

Music of a Lost Kingdom: W.B. Yeats and the Japanese Nō Drama

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Abstract

In this article I approach some of Yeats's later dance plays, written under the influence of the Japanese Nō drama, by asking and answering the following questions: What did Yeats think he was doing when in February 1916 he began drafting *At the Hawk's Well*, the first play written after he had been introduced to the Nō and the first of his *Four Plays for Dancers* (1921)? How and what did Yeats learn about the Nō? How did he explain the attraction that the Nō had for him and how does this explanation relate to his earlier writings on drama and theatre? How can the plays he wrote before *Four Plays for Dancers* be seen as preparations for his encounter with the Nō? Apart from *At the Hawk's Well* (1917), I consider *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919) and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939); I also pay attention to the role played by Ezra Pound in shaping Yeats's plays and his ideas about the Nō.

Keywords: W.B. Yeats, dance plays, Japanese Nō drama, Ezra Pound, «listening to incense»

In 1994, French translations of three plays by W.B. Yeats appeared under the title *Trois Nōs irlandais*¹. The title rings false, because in his published writings Yeats never used the label 'Nō play' for any of his productions, knowing very well that they were no Nō plays in the accepted sense, but something noticeably different. They are always referred to as plays for dancers, although this label is also misleading, because not all the characters dance in each play. I do not want to compare Yeats's plays for dancers with the Nō to the disadvantage of the former and to conclude that they are of little value because he did not understand the Nō. It is altogether pointless to assert that it «was a mistake for Yeats to believe that he could give us anything resembling the Noh drama»². Yeats believed no such thing. Nor will I discuss the occult or religious traditions underlying both the Nō and Yeats's plays, such as the so-

called 'dreaming back'. These parallels have been frequently explored, and the general consensus has been that an audience of a Nō play would understand these traditions, whereas Yeats's audience would not³.

I want to approach the plays by asking the following questions: What did Yeats think he was doing when in February 1916 he began drafting *At the Hawk's Well*, the first play written after he had been introduced to the Nō and the first of his *Four Plays for Dancers* (1921)? How and what did Yeats learn about the Nō? How did he explain the attraction that the Nō had for him and how does this explanation relate to his earlier writings on drama and theatre? In which way can the plays he wrote before *Four Plays for Dancers* be seen as preparations for his encounter with the Nō?

Yeats seems to have come into contact with Japanese art, literature, and culture at about the end of the 19th century through Arthur Symons⁴. His knowledge increased in 1903 through contact with the bilingual Japanese poet and essayist Yone Noguchi (1875-1947)⁵. In May 1909 Yeats met Ezra Pound for the first time, and it was through him that Yeats was introduced to the Nō⁶. In November 1913, the two poets retired to Stone Cottage in Sussex, where Pound began to work on the papers of the American scholar Ernest Fenollosa⁷. Fenollosa (1853-1908) had been a Professor of Philosophy and Political Economy at Tokyo Imperial University; he was also an expert on the Nō and had taken part in several performances. At his death he left drafts of several essays on the Nō and of some translations. Pound revised and published them in two books under Fenollosa's and his name, as "*Noh*" or *Accomplishment*⁸ (1916) and *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*⁹ (1916). For the latter Yeats wrote an introduction which, together with the notes appended to the dance plays and some passages in his essay of 1914, *Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places*¹⁰, stands as his most substantial writing on the Nō.

Pound's efforts have been criticized by Richard Taylor as «highly questionable, inaccurate, even incoherent»¹¹, but this objection is irrelevant when one wants to consider and evaluate Yeats's enthusiastic response to Pound's redactions, however misguided they in fact may have been. In order to assess the characteristics and the quality of Yeats's use of the Nō, one has to deal with what he himself knew about it and refrain from condemning the many instances where he and Pound failed to understand it. Indeed, Taylor has claimed that, despite all his shortcomings as a translator, Pound had some intuitive insight into the essence and spirit of the Nō, into its poetic and symbolic qualities and its fusion of poetry, music, and dance. These insights reverberate in Yeats's introduction.

Before I continue, a brief definition of the Nō is called for:

This relatively short Japanese dramatic form, employing poetry, prose, patterned movement, dance, and music, was perfected in the 14th c. [...] [T]he poetry is highly allusive and elevated. Such elevated richness, the religious subjects, and the slow tempo of most Nō create a drama akin to the Gr[reek], which it further resembles in its use of traditional materials, masks, male performers, and a chorus (that takes no part in the action).¹²

This definition can be supplemented by consulting Masaru Sekine and Christopher Murray's book on *Yeats and the Nob*¹³. The Nō stage is almost bare; a lone pine-tree is depicted on a backcloth. The actors wear gorgeous costumes; some of them are masked. They represent three or four distinct, ever-recurring types, approximately described as protagonist (*shite*), his companion (*tsure*), antagonist (*waki*), and chorus (about 6-8 actors). To these are added four musicians, a flutist and three percussionists. According to Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443), the Nō theatre's major playwright and theorist, the plays are designed to create an overall impression of subtle and profoundly felt beauty, for which he used the term *yugen*. It is, argues Hiro Ishibashi, a Japanese scholar, quite different from Yeats's concept of beauty¹⁴.

Yeats's introduction to *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* refers to these elements, but places them in highly idiosyncratic contexts¹⁵. He emphasizes the use of masks, the elaborate poetry (characterized by a play upon a single metaphor or image), the lack of naturalistic scenery, the presence of a chorus and of musicians, and the climactic dance. He has found what he had always been looking for, an elitist form of drama independent of the commercial theatre, of its mob-like audience, and of its coverage by the popular press.

Yeats never saw a Nō play performed; but, then, he never had the opportunity. Moreover, Masaru Sekine, a Japanese scholar and trained Nō actor, notes that Yeats «had no direct knowledge of the underlying philosophy of the Noh drama»¹⁶, because this philosophy was unknown in Europe in the early years of the 20th century. Yeats claims that his play *At the Hawk's Well* was «made possible by a Japanese dancer whom I have seen dance in a studio and in a drawing-room and on a very small stage» (*E&I*, 224). His name was Michio Ito (1892-1961)¹⁷. Yeats does not say that Ito performed Nō dances, and in fact Ito could not have done so, since he did not have the necessary training. He had come to Europe to study modern dance; later he became a well-known choreographer in America. He danced the non-speaking part of the Guardian of the Well in the first two performances of *At the Hawk's Well*. But, as Augustine Martin remarks on the basis of photographs and his own experience, the dance was no proper Nō dance¹⁸.

Yeats camouflages and compensates for his incomplete knowledge of the Nō by deflecting the reader's attention to his own reading, to his artistic ambitions, background, and experiences. Thus he begins his introduction, not with the Nō, but with a visit to the studio of the artist Edmund Dulac, where he saw the mask to be used in *At the Hawk's Well*; it struck him as a «half-Greek, half-Asiatic face» (*E&I*, 221). Another physical addition to his dance plays comes again from a source much nearer home, the «ivory-coloured screens invented by Gordon Craig» (*E&I*, 222), which Yeats used for the first time in 1910 in a production of his play *The Hour-Glass*.

The deflections continue as the essay proceeds. Yeats relates having watched the performance of a group of highly trained young Spanish danc-

ers «in the midst of a drawing-room» (*E&I*, 223). As is well known, the drawing-rooms of Lady Cunard and Lady Islington were the venues of the first performances of *At the Hawk's Well* on 2 and 4 April 1916. Further European authorities are invoked: the «spiritual painting» of the 14th century and the works of Shakespeare. Although Yeats intends «to go to Asia for a stage convention» (*E&I*, 227), he will do so with a travelling bag full of European memories. More is stuffed into it. He quotes from *Hamlet* (1603), *The Merchant of Venice* (1600), and *Thrasymedes and Eunoe*¹⁹, an obscure poem by Walter Savage Landor, without identifying his sources, because in his opinion the quotations have become part of an old cultural memory, which he cannot do without (*E&I*, 227). It remains Yeats's secret how these quotations might advance his advocacy of the Japanese Nō drama or indeed shed light on his own plays. It appears that here as elsewhere in the essay Yeats wants both to impress and to dupe the reader. A similar strategy underlies his use of rhetorical questions instead of well-reasoned assertions at crucial points. See for instance the final sentences of the introduction:

I know that I only amuse myself with a fancy [i.e. his play for dancers], for my writings if they be seaworthy will put to sea, and I cannot tell where they may be carried by the wind. Are not the faery stories of Oscar Wilde, which were written for Mr. Ricketts and Mr. Shannon and for a few ladies, very popular in Arabia? (*E&I*, 236-237)

Confronted with an enigmatic object such as the Nō drama, Yeats seeks reassurance in well-known quarters. As is his habit with other foreign sources, Yeats transfers the Nō to his own mental world and thereby domesticates and prepares it for his own use. Yeats's image of Japan is one that he himself «created in his thought and poetry»²⁰.

He also introduces an Irish perspective. The legends recounted in Nō plays remind him of certain motifs in Irish folklore. Thus the Moon Goddess or celestial dancer in *Hagoromo* is made part of the Irish spectral world, again with the help of a rhetorical question: «or should we call her faery?» (*E&I*, 232). Besides offering a reassuring foothold on an unfamiliar terrain, the Irish motifs provide analogues to the plots and stories of certain Nō plays and prompt Yeats to make the exorbitant claim that the Japanese Nō playwrights «were more like ourselves than the Greek and Romans, more like us even than are Shakespeare and Corneille» (*E&I*, 233). With this bold assumption Yeats builds a bridge between the Nō and an imaginary Irish audience. His own plays, modelled on the Nō, «may excite once more, whether in Gaelic or in English, under the slope of Slieve-na-mon or Croagh Patrick, ancient memories» (*E&I*, 236). But will they really do this?

The original version of the introduction begins with a sentence which he later eliminated but which presents his purpose most clearly: «I have asked Mr. Pound for these beautiful plays because I think they will help me to explain

a certain possibility of the Irish dramatic movement»²¹. The Nō plays will not only help him to write a new kind of drama; they will also infuse new life into Irish drama in general and reform it. As we know, such hopes were unfulfilled. Irish drama developed into a different direction, witness Sean O'Casey's realistic, even naturalistic, tenement dramas, such as *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923). Yeats's *Four Plays for Dancers* were not included in the Abbey's main repertoire. *The Only Jealousy of Emer* was first produced in a Dutch translation in the Netherlands in 1922; the first Abbey production was in May 1926. *At the Hawk's Well* took even longer to arrive in Dublin, namely until November 1930. The most topical of the four plays, *The Dreaming of the Bones*, set in the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising, premiered in December 1931, fifteen years after the event with which it deals. *Calvary* (1920) was not performed during Yeats's lifetime.

The reference to ancient memories is related to an obscure phrase towards the end of Yeats's introduction. He refers to «that curious game which the Japanese called [...] "listening to incense"» (*E&I*, 236). Yeats does not explain the mixed metaphor or sense impression, nor does he quote a source. It comes from Pound's introduction to "*Noh*" or *Accomplishment*, where it is defined as an ancient Japanese court game:

For «listening to incense» the company was divided into two parties, and some arbiter burnt many kinds and many blended sorts of perfume, and the game was not merely to know which was which, but to give to each one of them a beautiful and allusive name, to recall by the title some strange event of history or some passage of romance or legend.²²

Pound notes that this composite appeal to the senses of sight and hearing, to the audience's well-trained memory, and to the ability to understand its allusive nature resembles that of the performance of a Nō play.

Yeats thought that his plays for dancers should stir the ancient racial memories of an Irish audience, but no such memories are invoked in the actual plays with the sole exception of *The Dreaming of the Bones*. The members of his ideal audience are gathered, not in an ancient imperial court or under Croagh Patrick, but in a fashionable early 20th-century drawing-room in London, and are united by «good taste» (*E&I*, 223), i.e. by aesthetic pleasure. The guests at the performances of *At the Hawk's Well* in Lady Cunard's and Lady Islington's drawing-rooms were mostly British, not Irish, and came from high society, even royalty, and the avant-garde of artists and writers, among them T.S. Eliot²³. Eliot was so impressed that in 1933 he advised Hallie Flanagan, an American theatre director, to stage his *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932) in a manner similar to that of the first performance of Yeats's play²⁴.

Yeats's notes to the four plays for dancers are relevant to their understanding²⁵. He considers the Nō his «first model» (*VPL*, 415), implying that he had no model when he began to write plays in the late 1880s, and confesses

that the Nō liberated his own playwriting. He is no longer plagued by the constraints of having to write plays that will attract paying audiences and thus help keep a theatre going. Instead he can write to please himself, to pursue his own philosophical and occult interests, and to experiment with various theatrical techniques. But he honestly concedes that he may have taken on more than he can handle: the dance, for instance, «will give me most trouble, for I know but vaguely what I want» (*VPl*, 1304-1305). He cannot control the execution of the dances or give guidelines, because he is not in a position to judge whether the actual performance will resemble Nō dancing. In fact, the first account in English of the technique of Nō dancing was published only in 1984²⁶. Instead he is obliged to find this place himself in the very different conception of his own dance plays or leave it to a producer schooled in the European tradition.

As several scholars have observed, Yeats was well prepared when he came to learn about the Nō²⁷. His early enthusiasm for French Symbolism, for symbolic art in general, for Eastern lore (especially Indian traditions) made him receptive to Oriental art. There are numerous anticipations of the characteristics of the Nō, as Yeats saw them, in the essays and plays written before 1913. In *The Tragic Theatre*, published in 1910, he finds in tragic art

rhythm, balance, pattern, images that remind one of the vast passions, [...] a symbolism handled by the generations, a mask from whose eyes the disembodied looks, a style that remembers many masters that it may escape contemporary suggestion. (*É&I*, 243)

These phrases celebrate the distancing effect which Yeats will discern in Nō plays a few years later. Violent passions are remembered, not acted out, and conveyed through stylized movements and personified as or in masks. Visual arts and poetry merge, because they express themselves in similar ways; the result is a synesthetic work of art, the tragic theatre, or, moving ahead some years, the Yeatsian play for dancers. Yeats's preference for restrained acting and measured movement, subordinate to poetic speech, was confirmed when he saw Sarah Bernhardt playing Racine's *Phèdre* in June 1902²⁸. He was to prescribe this style of acting in his plays for dancers, encouraged in his approach by the example of the Nō.

In the early years of the 20th century, Yeats assumed the role of a theatre reformer; this is reflected in the title of one of his essays of 1903 (*Expl*, 107-113). He wants to restore poetry on the stage and asks for simplified scenery. The background «should be but a single colour»; a tree or hills can be painted in, but only «decoratively [...], an unobtrusive pattern» (*Expl*, 110). His often quoted declaration of love for the drama, made in 1904, includes another anticipation of Nō characteristics, its extreme reductionism: «What attracts me to drama is that it is, in the most obvious way, what all the arts are upon a last analysis [...], a moment of intense life. An action is taken out of

all other actions, it is reduced to its simplest form» (*Expl*, 153). When Yeats became acquainted with the Nō, he was vindicated in his early rejection of the naturalistic theatre and in his preference for a theatre of the imagination.

There are also anticipations of Nō techniques in Yeats's plays written before 1913. The Faery Child's song and dance in *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894) seduce Mary Bruin. In the revised version of 1912 the dance has magical powers; it encircles Mary and thus separates her from her family, who cannot pass the invisible line drawn by the dance. Four years later Yeats used this constellation in *At the Hawk's Well*, where the Guardian's dance seduces Cuchulain and erects a barrier between the Old Man and the well. In the later play, however, the song is provided, not by one of the characters in the dramatic action, but by the chorus.

There are three Musicians in *Deirdre* (1907), who sing three songs at crucial moments of the tragedy. The songs celebrate the two most important motifs of the play, love and death. While they sing, the Musicians are placed outside the dramatic action and comment on it as a detached chorus. But they become part of the action when they do not sing. They warn Deirdre, Naoise, and the old counsellor Fergus not to trust King Conchubar; the First Musician asks Deirdre to confide in her and reciprocates by revealing Conchubar's sinister plan to make Deirdre his queen. Finally the First Musician supplies the knife, which brings about the tragic end.

The plots of *The Land of Heart's Desire* and *Deirdre* depend on a double perspective. One and the same action is viewed in two different, diametrically opposed ways. The first perspective is naturalistic: the Bruin family in their house at their meal; Deirdre and Naoise summoned to Conchubar's court. The second perspective is introduced by characters who have songs and poetry at their command and possess unusual, even supernatural wisdom. A similar structure underlies *On Baile's Strand* (1904). Cuchulain, Conchubar, and Cuchulain's unrecognized son represent the first perspective. The chorus characters, the Blind Man and the Fool, provide the second perspective. The Blind Man knows about Cuchulain's past deeds and the fate that will befall father and son. Finally and most devastatingly, it is the Blind Man and the Fool who reveal to Cuchulain the identity of the slain warrior. The Blind Man and the Fool frame the heroic action, do not take part in it, but they provide its ultimate meaning in a dialog with Cuchulain. It is interesting to note that in a later version of 1921, i.e. after Yeats had begun experimenting with Nō techniques, masks are prescribed for the Blind Man and the Fool (*VPl*, 459). Clearly, Yeats wanted to relate this early play to *At the Hawk's Well* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, the dance plays which deal with two other episodes in Cuchulain's life; the first leading to the tragic events of *On Baile's Strand*, the second showing their consequences.

I now want to look at two of the plays for dancers and their sources among the Nō texts. At first sight, *At the Hawk's Well* differs considerably

from everything else which Yeats had written so far. The stage is bare and contains no props with the exception of a gong, a drum, and a zither, to be played by three Musicians who also represent a Chorus. All the characters wear masks or have their faces made up to resemble masks. They speak in verse throughout and move marionette-like to the accompaniment of music. One of the characters performs a dance. The plot is simple. For fifty years an Old Man has been waiting at a magical well whose water promises immortality, but bubbles up only rarely. It is guarded by a hawk-like girl, who is asleep and wakes up when the water is about to flow. Then she dances and thus puts the Old Man to sleep so that he will not be able to drink. A Young Man, the hero Cuchulain, appears in search of the well, but he is just as unsuccessful. The Guardian's seductive dance lures him away at the critical moment. Still, he does not despair when he realizes that he has been cheated. He goes out to fight «the fierce women of the hills, / Aoife and all her troop» (*VPI*, 411). The decision will turn out to be fatal; the Old Man accurately predicts that Cuchulain will kill his own son. The prediction connects this play to the earlier *On Bailé's Strand* and thus completes the Cuchulain cycle.

The Nō play *Yōrō* is one of the sources of *At the Hawk's Well*⁹. An imperial messenger has been asked to search for a waterfall and finds it on a mountain of a beautiful and wealthy country next to a pine tree. There he meets a father and a son, who know of the miraculous power of the water: it is an antidote against old age. Towards the end the father is replaced by the God of the Temple of the Mountain. The play ends with a song of praise of a peaceful and harmonious world. There is no indication in the text that there is a dance and who might be the dancer. It may be assumed, though, that the dance is performed by the God of the Temple.

Both plays feature an aristocratic quester in search of the water of immortality, a man waiting at the well (whose magical nature is known to him), a supernatural agent (who guarantees the existence of the well), and a commenting chorus. In *At the Hawk's Well*, Yeats has inverted the myth that he found in the Nō text. Cuchulain is no imperial messenger and no godlike character, and he does not dance. The action takes place in an inhospitable landscape; the withered Old Man is its only and fitting inhabitant. Cuchulain is deflected from his original quest when the Guardian's dance appeals to his heroic nature and to his erotic instinct. The Chorus laments the loss and makes dire predictions; the Guardian is a mute, enigmatic, and cruel seductress. There is neither praise nor a harmonious relationship between the natural and the supernatural worlds.

Yeats must have sensed that Fenollosa and Pound's texts are unsuited for performance. They are too fragmentary; their allusiveness is incomprehensible to a European reader. Their structure appears unfocussed; they hardly possess a plot. Yeats felt that he had to provide a plot structure in the conventional European sense, to substitute symbolism for allusiveness, and to invent certain

performative elements. The first problem which Yeats had to solve was how to begin and to end the play. Fenollosa's notes gave him little help. According to Fenollosa, characters frequently enter over a bridge which leads onto the stage and then begin the play by stating who and where they are and what they want to do. *Yōrō* begins with the following words of the imperial messenger:

Winds are calm – All the leaves & branches are quiet [...] I am a subject to the Emperor Yuriaku. Someone told him that a wonderful fountain is in this province of Motosu in Mino. So I received his order to see it quickly. So I am now making haste to Motosu [...] It is peaceful – the land is wealthy, and the people are rich. There are roads everywhere. The gates of the passes are opened. Passing the way of Mino which I heard far in the country I came to the fall of *Yōrō*.³⁰

This unsophisticated self-introduction did not appeal to Yeats, nor did a bridge onto the stage. It could not be made part of his drawing-room stage set. Still, Yeats needed some conspicuous stage business that would mark the beginning of the play. He invented the ceremony of the cloth, which cannot be found in *Nō* plays, and by doing so redefined the role of the chorus. Three Musicians enter with a folded black cloth which they unfold with measured steps. During the ceremony the Musicians sing or recite several verses of poetry which have the same introductory function as the first words of the imperial messenger:

I call to the eye of the mind
A well long choked up and dry
And boughs long stripped by the wind,
And I call to the mind's eye
Pallor of an ivory face,
Its lofty dissolute air,
A man climbing up to a place
The salt sea wind has swept bare. (*VPI*, 399)

The Chorus evokes the cold and inhospitable scenery, introduces the characters, establishes their roles in the play, and describes some of their actions, while they go through the motions in pantomime. The Chorus even considers the future implications of Cuchulain's actions:

What were his life soon done!
Would he lose by that or win? (*VPI*, 399)

This question will be answered at the end of the play, again by the Musicians. The ceremony of the cloth has another unexpected function. While the cloth is unfolded, the Guardian of the Well enters, covered by the Musicians and unseen by the audience, so that she is seen crouching when the cloth is folded up again, clearly a relic of the stage curtain of the realistic theatre

whose conventions Yeats has tried to avoid in almost every other respect. At the same time, the Musicians draw attention to themselves as important participants in the ensuing play; they are more than just uninvolved performers of incidental music. They get the play going; after some time they will close it, again unfolding and folding up the cloth to the accompaniment of songs. The concluding song picks up and perverts the motifs of praise and of a beautiful country, which Yeats found in *Yôrô*:

O lamentable shadows,
 Obscurity of strife!
 I choose a pleasant life
 Among indolent meadows;
 Wisdom must lead a bitter life.
 [...]
 Who but an idiot would praise
 Dry stones in a well? (*VPl*, 413)

A bit earlier, when Cuchulain follows the Guardian of the Well, the Chorus is even more outspoken in condemning his choice:

He has lost what may not be found
 Till men heap his burial-mound.
 And all the history ends.
 He might have lived at his ease,
 An old dog's head on his knees,
 Among his children and friends. (*VPl*, 410-411)

By sketching out a different and allegedly better life for Cuchulain, the Musicians dissociate themselves from his actions. They take sides and suggest an interpretation of the events which the audience might make their own. But should they? Does Yeats let his hero down? I do not think so; impotent old age is not what one should wish Cuchulain's fate to be. Yeats has recourse to the strategy of double perspective, but employs it differently. In the early plays, the second perspective is made known to the characters, whereas in *At the Hawk's Well* it is not. The Musicians do not interact with Cuchulain and do not advise him. They will not and cannot touch his integrity as hero and lover, however much they deplore his decision. The unbridgeable division of perspectives in Yeats's dance plays is another of his own unique inventions.

The complex role which Yeats assigns to the songs and the Chorus can be further explained by looking at the whole sequence of Cuchulain's mythical life. Before *At the Hawk's Well* Yeats wrote two Cuchulain plays, *On Bailé's Strand* and *The Golden Helmet*, later entitled *The Green Helmet* (1908/1910). *The Green Helmet* describes an early adventure of the hero in his prime; Cuchulain redeems a pledge to the supernatural Red Man, a pledge which he

had not given. He is vindicated when the Red Man praises his courage. *On Baile's Strand* deals with Cuchulain's downfall. When he learns that he has killed his own son, mad frenzy seizes him and he rushes into the sea to fight the waves. Heroic courage has destroyed his integrity.

Yeats now needed a play that could open the cycle by displaying Cuchulain's heroic nature and, at the same time, anticipating his failure, uniting both in a single text. Nō conventions gave him what he wanted. In *At the Hawk's Well*, the songs of the Chorus fuse the two aspects of success and failure in one complex character both heroic and flawed, who will have to enjoy and to suffer from the consequences of his action as the cycle progresses. Yeats seems to have cherished this sort of character complexity. It informs some of his mature poems, for instance the ambiguous portrayals of Maud Gonine in *No Second Troy* (1910) and of Leda in *Leda and the Swan* (1924). It is a strategy that allows both sympathy and ironic distance.

In *The Dreaming of the Bones*, Yeats extends the conventions, which he established in *At the Hawk's Well*, by relating them to Irish history, nationalism, and politics. *The Dreaming of the Bones* is based on the Nō play *Nishikigi*³¹. Yeats himself revealed his source by including a two-page summary of *Nishikigi* in his essay *Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places* (*Expl.*, 66-68). On his travels, a Priest meets the ghosts of a man and a woman, who are «entangled» in an unfulfilled love affair and tell a story, actually their own story. Many years ago the man had courted his beloved by offering charmed red sticks, called *nishikigi*, as love tokens. But she busied herself with weaving a blue cloth and refused him, and so he died of a broken heart and was buried in a cave. Shortly afterwards the woman also died, «and now because they were never married in life they were unmarried in their death»³². The Priest, who does not realize that the ghosts tell their own story, follows them into the cave; the journey is described by the chorus. There the lovers re-enact their story by weaving and offering the charm-sticks; the Chorus explains the actions and enters into dialog with the lovers. The lovers dance and thus identify themselves to the Priest. The Priest prays for the lovers, who are finally united. With the approaching dawn they «dissolve like a dream»³³.

The Dreaming of the Bones is at the same time a close imitation of *Nishikigi* and an entirely new departure. The parallels are obvious: the imperfect dead lovers, their need to be reconciled, past events re-enacted as if in a dream and their impact upon the present, the figure of the possible redeemer who does not understand that the ghosts want his sympathy, the delayed recognition, the journey, the lovers' dance, and the descriptions and comments of the Chorus. The structural skeleton of *Nishikigi*, although left largely intact, is fleshed out by Yeats with a story which is contemporary and very much his own. For once he deviates from his usual practice of prescribing masks for all players. After the ceremony of the cloth the visitor enters; he is not a priest, but an unmasked young Irish revolutionary. The time is 1916, shortly after

the Easter Rising; the revolutionary has fled from Dublin to County Clare in the West of Ireland. A stage direction stipulates that he should pray in Irish; one of two small reminders of the priestly origin of the figure in *Nishikigi*. He meets a man and a girl, wearing «heroic masks»³⁴. They ask for the Young Man's story and promise to conduct him to a safe place. The journey thither, indicated by their going round the stage several times, is described by the Chorus. Almost imperceptibly the ghosts lead the conversation away from the present to the past, to their own story, told in the third person. It is the story of a love, not unfulfilled but based on a crime and therefore unforgiven. The Young Man recognizes the story; it is the abduction of Dervorgilla by Diarmuid Mac Murrough in 1152 and the subsequent invasion of Ireland by the English, to whom the treacherous Diarmuid had turned for help. The Young Man does not yet realize that he is confronted by their ghosts, who re-enact their crime as if in a dream and ask the Young Man's pardon. This is the second reminder of the priestly function of the visitor. But the Young Man refuses absolution: «O, never, never / Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven» (*VPl*, 773). Only when they dance does he recognize them. As in *At the Hawk's Well* it is a dance of seduction, but unlike Cuchulain the young revolutionary does not yield to the temptation and the ghosts disappear, unforgiven. The Young Man has a clear view of Ireland's past history and of the events of 700 years ago. With Diarmuid's decision to bring the English in, Ireland's misery began. The Easter Rising is yet another episode in the long struggle to undo Diarmuid and Dervorgilla's treachery. The Young Man recognises the connection between the events of the 12th century and those of the early 20th and remains loyal to his Irish allegiances.

Where does the Chorus stand in the confrontation between two irreconcilable positions? In *At the Hawk's Well*, the Musicians dissociate themselves from Cuchulain's headlong heroism and predict future calamities. In *The Dreaming of the Bones*, the relationship between the Chorus and the three characters is more ambiguous. The first song prejudices the audience by introducing a note of fear, anticipating the fear of the Young Man who is about to arrive. The Chorus is afraid of the passionate shades of the unforgiven lovers. When the ghosts begin to involve the Young Man in their story, the Chorus sings again of fright and loneliness. It also sets up a dualism of night and day. A «red bird of March» (*VPl*, 768), clearly associated with the Young Man, is asked to fight against the seductive forces of the night, associated with the lovers, who have blown out the Young Man's lantern. The song for the concluding ceremony is, however, more sympathetic to the lovers' cause. Theirs is a sweet «music of a lost kingdom» and a beautiful dance. And yet, their music is a «snare» and their love led to destruction. Once more the red bird of March is invoked to end the nightmare (*VPl*, 775-776).

At the end of the play, the aesthetic pleasures inherent in the ancient conventions of the *Nō* and appreciated by Yeats, the elements of mask, poetry,

music, and dance, have to give way to unmasked contemporary political realities. The Chorus takes the Young Man's side, without forgetting the lovers' plight. Whether the Chorus can be regarded as Yeats's mouthpiece, here or in *At the Hawk's Well*, is an altogether different question.

A look at the later plays for dancers suggests that Yeats relaxed the use of the conventions established in *At the Hawk's Well*. In his last play *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), which dramatizes the final stage in the life of his hero, Yeats no longer works under the constraints of his own inventions. He uses them freely and unsystematically; he even parodies them in the prologue of the Old Man, who introduces himself as the producer of Yeats's play and predicts that the play is bound to be unpopular because it is as old-fashioned as the Old Man or, by implication, Yeats himself. The dance will substitute for a poetry that might be misunderstood; the masked heads have been reduced to blocks of wood. The Musicians were picked up on the streets; their song has an element of spite. The music of a lost kingdom has become a vulgar «music of some Irish fair of our days» (*VPI*, 1062). Yeats finally throws away many of the beautiful presents that the Nō offered him more than twenty years ago, but cannot quite forget them.

Yeats insisted that he had no model when he began playwriting, and indeed there is in the history of the English-language theatre nothing quite like his own usually short dramas. Yeats did not attempt to write five-act tragedies, and he had no use for secondary or subplots. The authoritative example of Shakespearean drama did not shape his plays to any great extent. The conception of Cuchulain, his favourite tragic hero, is indebted to the much older Greek tradition. The most conspicuous relict of earlier English playwriting is his pervasive use of blank verse. One can find it in almost all his verse plays, including the experimental *Four Plays for Dancers*. Yeats's reason for relying on the traditional metre is not that he inherited it from a long line of English drama, although, to be sure, he did just that. Blank verse allows him to bring his plays «as close to common speech as the subject permitted», as he writes in 1934 (*VPI*, 567). He could not have done otherwise. According to Earl Miner, the poetry of the Nō plays is written in «traditional syllabic fours and sevens»³⁵. In the Fenollosa-Pound versions, the metre appears flattened into prose, occasionally enlivened by bits of irregular verse; clearly a procedure which had no attraction for Yeats's poetic program. He saw no alternative but to fall back on the metre of traditional English dramatic verse.

How should one sum up the relationship between Yeats and the Nō; which terminology is one to use? Looking at the secondary literature one finds the terms influence, model, indebtedness, inspiration, catalyst, imitation, adaptation, affinity, parallel, and more. All of these terms have some justification, none is satisfactory. Take «indebtedness»: to be sure, Yeats himself registered certain debts to the Nō, but we have seen that there are many instances where he had to strike out on his own. «Imitation» is even more questionable. By 1913 Yeats looked back on

more than twenty years of playwriting and theatre business and had the necessary experience to make use of new models without slavishly imitating them. I think that Yeats himself found the most satisfying even if slightly vague description when he wrote: «In fact, with the help of Japanese plays “translated by Ernest Fenollosa and finished by Ezra Pound”, I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic» (*E&I*, 221). He challenges his audience to evaluate the plays for dancers on their own terms, not as sterile imitations of the Nō, and then to determine the measure of their originality and invention.

Notes

¹ W.B. Yeats, *Trois Nōs irlandais*, traduit par P. Leyris et précédé par K. Raine, *Yeats et le Nō*, J. Corti, Paris 1994. There are various ways of spelling the name of this type of Japanese drama; in this essay Nō is the preferred spelling except for quotations.

² L.C. Pronko, *Theater East and West: Perspectives toward a Total Theater*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1967, p. 72.

³ See for instance Y. Stucki, *Yeats's Drama and the Nō: A Comparative Study in Dramatic Theories*, «Modern Drama», 9, 1966, pp. 101-122.

⁴ See E.R. Miner, *The Japanese Tradition in English and American Literature*, Princeton UP, Princeton 1958, p. 235.

⁵ See Y. Hakutani, *Modernity in East-West Literary Criticism*, Fairleigh Dickinson UP, Madison 2001, p. 24.

⁶ See J.S. Kelly, *A.W.B. Yeats Chronology*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2003, p. 130.

⁷ See J. Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism*, Oxford UP, New York 1988.

⁸ E. Fenollosa, E. Pound, *“Noh” or Accomplishment*, Macmillan, London 1916.

⁹ E. Fenollosa, E. Pound, *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, Cuala Press, Churchtown, Dundrum 1916.

¹⁰ Reprinted in *Explorations*, Macmillan, London 1962 (hereafter cited as *Expl*).

¹¹ R. Taylor, *The Drama of W. B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese Nō*, Yale UP, New Haven 1976, pp. 36-37.

¹² E.R. Miner, “Nō”, in A. Preminger (ed.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. Enlarged Edition*, Princeton UP, Princeton 1974, p. 571.

¹³ M. Sekine, C. Murray, *Yeats and the Noh*, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross 1990.

¹⁴ H. Ishibashi, *Yeats and the Noh: Types of Japanese Beauty and Their Reflection in Yeats's Plays*, Dolmen Press, Dublin 1966, pp. 129-132.

¹⁵ Reprinted as *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* in W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, Macmillan, London 1961 (hereafter cited as *E&I*).

¹⁶ M. Sekine, *Noh and Yeats: A Theoretical Analysis*, «Ariel», 26, no. 4, 1995, pp. 135-146. This quotation p. 135.

¹⁷ On Michio Ito see H. Caldwell, *Michio Ito: The Dancer and His Dances*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1977.

¹⁸ M. Sekine, C. Murray, *Yeats and the Noh*, cit., p. xiii.

¹⁹ I owe this identification to Warwick Gould.

²⁰ E.R. Miner, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature*, cit., p. 245.

²¹ E. Fenollosa, E. Pound, *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, cit., p. i.

²² E. Fenollosa, E. Pound, *“Noh” or Accomplishment*, cit., p. 4.

²³ See R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, vol. 2, Oxford UP, Oxford 2003, pp. 39-41.

²⁴ See H. Flanagan, *Dynamo*, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, New York 1943, pp. 82-83.

²⁵ Quotations from the plays and Yeats's notes are taken from W.B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Plays*, ed. by R.K. Alspach, Macmillan, London 1966 (hereafter cited as *VPL*).

²⁶ See A. Parkin, *The Noh Triangle*, in D. Gerstle, A. Milner (eds), *Europe & the Orient*, Australian National University, Canberra 1994, pp. 155-179.

²⁷ See for instance J. Genet, *Le théâtre de William Butler Yeats*, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, Paris 1995, pp. 20-41.

²⁸ See J. Kelly, *A W.B. Yeats Chronology*, cit., p. 81.

²⁹ The text is available in R. Taylor, *The Drama of W. B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese Nō*, cit., pp. 121-127. A more accurate version can be found in N. Tsukui, *Ezra Pound and Japanese Noh Plays*, University Press of America, Washington 1983, pp. 102-109.

³⁰ R. Taylor, *The Drama of W. B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese Nō*, cit., p. 121.

³¹ The text of *Nishikigi* is available in E. Fenollosa, E. Pound, *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, cit., pp. 1-16.

³² *Expl*, cit., p. 67.

³³ *Ivi*, p. 68.

³⁴ *VPL*, cit., p. 764.

³⁵ A. Preminger (ed.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, cit, p. 571.

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