

DeGruchy's book provides a fascinating study of Arthur Waley, of the specifics of Anglo-Japanese orien-

talism, including its varied appeals to capitalists, bureaucrats, and modernist writers, and of the cultural milieu of the interwar years when this attraction arose. His book, moreover, is eminently readable and engaging. His work shows how *The Tale of Genji*, in particular view of Waley's translations, was read as a unique achievement in modernist English literature in the interwar years in the way that it evoked a utopian Golden Age and provided a metaphor for what many nostalgically believed had been lost in England. This book will appeal to a broadly based readership, including scholars of Japanese literature and history, English literature and history, and those in cultural studies. I maintain, moreover, that this book will have a special appeal to those readers whose introduction to Japanese literature was through Waley's translation of *The Tale of Genji*, as it may invoke their own golden introduction to their own ideal Japan.

Note

[1]. In contrast to earlier ways of seeing, many proponents of the aesthetic movement saw beauty as exempt from human laws and mores. That which was beautiful need not be moral; that which was moral was not automatically beautiful. However, this belief was not universal within the movement, particularly as the idea of beauty elsewhere became increasingly linked with the idea of the degradation of Western society. In fact, many of the later aesthetes saw art and society's betterment as inextricably linked.

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