# THE INFLUENCE OF THE NOH PLAYS OF JAPAN ON THE DRAMATIC ART OF W. B. YEATS

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An Abstract of

# THE INFLUENCE OF THE NOH PLAYS OF JAPAN ON THE DRAMATIC ART OF W. B. YEATS

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This thesis aims to demonstrate the ingenuity with which Yeats used the Noh plays of Japan in order to create a new kind of play. It is the contention of the writer that Noh was never for Yeats an alien convention. In it he recognized a dramaturgy that he had been projecting for years, but had never been able to fuse into a play. It is further contended that even with his first enthusiasm for Noh, Yeats never seriously undertook to reproduce a prescribed Noh formula; rather he selected those principles of construction that he had long searched for and combined them with his own metaphysics to create a new drama.

Chapter I outlines Yeats's dramatic aims in order to establish that the realistic stage was inadequate for his purposes.

Chapter II outlines briefly the most important features of Noh plays and demonstrates that in Noh, Yeats found the dramatic ideal that he had been projecting in his own essays.

Chapter III is transitional. It provides definitions for the particular terminology of Yeats's symbolism, and it

gives a frame of reference for the examination of specific plays in the next chapters.

Chapter IV examines At the Hawk's Well in order to determine how literally Yeats used the Noh conventions, and demonstrates that Yeats did not imitate a Noh formula, but that he adapted certain principles of the Noh for his own purposes.

Chapter V examines The Dreaming of the Bones as an experiment with the Noh theme. An attempt is made to demonstrate that while this play is similar to Nishikigi, a Noh spirit-play, it is not a re-creation of it. To show that differences in philosophy and cultural traditions would make such an imitation impossible, a brief outline of Yeats's concept of reincarnation is included.

Chapter VI examines two plays, Calvary and The Resurrection, which begin to use Noh more creatively. A comparison is suggested between Calvary and another form of Noh called the Noh of the Mind.

Chapter VII attempts to demonstrate Yeats's genius as a creative artist. It examines three plays, A Full Moon in March, The Words Upon the Window-Pane, and Purgatory, as logical outgrowths of Yeats's earlier experiments with Noh, and shows that although the external features of Noh disappear from Yeats's work, the internal structure of his plays is still that of Noh.

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# CHAPTER I

## IN SEARCH OF FORM

During the winter 1914-15, Yeats, with Ezra Pound who was at that time acting as Yeats's secretary, had retreated to a small cottage in Sussex.[1] Besides the work they were doing together, each was engaged in a project of his own. Yeats was correlating folk-lore and data of the occult writers with spiritualistic mediums for an essay which he eventually published as "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places". Ezra Pound had begun to edit Professor Fenollosa's manuscripts and translations of an austere form of Japanese drama called the Noh. Yeats became very excited about these plays, for here in traditional literature was a theatrical form based on the dramatization of supernatural phenomena. His enthusiasm for the possibilities that Noh suggested for his own drama comes out clearly in the Introduction which he wrote for Pound and Fenollosa's book, published first as Certain Noble Plays of Japan.

> . . . with the help of these plays 'translated by Ernest Fenollosa and finished by Ezra Pound' I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect and symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way--an aristocratic form. When this play and its performance run as smoothly as my skill can make them, I

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[1] Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), pp. 215-217.

> shall hope to write another of the same sort and so complete a dramatic celebration of the life of Cuchulain planned long ago. Then having given enough performances for I hope the pleasure of personal friends and a few score people of good taste, I shall record all discoveries of method and turn to something else. It is an advantage of this noble form that it need absorb no one's life . . . .[2]

Yeats wrote these words in April 1916, shortly after the premier performance of At the Hawk's Well, his first experiment with the Noh form. In quick succession came The Only Jealousy of Emer and The Dreaming of the Bones (both finished in 1919), and Calvary (1920). All were explicitly Noh experiments, later gathered into a single volume called Four Plays for Dancers (1921). In fact as it turned out, Yeats never did put aside this "noble form." All his subsequent plays make use of, and build upon, the principles he had learned from his Japanese model.

In order to understand the impact that Noh had on Yeats it is necessary to look somewhat closely at his specific dramatic aims as projected before 1916. When we read his essays written just after the turn of the century, two points hit us with equal force: he wanted a distinctively Irish theatre, and he considered a realistic stage inadequate for his purpose.

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[2] W. B. Yeats, "Introduction to Certain Noble Plays of Japan," Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, The Classic Noh Theatre of Japan (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. 151.

Broadly speaking, Yeats wanted to create a theatre that would be a social force in Ireland.[3] It was to be a national theatre that would stir the imaginations of his fellow-countrymen and replace the materialism and scepticism of modern Ireland with the passionate faith of former times.[4] It was his conviction that a drama that did not move the people could not be a national drama, and he early realized that to move the people, an artist must "find the passions among the people."[5] It was for this reason that he used Irish legend in his plays.

Although Yeats was later to become disillusioned about the possibility of achieving a cultural unity for Ireland,[6] it was precisely this unrealistic dream that motivated his early work in the Irish theatre movement. He noted from a study of ancient literature that "all races had their first unity from a mythology, that marries them to rock and hill."[7]

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[3] W. B. Yeats, "Pages from a Diary in 1930," Explorations (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1962), p. 300.

[4] W. B. Yeats, "The Celtic Element in Literature," Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1961), p. 185.

[5] W. B. Yeats, "Ireland and the Arts," Essays and Introductions, p. 203.

[6] W. B. Yeats, "The Trembling of the Veil," The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958), p. 196.

[7] Ibid., p. 131.

In 1903, in his essay on the Galway Plains, Yeats says:

> There is still in truth upon these great level plains a people, a community bound together by imaginative possessions, by stories and poems which have grown out of its own life, and by a past of great passions which can still waken the heart to imaginative action.[8]

Ireland, thought Yeats, like all great races, had a rich lore of "inherited subject-matter known to the whole people"[9] from which he could draw an inexhaustible supply of subjects. Here too he had the kind of material which would allow him to re-associate literature with the natural song, dance, and speech of its people.

Closely allied to Yeats's dream of cultural unity was his belief in the whole man, or what he called "Unity of Being." This concept, later refined in A Vision, grew out of an early conviction that individual man, like the nation or race he identified himself with, had undergone a process of fragmentation.[10] Yeats's heroic ideal is a complete antithesis of the public hero born of an age of specialization. His heroes must be complete men, combining noblesse oblige with courage and leadership, worldliness with vision.

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[8] W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 213.

[9] W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 128.

[10] Ibid.

Yeats was not concerned that his heroes be believable. He reminds us that "art is art because it is not nature."[11] In Samhain 1904 he explicates this more fully:

> . . . we are, it may be, very stupid in thinking that the average man is a fit subject at all for the finest art. Art delights in the exception, for it delights in the soul expressing itself according to its own laws and arranging the world about it in its own pattern . . . . But the average man is average because he has not attained to freedom.[12]

The reality that Yeats sought for his heroes is not one that pays lip service to the laws of Nature. Yeats believed only in that "unseen reality"[13] that lurks in the soul of man, a reality that flows out of personality and expresses itself in passion alone.

Although the theatre that Yeats wanted must be Irish and his heroes must be such that would stir the Irish imagination, he was by no means advocating a propagandist literature. His tragic vision of life turned him towards the creation of a tragic drama. He saw life as a series of antinomies, and man as a being fated always to strive for the impossible. Thus his heroes, seeking their opposites or striving towards Unity of Being, must inevitably suffer defeat. He exalts passion

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[11] Ibid.; p. 185.

[12] W. B. Yeats, "The Irish Dramatic Movement," Explorations, p. 168.

[13] Ibid., p. 170.

and defeat as the stuff of tragedy, for only when the hero is completely defeated and can squander his precious life do we have tragedy.[14] Herein lies ecstasy, for, as he himself suggests in a question: ". . . is not ecstasy some fulfillment of the soul in itself, some slow or sudden expansion of it like an overflowing well? Is not this what is meant by beauty?"[15]

Furthermore, tragedy, because it is passion alone, must reject character and personal energy.[16] Here Yeats came into conflict with a realistic drama where clash of character and action were supreme. He wanted to focus attention onto the poetry, not the player or the scenery, and neither a realistic drama nor a naturalistic stagecraft and acting technique allowed for this.

Yeats wanted a theatre of beauty, but not the peripheral ornamentation that the commercial theatre was passing off as beauty. His was a beauty that would derive from song, dance, poetry, symbol and ritual. He had already experimented with all of these before 1916, but not in any ritual sense. For instance, the songs that Aleel sings in The Countess Cathleen serve primarily to cheer the weary spirit of Cathleen on their journey. So too, the songs and dances in The Land of Heart's

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[14] W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 183.

[15] Ibid., p. 319.

[16] Ibid., pp. 318-19.

Desire are devices to differentiate the world of the faeries from the world of the mortals. They add interest and beauty to the play, but they are little more than ornaments. Only in On Baile's Strand does he use song and dance as ritual, a feature that becomes a pattern in all his later plays.

Yeats's essays, written during the early years of the Irish theatre movement, are attempts to clarify the discrepancies between a potentially ideal Irish Theatre and the popular, albeit unsatisfactory, commercial theatre. The realism of the commercial theatre he denounced with the zeal of a reformer.[17] Even Ibsen, the most renowned modern dramatist, Yeats condemned finally as too naturalistic.[18]

In Samhain 1901-1902,[19] Yeats urges the playwrights of Ireland to read widely in the great drama of the world. There, he says, not only will they learn what it is in literature that has always moved the people, but they will learn their craft. "Let us learn construction from the masters, and dialogue from ourselves."[20] Classical Greek drama was closest to his ideal. Deirdre (1907) was an experiment in this direction. An earlier play, On Baile's Strand (1904), also used the chorus "somewhat in the Greek manner."[21]

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[17] W. B. Yeats, "The Irish Dramatic Movement," Explorations, pp. 168-69.

[18] W. B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 185.

[19] W. B. Yeats, "The Irish Dramatic Movement," p. 80.

[20] Ibid., p. 81.

[21] Ibid., p. 138.

But despite the ever-narrowing gap between Yeats's projected ideal and his plays, there remained one problem at the very heart of Yeats's drama that seemingly had no solution. In all of his plays we see evidence of his interest in magic. All his life Yeats pursued the occult arts in an attempt to find the means whereby he could discover the spiritual world. Having accepted the existence of such a world[22] he was interested in exploring dramatically its relationship to the physical world. Although he consistently drew events and heroes from Irish legend where such an interpenetration was natural, he had yet to find a theatrical convention that moved him far enough from a realistic portrayal of events and characters to make an intersection of the two worlds meaningful. His early attempts serve only to suggest his conviction that another world exists and that we are influenced by it. But his careful exploration of the imperfect physical world and the equally imperfect spiritual world, of the interpenetration of these two worlds, and of the shrines that such an interpenetration creates are not attempted until Yeats invents adequate symbols for these in his metaphysics, and finds a dramatic form congenial to the inclusion of these symbols.

What Yeats needed was a tragic convention that would teach him how to fuse mythology, poetry, music, dance, ritual,

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[22]W. B. Yeats, "Magic," Essays and Introductions, p. 28.

symbol, and magic into one tight cohesive core. He found it when Ezra Pound introduced him to the Noh plays of Japan.

Since Yeats's use of Noh is not limited to the adoption of a few techniques, some understanding of this Japanese drama is a prerequisite to a study of Yeats's later plays. In the following chapter I will give a brief outline of those features of Noh that are important for an appreciation of the ingenious use that Yeats made of this drama.

## CHAPTER II

## THE NOH PLAYS OF JAPAN[1]

The Noh, meaning "accomplishment," is a traditional drama, highly stylized, ritualistic, refined, and poetic. Its origin, according to Arthur Waley, is a primitive ritual dance designed to lure the sun-god from his winter cave.[2] It evolved, he says, through five centuries of licentious buffoonery, to become in the fourteenth century a highly stylized song-and-dance drama with religious significance. Ezra Pound, on the other hand, finds a connection between the Noh and an eighth-century Japanese game called 'listening to incense,' a court game based on a sensitivity to words and on the art of allusion.[3] Pound sees this love of allusion in art at the root of Noh drama, for these plays "were made only for the few; for the nobles; for those trained to catch the allusion."[4] Waley therefore finds ritual at the

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[1]The information in this chapter comes from two sources: Arthur Waley, The Nō Plays of Japan (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1920) and Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, The Classic Noh Theatre of Japan (New York: New Directions, 1959). The following resumé is based not only on the general information outlined by Waley, Pound and Fenollosa, but also on my reading of some thirty Noh plays included in these books. I have arbitrarily adopted the spelling that Pound and Fenollosa give the word "Noh."

[2]Waley, op. cit., p. 15.

[3]Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 3.

[4]Ibid., p. 4.

centre of Noh, whereas Pound finds poetry. Although their accounts differ in emphasis, both agree on the central issues with which we are here concerned.

The Noh is a god-dance that takes its situations[5] from legend and history. These plays are not, however, a re-casting of past events; they constitute meetings of a person who is living, with the spirit of a person who has died, at some holy place where these spirits re-enact through the medium of dance some part of their past lives.

Ever since the fourteenth century, when this drama flourished under the genius of two actor-writers, Kwanami Kiyotsuzu (1333-1384 A.D.) and his son Seami Motokiyo (1363-1444 A.D.), the conventions of the Noh have been considered traditional and have remained virtually unchanged. In order to understand Yeats's use of this drama, we must look at these conventions in some detail.

The Noh stage is a simple platform open on three sides to the audience. All entrances are made by way of a bridge that connects the stage with an inner dressing room. The wall at the back is a permanent backdrop on which is painted a single pine tree, a symbol of the unchanging. Three small potted pines are placed on the bridge, symbolizing heaven,

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[5] I consciously refrain from using the word "plot" since, strictly speaking, Noh has no plots.

earth, and man. Properties and sets, when absolutely essential, are only symbolically suggested. This lack of distracting elements on the stage permits the use of elaborate costumes and masks in order to direct the attention of the audience to the actors themselves. Ezra Pound in his description of the Noh stage catches something of the spirit of these plays:

> If one has the habit of reading plays and imagining their setting, it will not be difficult to imagine the Noh stage . . . and to feel how the incomplete speech is filled out by the music or movement. It is a symbolic stage, a drama of masks--at least they have masks for spirits and gods and young women. It is a theatre of which both Mr. Yeats and Mr. Craig may approve. It is not, like our theatre, a place where every fineness and subtlety must give way; where every fineness of word or of word-cadence is sacrificed to the 'broad effect;' where the paint must be put on with a broom. It is a stage where every subsidiary art is bent precisely upon holding the faintest shade of a difference; where the poet may even be silent while the gestures consecrated by four centuries of usage show meaning.[6]

Central to every Noh play is a mimed dance, accompanied by instruments and supported by a chorus that both speaks and sings. The dance movement, although it is mimetic in that it tells a story, consists of a series of stylized, symbolic postures. The dance itself, solemn and slow in the beginning, increases in tempo as it reaches its climax.

Both mime and dance aim at the beautiful, not the realistic. Waley tells us that Seami, the fourteenth century

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[6]Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 4.

father of Noh, advised his actors to cultivate reality and restraint rather than realism.[7] In a neat paradox he tells his actors that imitation should always have a tinge of the unlike lest it cease to give the impression of likeness. Seami admits that the imitation of facts might be good for the common theatre, but for Noh an actor must not imitate externally; he must feel the thing as a whole, from the inside.[8] This applies not only to movement and emotion, but also to the voice. Every actor has his own voice; this constitutes his individuality and it must not be distorted by imitation. Yet with his voice he must so express himself that he clearly characterizes the speaker, whether it be man, woman, child, or spirit.

Conceivably, any play would require only two actors: the dancer, called _shite_, and the observer, called _waki_. Both can have supporters called _tsure_; thus the number of players can be increased to accommodate the greater complexity of some of the plays. It is generally accepted, however, that the number of players should never exceed five.

It is important to note the relationship between _shite_ and _waki_. In Noh plays _waki_ never takes any part in the conflict. He is strictly limited to the role of observer.

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[7] Waley, _op. cit._, p. 46.

[8] _Ibid._

He is usually a traveller or a priest seeking blessing, who meets quite by accident at some religious shrine, a spirit, god or goddess. Even in those plays where no traveller is necessary, he remains an impartial, though sympathetic, observer. His only involvement in the play is to discourse with the dancer and introduce the dance. Shite, on the other hand, carries all the action. His conflict is an internal one which enfolds for the audience through waki's questioning, and finally through shite's dance. This relationship never varies.

The chorus, which has become an integral part of Noh, was introduced to aid the dancer. When the dance became so strenuous that the dancer could not both dance and recite, a few extras would chant for him the words that he would normally speak himself. As the Noh developed sophistication, the chorus became a body of eight or twelve men who not only spoke the words, but at times broke into song. The chorus takes no part in the action, though it frequently engages in dialogue with shite. In some plays the chorus will continue the recitation of the dancer in the third person, recapitulating the last line that shite has spoken to indicate that it is a direct continuation of his words. This third-person narrative has the effect of distancing the words of the actor

from the actor himself and creating an almost objective narrative about him. The chief function of the chorus is to intensify the emotions by poetical comment. Thus it "carries the mind beyond what the action exhibits to the core of the spiritual meaning."[9]

Noh plays are structured according to an exact prescription: the introduction, the development, and the climax. The introduction, which includes everything from the entrance of waki to the entrance of shite, is not primarily exposition; it is designed to capture the attention and the imagination of the audience in preparation for the hero's entry.

Since there are no curtains or lights to alert the audience that the play is about to begin, some traditional sign is required. The audience at a Noh play becomes attentive when the music starts, but it is not until waki, entering alone, has recited an enigmatic opening couplet that the play actually begins. Then, introducing himself and stating his origin and destination, he begins to walk slowly around the stage. While he walks he recites his song of travel in beautiful lyric poetry which suggests to the minds of his listeners a vivid picture of the scene through which he is passing. Arriving at last at his destination,

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[9]Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 69.

some hallowed shrine, he sits at his pillar.

The hero now arrives, and with his entrance the development begins. This consists of an expository dialogue between waki and shite which leads into a poetic unison and ends in a simple dance or chant. As a rule, Act I would end here. Act II constitutes the climax. Now that the attention of the audience is focused completely on the hero, he begins his climactic dance, a highly mimetic portrayal of some memory from the past. The last lines of the play are usually chanted by the chorus, although waki, especially when playing priest, will sometimes recite a final prayer.

A performance usually consists of a cycle of five or six plays, no play longer than a single act of any Shakespearian play. Taken as a whole, the cycle could well represent the scope of man's spiritual life. It is a ritualistic celebration of life, highly colored by Shintoist spiritism and Buddhist contemplation. Out of the Japanese sensitivity to ritual, a definite format evolved for the presentation of these plays which has changed little to the present.

The cycle begins with a simple and dignified god-play, performed in praise and prayer, for it is the gods that protect the country.[10] Dance, if used at all, is not a prominent feature here. These bitter-sweet plays of love and forgive-

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[10] Ibid., p. 9.

ness usually turn on the momentary meeting of a ghost with someone very dear to him.

The second play is a battle-play. Sympathetic magic is evident in these plays, for it is their expressed purpose "to defeat and put out the devils."[11] Quite different from the gentle god-plays, these are harsh and often bitter. They feature the ghost of a warrior who returns to re-enact some previous act of violence. The dance often takes the form of a battle. At the end either the ghost is summoned back to hell or he relives his death. The themes are revenge, hatred, jealousy, or any violent emotion that must be expiated.

The wig-play, featuring a woman, comes next; for after battle comes peace, and with peace "the cases of love come to pass."[12] Beauty, love, pride are the themes here. The dance now becomes a prominent feature and often involves possession by the spirit of the man that she has wronged.

The fourth play, the spirit-play, also called the demon-play, marks the climax of the cycle. From the secret book of Noh we get an idea of the psychology that informs these plays:

> After battle comes peace and glory, but they soon depart in their turn. The glory and pleasures of man are not reliable at all. Life is like a dream that goes with the speed of lightning. It is like a dewdrop in the morning; it soon falls and is broken. To suggest these things

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[11] Ibid., p. 10.

[12] Ibid.

> and to lift up the heart for Buddha . . . we have this sort of play . . . . Here are shown the struggles and the sins of mortals, and the audience . . . will begin to think about Buddha and the coming world.[13]

Sentimentality, which pervades the other plays, disappears here, and we have instead raw emotion and suffering. The spirit-plays come as close as Noh plays can to tragedy. The ghost, haunted by a past crime or violent emotion, returns to the scene of his misdeed in order to expiate it. With unequivocal directness, these plays stress the purgatorial aspect of life after death.

Fifth comes a play that has some bearing on the moral duties of man. It is more philosophical in content and is greatly influenced by Buddhist contemplation. This play, according to the secret book of Noh, "teaches the duties of man here in this world as the fourth piece represents the results of carelessness to such duties."[14] Lengthy dialogues take place which often include very fine points of religion or ethics. This play is called the Noh of the Mind.

When a sixth play is performed, it is another god-play, frequently a repetition of the first play. "To show that though the spring may pass, still there is a time of its return, this Shugen is put in again just as at the beginning."[15]

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., p. 11.

The plays are written in a mixture of prose and verse. Conversations tend to be in prose, but the choruses, which constitute the finest passages in the play, are always in verse. As literature these plays are difficult to assess, because the words depend so much upon the music and dance to complete their emotion. As Pound points out:

> The reader must remember that the words are only one part of this art. The words are fused with the music and with the ceremonial dancing. One must read or 'examine' these texts 'as if one were listening to music.' One must build out of their indefiniteness a definite image. The plays are at their best, I think, an image; that is to say, their unity lies in the image . . . .[16]

Pound explains this unifying image more fully in another passage:

> When a text seems to 'go off into nothing' at the end, the reader must remember "that the vagueness or paleness of words is made good by the emotion of the final dance,' for the Noh has its unity in emotion. It has also what we may call Unity of Image. At least, the better plays are all built into the intensification of a single Image: the red maple leaves and the snow flurry in Nishigiki,[17] the pines in Takasago, the blue-grey waves and wave pattern in Suma Genji, the mantle of feathers in the play of that name Hagoromo.[18]

In describing the general effect of Noh plays, Waley says:

> . . . Nō does not make a frontal attack on the emotions.

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[16] Ibid., p. 37.

[17] I find it difficult to agree with Pound on this point. I tend, rather, to think as Yeats does (Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 160), that the grass is the unifying image.

[18] Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 27.

> It creeps at the subject warily. For the action, . . . does not take place before our eyes, but is lived through again in mimic and recital by the ghost of one of the participants in it. Thus we get no possibility of crude realities; a vision of life indeed, but painted with the colours of memory, longing or regret.[19]

Although Pound thought the psychology of the Noh amazing and the poetry with its Unity of Image exciting, his final comment is that Noh is after all "unsatisfactory," or to put it more succinctly, "too damn soft."[20] Yeats's reaction on the other hand, was whole-hearted approval. Their difference of opinion was, perhaps, not entirely a matter of taste. Pound saw in Noh a very beautiful art, whereas Yeats saw in Noh the answer to his dramatic difficulties. Not only did it solve the problem of the intersection of the spiritual world with the physical world, but it actually combined the many disparate elements of Yeats's dramatic ideal into a unified whole.

Here Yeats found a stage and acting convention that he had long searched for. He found formal faces and sculptured masks which were works of art themselves. He had often complained about the grotesquely painted faces of the western stage because they distracted from emotion rather than ex-

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[19]Waley, op. cit., p. 53.

[20]Donald Davie, Ezra Pound: Poet As Sculptor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 53.

pressed it. He found a chorus that takes no part in the action but which speaks and sings beautiful poetry. He found body movements that do not detract attention from words by ugly imitative distortions, but which, instead, create a rhythmic line for the whole play. He found a true theatre of non-realism where everything is beauty and allusion, where the dancer inhabits not an artificial stage world, but "the deeps of the mind."[21] Moreover, he found the kind of aesthetic distance he was looking for in the intimacy of a small theatre where the voice is supreme; where the audience can hear every inflection of the voice; where the delicate balance of ritual, dance, verse, and music requires "that gesture, costume, facial expression [and] stage arrangement" must aid in keeping that distance.[22]

Here finally was a theatre "remote, spiritual, and ideal"[23] which he had projected as early as 1899. He had said then:

> The theatre of art, when it comes to exist, must therefore discover grave and decorative gestures; . . . and dresses of so little irrelevant magnificence that the mortal actors and actresses may change without much labour into the immortal people of romance.[24]

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[21] Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 153.

[22] Ibid., p. 154.

[23] W. B. Yeats, "The Theatre," Essays and Introductions, p. 166.

[24] Ibid., p. 170.

By 1910, in his essay "The Tragic Theatre," Yeats had moved even closer to a dramatic aesthetic similar to that of Noh. He says there:

> If the real world is not altogether rejected, it is but touched here and there, and into the places we have left empty we summon rhythm, balance, pattern, images that remind us of vast passions, and vagueness of past times, all the chimeras that haunt the edge of trance.[25]
>
> Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us by setting us to reveries, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. The persons upon the stage, let us say, greaten till they are humanity itself.[26]

Yeats could well have been describing Noh. Unlike the western stage which was photographic, this was an art that would be only suggestive. He was interested in it primarily because, "while seeming to separate from the world and us a group of figures, images, symbols, [it] enable[s] us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation."[27]

It should be clear from the above that Yeats's enthusiasm for Noh was the enthusiasm of the creative artist. To see how he uses Noh, we must examine some of his plays. However, at this point a slight digression might be useful to draw attention to Yeats's scheme of symbolism and to his use of Noh in this broader context.

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[25] W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 243.

[26] Ibid., p. 245.

[27] Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 154.

## CHAPTER III

## TOWARDS A NEW FORM OF DRAMA

Although all of Yeats's plays after 1916 bear the mark of Noh, it would be an oversimplification to suggest that the discovery of a dramatic convention alone is responsible for the unique quality of these plays. The construction he certainly learned from Noh, but the dialogue was his own, and the dialogue began to change markedly after October 24, 1917. On this day, four days after his marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees, his wife first attempted automatic writing. This was the beginning of a long arduous involvement with a metaphysical scheme eventually published in 1925 as A Vision. Yeats's plays after 1917 show a slow interaction of A Vision with Noh, until they become totally integrated.

It is not within the scope of this paper to present a detailed outline of Yeats's philosophy. On the other hand it is impossible to discuss his plays without using terms that are peculiar to Yeats. Thus definitions of some sort become necessary. Those aspects of his metaphysical scheme that can be integrated into a discussion of the plays I will leave until they become essential for the understanding of a particular play. One aspect only concerns us now, since it is the underlying theme in all his plays.

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According to a complex symbolism,[1] Yeats conceives of life as a great wheel on which are marked twenty-eight points. These points can represent either the twenty-eight phases of the moon or the twenty-eight stages in a man's life. Man's individual life, then, is a progress around that wheel.

Further, he conceives of man as struggling always between the two opposites of self-completion and self-negation, or what he calls subjectivity and objectivity respectively. Phase 1, the dark of the moon, symbolizes a state of complete objectivity, a state where no life can exist because no conflict exists. Phase 15, the full of the moon, symbolizes a state of complete subjectivity where similarly no life can exist because there is complete Unity of Being, hence again no conflict. Man's life, then, is a movement either toward subjectivity or away from subjectivity toward objectivity. Phases 8 and 22, midway between the two absolutes, are phases of struggle and tragedy. At Phase 8 man begins his struggle to find personality which is attainable only through suffering and defeat. At Phase 22 he struggles again to lose personality which he can do only by negating his own individuality.

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[1] W. B. Yeats, A Vision (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), pp. 67-89.

This scheme, according to Yeatsian geometry, accommodates much more than the cycle of man's individual life. As Yeats explains it in A Vision:

> This wheel is every completed movement of thought or life, twenty-eight incarnations, a single incarnation, a single judgment or act of thought. Man seeks his opposite or the opposite of his condition, attains his object so far as it is attainable, at Phase 15 and returns to Phase 1 again.[2]

The cycle of man's individual life is but a part of a greater whole. This Yeats describes as the Great Wheel, which also has twenty-eight phases, each of which consists of the smaller wheel with its twenty-eight phases. Thus, although every soul moves from Phase 1 to Phase 28 on the smaller wheel in any particular life, it is reborn successively into one phase after another on the Great Wheel. Thus rebirth, too, is an endless progress around a wheel. Since historical eras are also cyclical, a man born into a subjective, or antithetical, phase could well find himself living in an objective, or primary, historical phase, which would increase the difficulty of attaining Unity of Being.

Oversimplified as this outline is, we can begin to get a picture of what Yeats is trying to achieve in his plays. When he rejects characterization in his plays,[3] he does so because he believes that there is a struggle going on within man that far outweighs the petty conflicts that result from

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[2] Ibid., p. 81.

[3] W. B. Yeats, "The Tragic Theatre," pp. 239-40.

clash of character. Each play represents a point of crisis that has no external reality. The action is really a conflict of essences taking place within the mind of the hero. Thus the personae of Yeats's plays become objectified essences that have no autonomous reality outside the world of the play.

One more point requires mention. Once we understand the subjective nature of Yeats's drama, the inclusion of supernatural phenomena into his plays takes on a much broader significance than it did in early romantic plays like The Land of Heart's Desire or The Countess Cathleen. Like all the other characters in Yeats's later plays, the supernatural being becomes a spiritual essence within the mind of the hero. Whether this essence be his daemon whose lot it is to confront him with that obstacle most difficult to contemplate this side of despair; whether it be man's dream for perfection; whether it be a voice from the distant past; whether it prods man to action or lures him to his defeat; whatever it be that the shade represents in any particular play, it is nonetheless a part of man's mind.

All of Yeats's plays after 1916 set the stage, not in the external world, but in the internal world, the world of the mind. Furthermore, they all deal with some variant

of the classical Noh meeting between the natural world and the supernatural world. When we look back at Yeats's early attempts at such meetings we are struck with an incongruity. Into a plot and a convention that are basically realistic, Yeats introduces some form of the supernatural which invariably jars us because it is not a natural part of the world which the play creates. Seldom does he actually show us an immortal being, but we are always asked to suspend our disbelief to allow for the possibility of such a phenomenon. Where it works best, as in the case of the two demon merchants in The Countess Cathleen and the faery child in The Land of Heart's Desire, these superhuman beings are presented in very human form; they cause us little trouble since we can easily translate them into some sort of psychological allegory. They are not presented boldly enough to force us to accept them as indeed beings from a spirit world, nor are they integrated well enough into the world of the play to allow for bolder presentation. Much of the charm and power of Noh derives from its naif assumption that the spirit world can be presented to an audience without any need for justifying such a presentation. It is this element of Noh that Yeats henceforth unhesitatingly accepts. He now presents gods, goddesses, spirits, ghosts and supernatural

voices as a normal and natural part of the play world, the world of the mind.

It is primarily the dance, the mask, and the chorus that make this integration so successful. Stylized movement, stylized faces, and chanting voices dethrone naturalism and force the audience to react poetically to the plays. These techniques Yeats learned from Noh, but none of them does he use according to the Noh prescription.

The dance, according to Noh, is in effect "the play." Without it, there is nothing but bits and pieces of very beautiful poetry, too incoherent to be called a play. The dance in Yeats's plays, even in those which he explicitly calls dance-plays, never assumes so much importance. It becomes indeed the central ritual of the play, but whereas the play would lose much of its beauty and its impact on the audience if the dance were removed, it is never so much "the play" that the rest would become incoherent without it.[4] In fact, many of the plays, including Calvary (1920) which Yeats calls a dance-play, use the principle of the dance in so submerged a fashion that it takes a keen eye to discern it at all. This is certainly true of such later plays as The Words Upon the Window-Pane (1934) and Purgatory (1939).

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[4]There is one exception to this generalization, A Full Moon in March, which I will deal with in a later chapter.

The masks worn in Noh intrigued Yeats immediately. In Noh plays the dancer and his companion (tsure) frequently wore masks, although not primarily as a device to create aesthetic distance. Because a young warrior would seldom be masked, whereas spirits, old men and women invariably were,[5] we can assume that the masks were traditional items of costume.

What fascinated Yeats about the use of masks was precisely the matter of distance. In his essay on Noh, he describes a mask that Mr. Dulac carved for Cuchulain, half-Greek, half-Asiatic, which "will appear perhaps like an image seen in revery by some Orphic worshipper."[6] To this he adds: "I hope to have attained the distance from life which can make credible strange events, elaborate words."[7] Yeats's use of masks in his early plays also differed from Noh use in that nearly all of his characters wore them; even the musicians had their faces painted to resemble masks. It is noteworthy that after the first four plays he uses masks less frequently, and finally, in his last four plays he dispenses with them altogether. This is not to say that the last plays need less distancing than the first: The Herne's

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[5] Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 70.

[6] Ibid., p. 151.

[7] Ibid.

Egg and The Death of Cuchulain are in many ways much wilder conceptions than any of the early plays. Yet they use no masks. Since they create nonetheless a completely credible world, we can only conclude that Yeats no longer needed to lean on external techniques.

The Noh use of chorus also helped Yeats to integrate the two worlds. A Greek chorus was too cumbersome for the short one-act plays he was writing, but a Noh chorus which stood always outside the action, yet never so far that it did not know the thoughts of the characters was an ideal way of making credible strange events. At the same time, with the delicate, enigmatic lyrics that it would chant or sing from time to time, it could heighten the effect of the dream world that the poet was trying to create.

But Yeats found, as with the masks and the dance, that he could modify the chorus structure radically to suit his intentions in the later plays, and still present the world of the mind to his audience.

These are the main structural features of Noh that Yeats adopted and kept; but he adopted others too. He took the compactness, the lack of decoration, the boldness of execution, the barenness of setting, the impersonality of personae, and the tightly-knit symbolism and wove them into a

dramatic form that was truly original.

At the Hawk's Well (1916) and The Dreaming of the Bones (1919), were among Yeats's first attempts at the creation of a new form, and were written when his enthusiasm for Noh was high. As could be expected, they are both dance-plays, and have been collected, along with The Only Jealousy of Emer (1919) and Calvary (1920) into a small volume called Four Plays for Dancers. In many ways At the Hawk's Well and The Dreaming of the Bones are very similar. Both are based on Irish myth, both are dance-plays, both use some variant of the traveller-dancer relationship, both present a song of travel, and both create a shrine. Yet their differences are greater than their similarities. In the Cuchulain play, Yeats is applying what he has learned from the Noh form to subordinate Irish legend to his own symbolism, and to present it with the kind of power, beauty, and breadth of meaning for which he had hitherto lacked technique. In The Dreaming of the Bones, Yeats uses Irish myth and the Noh form in order to explore the basic Noh theme--guilt and expiation--a theme that interested him quite apart from Noh.[8]

Calvary (1920) and The Resurrection (1931) go beyond

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[8]See W. B. Yeats, A Vision, Chapter III, for a detailed discussion of the psychology of the soul between death and birth.

both of these plays in that they take their subject-matter and themes from Yeats's personal philosophy as outlined in A Vision, and in that they begin to experiment quite freely with the Noh form.

A Full Moon in March (1935), The Words Upon the Window-Pane (1934) and Purgatory (1939) all evolved logically from the early experiments. They demonstrate more clearly than do the earlier plays Yeats's genius as a creative artist. The principles of Noh have become for him a smooth machine, operating beneath the surface, and within the larger context of his philosophy.

It is within the above frame of reference that I will discuss the plays.

## CHAPTER IV

## AT THE HAWK'S WELL

At the Hawk's Well (1916) is for Yeats a new kind of play. Yeats himself in his essay on Noh describes it as "distinguished, indirect, symbolic, . . . [and] aristocratic."[1] Here for the first time Yeats fully subordinates Irish myth to his symbolic scheme. He was already moving towards this subordination in On Baile's Strand (1904). In that play Yeats had underscored the dramatization of legend with his theory of antinomies. In fact, the play is a veritable dance of opposites: Cuchulain and Conchubar, their shadows the Fool and the Blind Man, subjective man and objective man, the man and his mask, the heroic life and domestic peace--all of these are poised neatly one against the other. But although these antinomies inform the play with a broader meaning, they are kept firmly subordinated to the story that Yeats is dramatizing.

Not so with At the Hawk's Well. Here the event itself has symbolic significance. For his purpose Yeats has invented for his legendary hero, Cuchulain, an incident,[2] which allows the playwright the freedom he must have if the play itself is to become a symbol.

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[1] Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 151.

[2] For a complete discussion of this see Reginald Skene, "The Unity of the Cuchulain Cycle of W. B. Yeats," (unpublished Master's Thesis, The University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, 1967), pp. 78-80.

The play dramatizes that point in a man's life where he must choose between the opposite pulls in his own nature. Whether we place him, according to the Yeatsian scheme, at Phase 8, choosing between the false and true masks, or at Phase 12, choosing to follow the image of his desire, we get the same picture: he is committing himself to the heroic life. It is this moment of choice within a man's soul that constitutes the play.

As in Noh, the plot has been reduced to its bare essentials. A very brash, self-confident young Cuchulain has heard by chance of a well whose water gives man immortality. The play takes the form of a quest, in which a Young Man, Cuchulain, finds the sacred well only after he has overcome the trials designed to discourage him. When he arrives at the shrine he discovers that the well is dry, and that a woman guards it. He also learns that an Old Man has been waiting fifty years to drink of its water, but is always betrayed by sleep at the crucial moment. The Old Man begs Cuchulain to leave, for by very reason of his long vigil the water belongs to him. Although Cuchulain refuses, he generously offers to share the water.

This concludes the first part of the play, a brief exposition presented by Chorus, Cuchulain, and the Old Man, which serves to identify the characters, to give their

motives, to describe Cuchulain's journey, to enshrine the place, and to prepare us for the miracle.

In the second part of the play our attention shifts to the Guardian. Cuchulain is warned not to look into her dry eyes, for to look is to be cursed. Undaunted, he meets her eyes, whereupon she rises and begins to dance, leading him ever further from the well. With half his mind he is aware that the water of immortality has bubbled up, but passion and desire master him, and he ignores it. Life, cursed and foolish, is Cuchulain's choice. Thus he rejects the well, and the Old Man sleeping beside it.

In the third part, our attention returns to Cuchulain. When he discovers that he has forfeited immortality for a moment of ecstasy, we see no regret. Impervious to the Old Man's whining, Cuchulain responds with wild triumph to the clash of arms:

> I will face them.
> He comes! Cuchulain, son of Sualtim, comes![3] (218)

No fear of life or of death can daunt him. As he exits to fight the fierce women of the hills, the Chorus speaks for him, as would a Noh chorus, his final affirmation of life:

> Folly alone I cherish,
> I choose it for my share;
> Being but a mouthful of air,
> I am content to perish;
> I am but a mouthful of sweet air. (219)

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[3]All quotations from the plays refer to W. B. Yeats, The Collected Plays (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1963).

Cuchulain has renounced his opportunity for immortality in order to grasp, if for a moment only, but in the context of life, at an ideal. Both immortality and the ideal slip through his fingers, but his reaction is truly heroic. Though he now bears a curse and his life is in danger, he is triumphant; he has had a moment of ecstasy.

We can see from this synopsis that, although many of the structural features of Noh are recognizable, they stand in a different relationship to each other than they do in Noh. In fact I can see no evidence in any of the plays that Yeats was trying to follow the strict Noh rules with any degree of fidelity.[4] We can, for instance, see three parts in the basic structure, but these parts resemble at least as closely the Aristotelian 'beginning, middle, and end' as they do the Noh 'introduction, development, and climax.' Then too, the relationship between _shite_ and _waki_ has been altered. In Noh, _shite_ is shade, dancer, and central character. What story there is, is his story; _waki_, the chorus, and _shite's_ own dance all serve to make this explicit. Moreover, all the conflict of the play resides within him.

Not so in Yeats's play. Here the dancer, or shade, takes on a subordinate role, and Cuchulain, the traveller,

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[4]See F. A. C. Wilson, _Yeats's Iconography_ (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1960), p. 28. He suggests that, in fact, Yeats was trying to reproduce the Noh form.

becomes protagonist. The Old Man could perhaps be conceived of as waki, but he too goes beyond Noh prescription by his vested interest in the action.

Then there is the matter of the chorus. In Noh, as we have seen, waki enters first; when the audience has been carefully prepared for it, shite makes his entrance. After both players have introduced themselves, the chorus will speak, usually only for shite although occasionally also for waki, but always as a continuation of their thoughts. It is never difficult to determine for whom a Noh chorus is speaking.

In Yeats's play the three Musicians, who take the place of the Noh chorus, would in Noh terms create general confusion. They speak at times in the first person, and at times in the third person, for various characters, never giving any hint that they have shifted focus. The confusion increases when we note that at times the musicians comment objectively on the action, as would a Greek chorus. Then, too, it is the chorus, not waki, that introduces the play, its theme, and its characters. Moreover, in Yeats's play a character will frequently continue a thought that the chorus has introduced, whereas in Noh the chorus never initiates thought; it only continues and confirms it. The role of the chorus in Yeats's play being, thus, almost prophetic, it would assume much more dramatic importance than in Noh.

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It should be clear from the above analysis that Yeats's use of Noh was not a matter of imitating a Noh formula. It was the principles of Noh that interested him, not the rules.

In terms of innovation, the most significant feature of this play is expressed confidently by the chorus in the opening lines:

> 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. (208)

This play, which is to take place in the mind, must be seen by the imagination, not with the sensual eye. Thus, appropriately, Yeats has cleared the stage of any distracting elements. The sensual eye will see only a bare stage before a wall, against which stands a patterned screen, and a square of blue cloth suggesting a well. The scene, then, must be visualized by the imagination fired by the spoken word. Yeats describes this technique in his essay on Noh, a technique which he will use for the next four plays and then modify for the rest of his plays until it is all but submerged into the action.

> There will be no scenery, for three musicians, whose seeming sun-burned faces will I hope suggest that they have wandered from village to village in some country of our dreams, can describe place and weather, and at

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> moments action, and accompany it all by drum and gong or flute and dulcimer.[5]

How important this setting of the scene was to Yeats we can gather from a later statement in the same essay:

> . . . when I first began to write poetical plays for an Irish theatre I had to put away an ambition of helping to bring again to certain places, their old sanctity or their romance. I could lay the scene of a play on Baile's Strand, but I found no pause in the hurried action for descriptions of strand or sea or the great yew tree that once stood there; and I could not in "The King's Threshold" find room, before I began the ancient story, to call up the shallow river and the few trees and rocky fields of modern Gort.[6]

In the self-conscious, reminiscent emotion of the Japanese Yeats sees a connection with that of the Irish, for it too was an emotion always associating itself with pictures and poems.[7]

Yeats's note also explains the painted faces of the musicians. With their sunburned faces they would take on a bard-like quality, making more credible their Homeric role of story-teller and objective commentator. The mask-like faces would also heighten the impact of the ritualistic unfolding and folding of the cloth at the beginning and at the end of each play. The stately, rhythmic movements of this ceremony, performed by three masked figures, would set the stage for a dream world where strange events

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[5] Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 151.

[6] Ibid., p. 160.

[7] Ibid.

could quite naturally take place.

Although it is primarily the chorus that holds off the pushing objective world, it is also the chorus that brings us into the play. It is as though it sits beside us and comments, explains, fills in, and most important, anticipates our emotions.

Thus the Musicians, sitting behind their instruments, and singing, take on the quality of the bard while the actual characters become almost dream-figures in a story. Despite their painted faces and trance-like movements, the Musicians are human and understand our fears and joys. By prodding the depths of our minds, they make us more susceptible to the deeper passions within the minds of the characters.

Although the Musicians successfully create the illusion of a dream world in the opening songs and speeches of the play, this illusion must be maintained if so strange an event as the possession of a young girl by a hawk is to seem natural. To do so Yeats combines a few Noh techniques with his own theatrical instinct. He had already noted in his essay "The Tragic Theatre" (1910), that insofar as character is defined, passion is lost.[8] The personae of tragedy must "greaten till they are humanity itself."[9]

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[8] W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 240.

[9] Ibid., p. 245.

In At the Hawk's Well Yeats works consciously towards this. The stylized masks that he adopted from Noh served not only to cover up the commonplace features of the actor, but to de-personalize the character that he was playing. Furthermore, masks, because they allow for no facial expression, force the actor to use his whole body to express emotion, creating thereby more formal gestures.

The costumes, too, serve to delineate types rather than individuals. The Guardian is "entirely covered by a black cloak," (208) the Old Man wears a tattered gown, and Cuchulain, "not of those that hate the living world," (211) has gold "On head and foot and glittering in /his/ coat." (211)

Yeats capitalized on this use of masks and costumes, but he did not wholly rely on it. The characters themselves, as in Noh,[10] are given no real individuality. They are designated as types and are called only Old Man, Young Man, and Guardian. That the Young Man is incidentally identified as Cuchulain serves less to individualize him than to link him with an heroic past. The choice he makes at the holy well becomes, then, not only the choice of youth, but also an heroic committment.

Besides universalizing the characters, this impersonality of personae serves another purpose. Stripped of all character, they become mirrors wherein are reflected the

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[10]Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 70.

images and ideas of the play. We see the Old Man in the thorn trees, the dry leaves and sticks, the sinking sun, the cold night. We hear him when the Musicians cry, "I am afraid of this place," (209) and again when the Musicians sing:

> 'O wind, O salt wind, O sea wind!'
> Cries the heart, 'it is time to sleep;
> Why wander and nothing to find?
> Better grow old and sleep.' (210)

But most important, we see in his fear of both life and death the complete antithesis of the hero.

It is as such an antithesis that the Old Man is really functional in the play. Cuchulain's choice, finally, is not between immortality and a moment of ecstasy; it is a choice between waiting passively for an immortality that will always elude him, and fearlessly accepting life with its implicit curse. A bitter choice indeed, for both must end in defeat. The Musicians, commenting on Cuchulain's choice, make this eminently clear:

> He has lost what may not be found
> Till men heap his burial-mound
> And all the history ends. (217)

Both Cuchulain and the Old Man lose what may not be found; but whereas Cuchulain's defeat is heroic, the Old Man's is ignominious. He spells it out himself:

> The accursed shadows have deluded me,
> The stones are dark and yet the well is empty;

> The water flowed and emptied while I slept.
> You have deluded me my whole life through,
> Accursed dancers, you have stolen my life.
> That there should be such evil in a shadow! (217-18)

Just as this petty, querulous Old Man reflects the image of sleep and death, Cuchulain reflects the image of action and life. His response to defeat is a wild cry of life. "I will face them," (218) he announces when, coming out of his trance, he hears the cry of war and the clash of arms. Neither life or death holds any fear for him.

Thus it is the very impersonality of the characters that draws towards the characters the images of the play. From these images they take on their only meaning and their only personality.

Since it is from the symbolism that the play derives its meaning, we can understand why the central image, or what is generally known as the 'binding metaphor,' of the Noh plays attracted Yeats.

In his Introduction to Certain Noble Plays of Japan Yeats asks:

> I wonder am I fanciful in discovering in the plays themselves . . . a playing upon a single metaphor, as deliberate as the echoing rhythm of line in Chinese and Japanese painting.
>
> In neglecting character which seems to us essential in drama, as do their artists in neglecting relief and depth, when they arrange flowers in a vase in a thin row, they have made possible a hundred lovely intricacies.[11]

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[11] Ibid., p. 161.

In At the Hawk's Well we see just such a playing upon metaphor. The dry well choked up by withered leaves, the hazel tree stripped by the wind, and the salt sea wind are echoed again and again. The Guardian of the well is "Worn out from raking its dry bed,/ Worn out from gathering up the leaves," (209) while "The wind that blows out of the sea/ Turns over the heaped-up leaves at her side." (209) The Old Man whom the years have withered away (213) tries to warm himself at a small fire which he makes of "a little heap of leaves" and "dry sticks," (210) but finds that it only serves to light up "the hazels and the dry well." (210) When the Young Man declares his intention to drink of the holy water of the well, the Old Man, jealously guarding his right to it says:

> . . . I have lain in wait
> For more than fifty years, to find it empty,
> Or but to find the stupid wind of the sea
> Drive round the perishable leaves. (213)

The Old Man begs Cuchulain to leave the well to him, for it belongs "To all that's old and withered." (213) Cuchulain agrees that the old man seems "as dried up as the leaves and sticks." (215)

The Guardian of the well is also associated with dryness. Her eyes are "unmoistened," (215) and to look into them is to be cursed. She herself is lifeless and dull until she is possessed, and then it is but a "shadow" (217) that slides

through her veins. When the Old Man awakes to find that the water has come and gone he cries out in bitterness, "That there should be such evil in a shadow!" (218) Finally, it is the empty well and the leafless tree that have the last word:

> 'Who but an idiot would praise
> Dry stones in a well?' (219)
>
> 'Who but an idiot would praise
> A withered tree?' (220)

In the same way, images of the sea, the wind, and the hawk resound through the play, thereby defining Cuchulain's quest, his desire, and his defeat. By gathering into themselves the whole meaning of the play, these images and the characters that reflect them become symbols that are created within the context of the play and that therefore constitute the play.

The most striking feature of this play is, of course, the dance. Yeats had previously used song and dance, but their purpose was never clearly defined. Here for the first time he uses dance organically, and gives it a prominence that it hitherto has not had. If we compare its use to that of the Noh dance, however, we note that its purpose in Yeats's play is quite different from that in the Japanese play. In the Japanese play it is the shade, seeking forgetfulness and release, who dances. The dance itself is a ritual of purgation.

Not so in At the Hawk's Well. Here, although it is immortal Fand who dances, the dance becomes a ritual of temptation. The Woman of the Sidhe possesses the body of a young girl to lure Cuchulain away from his chosen fate. She becomes for Cuchulain his object of desire.

Her connection with the hawk which attacked him on the hillside is made clear by her dress, her cry, and her movements, all of which are hawk-like. Cuchulain had already desired her when she appeared to him on the hillside in the form of a hawk. Never having seen its like, he wished then to snare and hood it. But now in the form of a young girl, she becomes for him an object of sexual desire:

> Run where you will,
> Grey bird, you shall be perched upon my wrist.
> Some were called queens and yet have been
> perched there. (217)

Her role as hawk was to destroy; as hawk woman it is to tempt.

The dance in Yeats's play is impressive and beautiful, it is ritualistic, and it is completely integrated into the plot; nevertheless it does not have the functional importance that it has in Noh. When all is said, it is Cuchulain's reaction to the temptation that concerns us most, not the temptation itself. By making the dancer a subsidiary character, Yeats has quite consciously undercut the significance of the dance.

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In At the Hawk's Well, all the elements unite to create a single image. Fenollosa says of the Noh that

> The beauty and power of Noh lie in the concentration. All elements--costume, motion, verse, and music --unite to produce a single clarified impression. Each drama embodies some primary human relation or emotion; and the poetic sweetness or poignancy of this is carried to its highest degree by carefully excluding all such obtrusive elements as a mimetic realism or vulgar sensation might demand.[12]

Yeats, too, has pared away everything that is not functional. Character, action, stage, costume, masks, dance, verse, and music all become functional parts in a working whole. What we are left with is a moment of crisis, a moment of intense emotion, embodied in the dance and Cuchulain's reaction to it.

Such was Yeats's first experiment with the Noh form. He himself was certain that he had "found out the only way the subtler forms of literature can find dramatic expression."[13] He goes on, in The Dreaming of the Bones, to experiment with the typical Noh theme, but in the context of Irish legend and his own metaphysics.

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[12] Ibid., p. 69.

[13] W. B. Yeats, Four Plays for Dancers (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1921), p. 88.

## CHAPTER V

## THE DREAMING OF THE BONES

The Dreaming of the Bones bears a greater resemblance to Noh than does At the Hawk's Well because inherent in its underlying theme is the Noh theme of guilt and purgation.

Although this is by no means the only theme in the Japanese plays, it occurs again and again in the spirit-plays. The spirits of the dead are tortured by memories of deeds committed in a past life that must be purged before the soul can be reborn or escape the cycle of rebirth. Thus in Sotoba Komachi we see the spirit of Ono no Komachi, once a beautiful but cruel lady, now a tattered old woman driven mad by the spirit of her lover whom she had tormented and whose death she must relive.[1] In Kumasaka we see the spirit of Kumasaka who returns to relive his shameful death at the hands of a young boy.[2] In Ukai we see the spirit of a cormorant-fisher who is bound to his hateful trade because he fished, during life, in sacred waters where the taking of life was sinful.[3] Or again in Nishikigi we see the spirits of two lovers unable to consummate their love because folly prevented them from marrying in life.[4]

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[1] Waley, op. cit., pp. 150-160.

[2] Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., pp. 39-45.

[3] Waley, op. cit., pp. 164-170.

[4] Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., pp. 76-88.

All these spirits seek release from the bondage of a past life. It is through the meeting of the living with the dead that Noh works out its theme of purgation.

Although Yeats adopts the principle of this meeting of the living with the dead in The Dreaming of the Bones, he works it out within the terms of his own philosophy. Only insofar as Yeats's philosophy coincides with Buddhist and Shintoist philosophy, can there be any resemblance, other than a structural one, between The Dreaming of the Bones and a Noh spirit-play.

In order to understand the metaphysics that informs Yeats's play, it is necessary to understand his concept of reincarnation as he outlines it in A Vision.[5]

The Buddhist concept of escape, or Nirvana, plays little part in Yeats's scheme, except insofar as man always strives for the ideal, self-completion. We are concerned here primarily with that stage in the life of the soul, according to Yeatsian thought, which serves to purify it for the next incarnation.

For some time after death, all spirits keep the shape of their earthly bodies and carry on their old activities. This is the first stage, lasting only until forgetfulness sets in.[6]

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[5] W. B. Yeats, A Vision, pp. 219-240.

[6] Ibid., p. 221.

Following forgetfulness is the discarnate stage.[7] This is a purgatorial state where the spirits expiate their deeds by reliving them right through to their consequences, and back to their causes.

There are three processes at work here, but with the single purpose of freeing the spirit, "untying the knot." This occurs only when all passion is completely exhausted and thus dismissed.[8]

The processes for achieving this are the dreaming back, the return, and the phantasmagoria. The last two are really a check on the dreaming back. Although passionate events must be relived so that they may be understood, no event can be comprehended by virtue of its repetition alone; hence the return. Here the spirit must relive in the order of occurrence, and trace back to its cause, every passionate event until all events are related and turned to pure knowledge. Until this is completed, the spirit remains imprisoned in the event. Once the spirit has freed itself of one passionate event, it falls into the dreaming back once more and goes through the whole process for the next event.[9]

Along with the dreaming back and the return, there is the phantasmagoria which exists to exhaust emotion by com-

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[7] Ibid., p. 226.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., pp. 226-29.

pleting or taking to its consequences every event, "for only that which is completed can be known and dismissed."[10] It sounds fairly simple, but its implications seem endless. For instance, in the case of a murder, the aggressor would have to relive his crime, trace it to its cause, and then trace it to its consequences. But he can never fully understand his crime unless he also becomes his own victim. Only then can he understand and dismiss it, and only after all passion is dismissed is the soul ready for rebirth.

This is a psychology of the dead that corresponds almost exactly to the Buddhist belief. All Noh plays are built upon it. Only the Oriental preoccupation with rebirth could make a traditional literature of spiritism popular among the elite of Japan. Life before death, and life after death differ but little; in both the soul strives for release from the wheel. The Buddhist path to Nirvana being the way of self-abnegation, we see, in Noh, travellers or observers seeking at holy shrines to lose themselves in the contemplation of Buddha, and at these shrines we see shades seeking release from the passions of a previous life. Hence the Japanese play is so structured that its climactic dance results in at least partial release from torment. From his treatment of this Noh theme, we learn much about Yeats's uncompromising

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[10] Ibid., p. 230.

view of life. His plays are so structured that release becomes impossible.

The Dreaming of the Bones is more closely modeled upon a Noh play than are any of the other dance-plays. This, no doubt, can be explained by Yeats's recollection of an Aran story that bears great resemblance to the Japanese play Nishikigi.

Briefly told, Nishikigi is the story of two ghost lovers who, because they would not marry in life, remain unmarried in death. In the course of the play they are united through the intercession of a pious priest who prays for their souls.

The scenario, as transcribed by Pound from Fenollosa's manuscripts, is worth quoting, at least in part, to get an idea of the construction of the play that Yeats is working from.

> The play opens with the entrance of the travelling priest, who has wandered to the ancient village of Kefu in the far north of the island. He meets the two ghosts in ancient attire. At first he supposes them to be villagers. . . . Then the two ghosts sing together, as if muttering to themselves:
>
> We are entangled--whose fault was it, dear?--tangled up as the grass patterns are tangled in this coarse cloth, or that insect which lives and chirrups in dried seaweed. . . . We neither wake nor sleep, and passing our nights in a sorrow, which is in the end a vision, what are these scenes of spring to us? This thinking in sleep of some one who has no thought for you, is it more than a dream? And yet surely it is the natural way of love. In our hearts there is much and in our bodies nothing, and we do nothing at all, and only the

waters of the river of tears flow quickly.[11]

The priest, curious about the symbols that they carry, asks for an explanation. The piece of cloth that the woman carries, he is told, is called hosonuno, and the red sword that the man carries is a love wand called nishikigi. As chorus, shite, and tsure[12] explain the symbols, they lead naturally into a story of unfulfilled love.

> . . . Two people had lived in that village, one of whom had offered the nishikigi, the charm-sticks, the 'crimson tokens of love' night after night for three years. That was the man, of course; and the girl, apparently oblivious, had sat inside her house, weaving long bands of cloth. They say that the man was buried in a cave and all his charm-sticks with him. The priest says it will be a fine tale for him to tell when he gets home, and says he will go see the tomb, to which they offer to guide him. Then the chorus for the first time sings:
>
> 'The couple are passing in front and the stranger behind, having spent the whole day until dusk, pushing aside the rank grass from the narrow paths about Kefu. Where, indeed, for them is that love-grave? . . . '[13]

The chorus continues the song of travel until, finally, as night falls, the three travellers come to the love-grave where the bodies of the dead lovers are buried.

This ends part one of the play. The second part begins after a brief interval which allows the "spirits" to change their costumes.

> . . . The priest cannot sleep in the frost, and thinks he had better pass the night in prayer. Then the spirits in

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[11] Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 73.

[12] shite's companion. When shite is male, tsure is generally female. In this case it refers to the ghost woman.

[13] Pound and Fenollosa, op. cit., p. 74.

masks steal out, and in mystic language, which he does not hear, try to thank him for his prayer, and say that through his pity the love promise of incarnations long perished is now realized, even in dream. Then the priest says:

'How strange! That place, which seemed like an old grave, is now lighted up from within, and has become like a human dwelling, where people are talking and setting up looms for spinning, and painted sticks. It must be an illusion!'[14]

What follows is a loom song, sung by shite, tsure and chorus. Then as the spirits dance the old tragic story, the chorus explains the meaning of the movements and the thoughts of the dancers. In the end, the lovers meet over the wine-cup, the symbol of their union. The final song of the chorus, as Pound translates it, provides a fairly typical example of the direct, frank manner of a Noh chorus.

Ari-aki,
The Dawn!
Come, we are out of place;
Let us go ere the light comes,
(To the WAKI
We ask you, do not awake,
We all will wither away.
The wands and this cloth of a dream.
Now you will come out of sleep,
You tread the border and nothing
Awaits you; no, all this will wither away.
There is nothing here but this cave in the field's midst
To-day's wind moves in the pines;
A wild place, unlit, and unfilled.[15]

As we can see from this synopsis, the entire first part of the play moves directly towards the dance, which constitutes

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., pp. 87-88.

most of the second part. It is from this dance that the play derives its meaning. The chorus, used mainly to intensify emotion, plays a simple, direct role. Waki, interested and sympathetic, is little more than a means of eliciting information from shite and chorus. His prayers are unsolicited on the part of the lovers, and are offered up prior to his discovery that this man and woman are the spirits of whom they have been talking. Thus the emotions of the play are reminiscent, not fraught with conflict.

Yeats, retelling the story of Nishikigi in his essay "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places,"[16] makes specific mention of several features of the play. He notes the symbols--the red stick, the coarse cloth, and the grass --and quotes a long passage to illustrate the subtle use made of them. Next, he describes in some detail the song of travel, again noting the symbolism. Finally, after noting the role of the chorus, he describes the dissolving of the dream. Yeats obviously admired the play, and there can be no doubt that it served as a working model for The Dreaming of the Bones.

However if we read The Dreaming of the Bones as an attempt to imitate this gentle play, we must agree with F. A.

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[16] W. B. Yeats, Explorations, p. 68.

C. Wilson's conclusion that Yeats indeed paints with a heavy hand.[17] The soft rustling of the grasses and the whirring of the crickets in Nishikigi certainly contrast sharply with the heavy tread of the soldier and the shrill crowing of the cocks in Yeats's play. But The Dreaming of the Bones is no re-creation of Nishikigi. Yeats's retelling of the story in his essay makes it quite clear that he was fully aware of the delicacy of the Japanese story. He understood perfectly that Nishikigi is a dream vision, with all its sights and sounds modulated to keep the dreamer asleep until the very end.

Yeats was not writing a 'Noh play;' he was writing an Irish play. He found in the Noh play a convention for intersecting the past with the present, but neither an Irish heroic past, nor the civil war which constituted Ireland's present, has much to offer him by way of quiet sentimentality. Once more he shows us that though he will go abroad to learn a play's construction, the dialogue is always his own.

The Dreaming of the Bones deals with two souls who, imprisoned in a past event, are forced into an endless dreaming back. Seven centuries ago, because their love seemed otherwise doomed, these lovers, Diarmuid and Dervorgilla,

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[17] See F. A. C. Wilson, Yeats's Iconography, pp. 213-223, for a detailed comparison of these two plays. He concludes that Yeats's play is inferior to its Japanese model.

called in a foreign power to help them in their struggle against Dervorgilla's husband, the king. But what had seemed to them a desperate battle for the survival of their love had, as it turned out, amounted to a wholesale betrayal of Ireland to the British.

Now, long dead, they still wander through the rocks and hills of County Clare, cursed until some one among their fellow countrymen forgives them their crime. Until they meet with such compassion, they can neither touch hands or lips, nor can they attain to a state of forgetfulness.

With consummate skill, Yeats brings these harassed souls face to face with the consequences of their deed. A fugitive from the Easter Rising, frightened and praying, stumbles through a land laid waste by war. He comes upon the ghost lovers who see in him a possible agent for their release. Promising to take him to safety, they lead him along paths haunted by spirits of the dead. As they go, they tell their story in an effort to soften his hard heart. Momentarily this bitter, hate-ridden young revolutionary yearns toward them; but as the brutal facts of the ravished Irish countryside come to mind, his heart is hardened.

> O, never, never
> Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven. (442)
> . . .
>
> That town had lain,
> But for the pair that you would have me pardon,

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Amid its gables and its battlements
Like any old admired Italian town;
For though we have neither coal, nor iron ore,
To make us wealthy and corrupt the air,
Our country, if that crime were uncommitted,
Had been most beautiful. (443)

When at last they have arrived at the summit where the young man must wait for the coracle that will take him to safety, the lovers, having despaired of his help, begin to dance. Only then does he recognize them for Diarmuid and Dervorgilla. It is a dance of agony in which eyes can meet, but hands and lips, never. They try to hide from themselves their own torment by covering their faces, but finally,

They have raised their hands as though to snatch the sleep
That lingers always in the abyss of the sky
Though they can never reach it. (444)

Touched by this heart-rending spectacle, the Young Man almost yields. But it is too late, for dawn has broken. A cloud floats up and enshrouds them. When it lifts they are gone, swept away by the wind. Waking from the dream, he becomes aware of his own weakness:

I had almost yielded and forgiven it all--
Terrible the temptation and the place! (444)

The chorus now takes the theme and restates it simply and clearly. With the lovers has gone the music of a lost kingdom--an heroic kingdom where love was supreme. Modern man, confronted with such dreams finds himself suddenly lost,

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for this wandering airy music is played by crazy fingers upon a rascal heart. What was once bright and laughing is now but a bitter dream that darkens the sun. But when this night music, this dream, is driven out by the harsh music of the day--the clarion call of the cock--luck goes too:

> Our luck is withered away,
> The wheat in the wheat-ear withered,
> And the wind blows it away. (445)

The heart, says the chorus, has been stilled. This however does not imply stasis. By using the image of night and day, Yeats suggests the eternal recurrence of the dream, both for the lovers and for the young Irish rebel.

As a love story The Dreaming of the Bones is poignant; as a comment on Ireland, it is bitter. The main action of the play takes place at a specific moment in Irish history --the failure of the Easter Rising, 1916. When we recall that Yeats describes Celtic Ireland as antithetical, and modern Western civilization as primary, we can begin to understand the antinomies he is working with here. Ireland, 1916, is the complete antithesis of the heroic world and, being opposites, neither can be complete without the other. The separation of the lovers becomes a symbol of disunity which works for all levels of the play.

This play, then, is a confrontation of the heroic past with the disintegrating present. The Young Man, caught

between the romantic dream and a harsh reality, becomes for us Ireland, 1916. Through his failure of compassion and his refusal to assume responsibility for his own past, he is in effect betraying the present.

The elements of Noh that we saw operating in At the Hawk's Well we see again in The Dreaming of the Bones. As in Noh, all the parts of the play work together to create a unified image. The stage is bare. The shades wear heroic masks and costumes of a past time, whereas the soldier is unmasked, but wears a disguise--the clothes of an Aran fisher. The shades are romantic dream-figures, whereas the rebel is coldly realistic. The images of night and day, with their sounds and sights, all serve to heighten the contrast between the past and the present. All the contrasting images are bound together by the red bird of march which separates the night from the day.

These elements, concentrated as they are into an image of disunity, are reflected by the lovers who are separated from each other, and by the Young Man who is separated from himself.

The chorus resembles more closely that of Noh in that it plays a more simple, direct role. Not only is there less ambiguity within the songs themselves, but also there is less ambiguity about their function at any particular time. As in

the previous plays, the chorus introduces and concludes the play by folding and unfolding the cloth in ceremonial fashion. At times, it also breaks into the dialogue with songs that sharpen the contrast between the dreams of the past, and the betrayal of those dreams by the present. However, the chorus derives its chief importance in this play from its vivid description of scene. For the first time, Yeats uses the song of travel as an organically functional element. By contrasting the ruins of a past glory with the sterility of present-day Ireland, the chorus provides a picture of Ireland's history which gives real significance to a meeting of the present with the past.

The dance, although it does not have the ritual significance of a Noh dance, has, nonetheless, a greater prominence here than it has had in previous plays. In At the Hawk's Well, the only conflict is Cuchulain's conflict; thus we can never identify our interests with those of the dancer. In The Dreaming of the Bones, on the other hand, our sympathies are divided. We pity no less the lovers who cannot shed their guilt than we pity the Young Man who both reaps the results of a past crime and, at the same time, perpetuates it. In the separation of the lovers we see our own lack of fulfilment, and in the Young Man's refusal to help them we see our own rejection of personality. Thus, because so much of the emotion

is realized in the dance, it here begins to approach the significance of the dance in Noh plays.

Yet, despite these greater similarities to Noh, The Dreaming of the Bones differs significantly in tone and spirit from its model. A consistently inverted use of character accounts for much of the dissimilarity. As I mentioned before, waki, the traveller or Everyman, is on a quest for enlightenment and purification. His role is that of a compassionate observer of human suffering. Anything he can do to alleviate the distress of a tormented soul will eventually help him to attain his own goal, for his journey takes him towards the abnegation of the Self. Shite is invariably the shade, forced by reason of past sin or passion to expiation or dreaming back. His dance is not so much a plea for sympathy as it is a ritual of purification, aided by waki who acts as intercessor. This breakdown of roles is perfectly suited to a religion where denial of Self is the path to Nirvana.

For Yeats, who is concerned not with self-denial, but with self-fulfilment, and who recognizes no Nirvana, the Japanese play will not do. Thus the traveller, whether in quest or in flight, not the dancer or shade, becomes the focal point of his plays. Only, as we will see in A Full Moon in March, when a protagonist, both seeking and attain-

ing self-completion, becomes also dancer, can the dance in Yeats's play have the ritual significance that it has in Noh.

The Dreaming of the Bones creates its own world with complete credibility. In no other play does Yeats present the ghost so boldly, as also in no other play does he paint the scene so vividly. The opening lyrics, sung by the musicians as they fold and unfold the cloth, put us immediately into the passionate world of the dreaming dead. We see the war-torn County Clare, we see its rocks, thorn trees, ruined abbey, and broken tombs. At the same time we are genuinely moved by the shadowy dream that pervades the whole scene--a wasteland shrouded in desolate cries and airy music, and inhabited by two shades who ask but to touch hands and lips. Contrary to all Noh tradition, Yeats will not permit this; he remains true to his own vision. That the two worlds can meet and communicate, he accepts, but that they can interact, he rejects. Thus the dream remains a dream, and modern man, although he yearns to do so, cannot bridge the gap between the dream and the reality, the past and the present.

# CHAPTER VI

## CALVARY AND THE RESURRECTION

Calvary (1920), written a year after Yeats wrote The Dreaming of the Bones (1919), is the last of the Four Plays for Dancers. Collected as it is into a volume of plays for dancers, Calvary is a puzzle, for it seems to have little in common with the other three plays in this group. It is not really a dance-play; it is certainly not a spirit-play; furthermore, it is not an Irish play, whereas the other plays in the volume belong to all three classes. Instead, it is a religious play which explores the death of Christ according to a theory of history that Yeats had been schematizing since 1917.

Having completed his dance-plays in 1920, Yeats does not write another play until 1931, several years after the publication of A Vision in 1925. He had started The Resurrection in 1925, but, not liking it, he had left it and returned to it six years later. It echoes, significantly, not the heroic plays, but the one religious play he had written, Calvary.

Several reasons suggest themselves as an explanation for this new impulse in his plays. As a result of his work with a symbolism that was later to be published as A Vision,

he found that he was becoming more interested in philosophy and history. But even more important for him as an artist, he found that his symbolism was becoming more coherent than it had been,[1] and thus could be used to explore through his art what for Yeats had been unmapped areas.

Calvary and The Resurrection can be considered as both religious plays and historical plays in that they pose a question about Christ's divinity, yet also dramatize a point in history when one civilization dies and another is born.

Yeats uses two distinct but related symbols with which to describe experience. As I have already noted[2] he sees life as a cyclical movement around a Great Wheel. Alternatively, he also sees life as a linear movement along the spirals of two interpenetrating gyres, one of which is primary, and the other antithetical. Since the unwinding of one gyre would necessitate the winding of the other gyre, each would be "Dying each other's life, living each other's death."[3]

In terms of Yeats's historical schemata, every Great

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[1]By 1920 Yeats had already mastered the twenty-eight phases and the historical scheme which his communicators had given him through his wife's automatic script and her speech during sleep. A Vision, p. 18. The communicators had asked him not to read philosophy until their work was done (1920), but encouraged him to read history and biography. A Vision, p. 12.

[2]See above, p. 24.

[3]W. B. Yeats, A Vision, p. 68.

Wheel comprises a civilization of 1000 or 2000 years.[4] Translated into the symbol of the gyres, this would mean that at the end of every cycle the movement of the gyres would reverse itself, and a new civilization would begin. This reversal is marked, in history, by a divine annunciation. Thus the beginning of the classical era is marked by Leda and the Swan (and the birth of Helen),[5] and the Christian era is marked by Mary and the Dove (and the birth of Christ). Both foreshadow the birth of the divinity who will usher in the next cycle--the Rough Beast who "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born."[6]

Consequently, within the terms of Yeats symbolism, Christ not only represents a new religion, but he also marks the moment in history when the gyres change, and an antithetical civilization is invaded by primary power. What this meant for Christ as man and Christ as God, what it meant for his believers, and what it meant for civilization are the questions that lie beneath the surface of these plays. A passage from A Vision gives the answers in terms of philosophy:

> God is now conceived of as something outside man and man's handiwork, and it follows that it must be idolatry

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[4] Ibid., p. 202.

[5] Ibid., p. 268.

[6] W. B. Yeats, The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (Toronto: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1967), p. 210.

> to worship that which Phidias and Scopas made, and seeing He is a Father in Heaven, that Heaven will be found presently in the Thebaid, where the world is changed into a featureless dust and can be run through the fingers; and these things are testified to from books that are outside human genius, being miraculous, and by a miraculous Church, and this Church, as the gyre sweeps wider, will make man also featureless as clay or dust. Night will fall upon man's wisdom now that man has been taught that he is nothing.[7]

To transmute this philosophical statement into emotion is the task that Yeats sets himself in these two plays. Noh had already taught Yeats how to build a play upon a symbol, and to create thereby a single intense emotion. But the form of Noh he had been using was particularly suited to a conflict that could be externalized by means of a symbolic dance which gathered into itself all the emotion of the play. In Calvary and The Resurrection, Yeats breaks away from this form of Noh by minimizing the dance so that it becomes an almost incidental feature. He must, therefore, find some other means of creating and expressing emotion.

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On the surface, Calvary resembles Yeats's other plays. We see again all the Noh features that we have already seen in At the Hawk's Well and The Dreaming of the Bones. As in the other plays, the Musicians open the play with a song as they unfold and fold the cloth. Then they describe the scene in a song of travel while Christ, wearing a mask, climbs up to Calvary. Lazarus, masked, enters and rebukes Christ for his limited concept of love. After he leaves, the Musicians

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[7] W. B. Yeats, A Vision, pp. 273-4.

again describe the scene, and sing another enigmatic song. Judas, also masked, now enters, and challenges the power of Christ. Having been selected for the task, Judas then holds up the cross "while Christ stands with His arms stretched out upon it." (455) Three Roman Soldiers now enter into a dialogue among themselves about their own complacent acceptance of the fortuitous nature of life, and then dance their allegiance to the God of dice. The play ends as it began, with the song of the Musicians as they unfold and fold the cloth.

As we can see, the construction of this play does not differ markedly from the construction of the first three plays. Yeats has used, as in Noh, the meeting of mortal man and immortal being. He has used also the mask, the binding metaphor, the chorus, and the dance. Here, also, as in Noh and in his previous plays, all these elements work together to create a single unified image. Nonetheless, there is a notable difference between this play and Yeats's previous plays.

In pruning a stage-craft down to its bare essentials, a dramatist will throw the weight of the play onto the actors. They, then, must carry the play. This Yeats had already done in his first plays, in keeping with the Noh tradition, and what he lost in peripheral ornamentation, he more than gained in organic strength. The power of these plays comes from a

passionate conflict in the hero's mind between values that are mortal and immortal, material and spiritual. The crisis, symbolically represented by the dance of a spiritual being, is thus the climax of the earlier plays. Everything within those plays, including the sometimes enigmatic lyrics sung by the musicians, works together to intensify and clarify that moment of crisis. The earlier plays, then, have a well-defined "action" at their centre, and whether we are familiar with Yeats's symbolism or not, we the audience have no difficulty in understanding the play on at least one level--that of plot.

In Calvary, because of Yeats's particular religious bias, we have a strange upsetting of all the norms. We see, not mortal man confronted by immortal being and forced to make a choice, but Christ, God, confronted and tempted by man, and this not once, but three times. Thus there is no well-defined moment of crisis. The central conflict is also difficult to pin-point. Lazarus and Judas, recognizing that they have been defeated by an irrational force that "substitute/s/ for reason, miracle,"[8] reject Christ, and confront Him with their rejection. A note from A Vision throws some light on the struggle that is going on within Christ:

> We say of Him because His sacrifice was voluntary that He was love itself, and yet that part of Him that made

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[8] Ibid., p. 275.

> Christendom was not love but pity, and not pity for intellectual despair, though the man in Him, being antithetical like His age, knew it in the Garden, but primary pity, that for the common lot, man's death, seeing that He raised Lazarus, sickness, seeing that He healed many, sin, seeing that He died.[9]

Yeats is forcing onto Christ both the intellectual despair of Lazarus and Judas, and the indifference of the Roman soldiers. He thus becomes, if for a moment only, subjective man, and knows, as man knows, the anguish of isolation and loneliness. It is all expressed in His final cry: "My Father, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (456)

The conflict, then, is between Christ the Son of Man, and Christ the Son of God, or in Yeats's terminology, objective pity and subjective love.

But all of this remains implicit; none of it is explicit. There is no action at the centre, no moment that can be dramatized because there is no choice involved. Thus the play appears to stand still. Everything that an audience expects from a play has been submerged, if not actually dispensed with. Even the dance has no surface significance. All that is left is the emotion--the intellectual despair of three characters who are all faced with the terrifying consequence of God's will made manifest on earth. We have only the bitterness of Lazarus who, snatched from his solitude, feels himself cheated of death; the defiance of Judas who, in the face of eternal

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[9] Ibid.

damnation, exults that he has out-witted God; the anguish of Christ who, dying for a world that neither wants Him nor needs Him, finds Himself abandoned by man and God alike. This is a drama of the mind, which must engage our passions through our minds.

In order to understand how Yeats achieves this effect, it is necessary to look beyond the Noh spirit-play that he had used as a model for the construction of his previous plays. There is, in Noh, a precedent for this kind of play which Yeats might have had in mind,[10] and which would also explain why he included it among his dance-plays.

As I pointed out in Chapter II,[11] the fifth play in a Noh cycle of plays is called the Noh of the Mind. In Waley's book, I find a description of this kind of play in an extract taken from an essay on Noh by Seami (1363-1444) and translated by Waley. Seami divides Noh plays into three classes, those plays that appeal to the eye and feature the dance, those that appeal to the ear and feature music, and those that appeal to the heart. He speaks here of the latter class:

> The third class is that which appeals to the mind. In the hands of a peerless master Sarugaku will move the heart

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[10] According to Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 217, Yeats was acquainted with Arthur Waley and his work with the Noh plays. It thus seems incredible that Yeats would have been unfamiliar with the Noh of the Mind.

[11] See above, Chapter II, p. 15.

> when not only representation, but song, dance, mimic and rapid action are all eliminated, emotion as it were springing out of quiescence. This is called "frozen dance."
>
> Such acting cannot be understood by many spectators of long experience; still less by peasants or the like. This mystic style belongs only to the peerless master-player; and though it is called "Nō that speaks to the mind," yet it is also called "mindless Nō." There are many who have long frequented the theatre, yet do not understand Nō; and many who understand, though they have little experience. For eye-knowledge comes not to all who see, but to him who sees well . . . .
>
> The Book of Criticism says, "Forget the theatre and look at Nō. Forget the Nō and look at the actor. Forget the actor and look at the "idea" (kokoro). Forget the "idea" and you will understand the Nō.[12]

I am not suggesting that Calvary is a Noh of the Mind, but I do see a resemblance between Calvary and what Seami calls the "frozen dance." In any case, Seami's comments illuminate some aspects of Yeats's play that are otherwise difficult to understand.

Calvary, unlike the Noh of the Mind, does not eliminate all representation, song, dance, and mimic action. Yeats uses all these parts, but he modifies his use of them to achieve an effect very like the effect Seami describes. This is particularly true of the chorus and the dance.

The role of the Noh chorus was to intensify the emotion of the play, and to carry "the mind beyond what the action exhibits to the core of the spiritual meaning."[13] Yeats accepted this principle and had experimented in his first three

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[12] Waley, op. cit., p. 44.

[13] See above, Chapter VI, p. 73.

plays, with various techniques of applying it. He used the chorus to set the scene, to present a song of travel, to speak the thoughts of the characters, to comment poetically on the action, to weave a pattern of images, or to throw emphasis onto a single image. All of these Yeats used in various combinations in his first three plays, but always with the same purpose of intensifying the emotion and building meaning into his play. Not until he writes Calvary does Yeats realize the full dramatic scope of the principle he had adopted from the Noh, and he realizes it, as one would expect, by achieving the kind of simplicity for which Noh is famous. Although these songs appear to be enigmatic, and their imagery to be too esoteric to be dramatically useful, they truly carry the mind to the core of the spiritual meaning.

The songs of the chorus are built around a single image, that of the moon-crazed heron, frozen into immobility. Associated with this image in the opening song is the refrain: "God has not died for the white heron." (449) In the following songs, the image of the heron is extended to include the eagle, the swan, and the gull, and in the last song the refrain becomes: "God has not appeared to the birds." (457) The lonely seabird, lying at her rest; the eagle who "is content with his savage heart;" (457) the swan who needs nothing but

a swan; these are images of fulfilment, of completion, of Unity of Being. Unlike man, who must experience the terrifying effects of Christ's death, these birds represent the subjective impulse that remains untouched.

From these songs, and the images they suggest, comes an emotion, "springing out of quiescence,"[12] which counterbalances the emotion springing out of conflict. Having themselves the frozen quality of the white heron which stands "Motionless under the moon-beam," the songs become for us the complete antithesis of the "action" exhibited on the stage. Within the characters there is only discord; within the songs there is only unity. Our minds are forced to move between these two extremes which act as foils for each other, and implicitly comment upon each other. It is not essential that the audience understand the particular meanings that Yeats attaches to the symbols within these songs in order to catch the full emotional effect which they create. "Forget the 'idea' and you will understand the Nō," says Seami. So, too, it is with these songs. Having once looked at the "idea" we must forget it in order to understand the emotion that these songs serve to intensify.

The dance of the three Roman Soldiers, by no means a prominent visual feature, yet contributes significantly to the play. Within it, as in all Noh plays, is contained the

emotion that springs from action. As such, the dance becomes the antithesis of the songs, and the Soldiers represent the antithesis of what the birds represent. In these Soldiers we see a representation of the "formless dust"[14] that man will become when the gyre of objectivity sweeps wider.[15] Lazarus has questioned Christ's love, and Judas has questioned Christ's power; but the Soldiers, having rejected choice, have become but victims of chance, and question nothing. Lazarus and Judas, both threatened in a vital way by Christ, reject Him. But to the soldiers, Christ has not appeared at all. In a grotesque comment on the songs, the Soldiers dance their indifference to the significance of Calvary. In this dance Christ sees His own defeat. It is this moment of defeat, in which Christ feels the emptiness of His own being when He is separated from His divinity, that marks the crisis of the play.

Calvary is certainly not a Noh play, but the parts that make up the whole derive from Noh. That Yeats has taken these parts--the dance, the chorus, the masks, the binding metaphor--and adapted them to his own purpose, does not make them any less Noh conventions. That he could break free from a literal use of these conventions is a tribute to his creativity; but that he could radically modify them and yet achieve a Noh effect

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[14] W. B. Yeats, A Vision, p. 274.

[15] See above, Chapter VI, p. 67.

is evidence that he has made these conventions his own.

2

In Calvary Yeats has pushed Noh to its limits; in The Resurrection he breaks away from it. His note in the Collected Plays is significant:

> Before I had finished this play I saw that its subject-matter might make it unsuited for the public stage in England or in Ireland. I had begun it with an ordinary stage scene in the mind's eye, curtained walls, a window and door at back, a curtained door at left. I now changed the stage directions and wrote songs for the unfolding and folding of the curtain that it might be played in a studio or a drawing-room like my dance plays, or at the Peacock Theatre before a specially chosen audience. (579)

It follows then that the chorus would have had no part in this play as originally conceived except to sing the song of the Dionysian celebrants. As we shall see, this is not the case. The songs are as integral a part of this play as they are of all those plays that we have already looked at.

On the surface The Resurrection is a discussion among three men, a Hebrew, a Greek, and a Syrian, about the Easter events in general, and the divinity of Christ in particular. Into the midst of this conversation Christ enters, a phantom with a beating heart, incorporeal and corporeal at the same time, bringing into focus all the discussion and commenting on all the arguments.

Yeats's technique is interesting. Quite apart from the opening song of the chorus, we can recognise snatches of Noh everywhere. Once having accepted the principle that scene

and action need not be visually seen, need only be suggested, a dramatist requires only a few conventions that the audience will recognize in order to set the scene. This is why the formula for the chorus and the song of travel were so useful. The select audience that Yeats was ostensibly writing for had come to know it and understand its function. In The Resurrection, Yeats dispenses with any easily recognizable form of both these conventions. Because the characters remain always within the one room, he does not need a song of travel, and because he leans heavily on realism, he cannot use the chorus in its traditional form. Instead, the three young men variously assume the role of story-teller and commentator. First it is the Greek who has just returned from a scouting mission; then it is the Hebrew who, looking through an opening in the curtains at the eleven apostles, describes their actions; then again it is the Greek who watches the worshippers of Dionysus through a window and explains to the Hebrew their significance. When the Syrian enters he recounts the Easter morning events at the tomb, which he has just witnessed. Their chorus role is explicit, nor does Yeats try to disguise it naturalistically. He gives them long speeches in highly stylized and somewhat archaic prose.

However, the three men are not only a chorus; they are

also characters in a drama, though they are not characterized as individuals. The Greek as a rationalist, the Hebrew as a sceptic, and the Syrian as a believer in irrational miracle all become individual mouthpieces for different concepts of reality, and as such they become symbols for three quite different reactions to a miraculous event. But they are also flesh-and-blood men who are caught together and forever separated by a moment in history.

Yeats also puts the Noh dance to very subtle use in this play. The dance is narrated by the Greek as he observes it. At first he feels nothing but contempt for it. But as the dance builds to a climax of frenzy he becomes strangely affected and transmits his tension to the audience. The scene is a masterpiece of suggestive psychology. Since we neither see nor hear the worshippers, we must experience everything through the reactions of the characters on stage, who watch the dances through a window. First the Syrian, infected by the beating of the drums and rattles and the chanting of the crowd, begins to laugh irrationally, to the horror of the Hebrew. Then the Greek, disgusted by the lunacy of this so-called Greek religion, becomes uneasy when all sound suddenly ceases:

> . . . but why are they silent? They are dancing silently. They are coming nearer and nearer, dancing all the while, using some kind of ancient step unlike anything I have seen in Alexandria. They are almost under the window now.

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. . . . . .

> How they roll their painted eyes as the dance grows quicker and quicker! They are under the window. Why are they all suddenly motionless? Why are all those unseeing eyes turned upon this house? Is there anything strange about this house? (592)

The sudden silence of the dancers and the tense questioning of the Greek are dramatically explosive. His last question refocuses the action back to the room and prepares us for the miraculous entrance of Christ through the wall.

We have seen no dance, except through the eye of the mind, but by that very fact Yeats has heightened the significance of the parallel nature of the irrational worship of Dionysus and Christ.

The binding metaphor is here, too. We have it first from the opening song:

> I saw a staring virgin stand
> Where holy Dionysus died,
> And tear the heart out of his side,
> And lay the heart upon her hand
> And bear that beating heart away . . . . (579-80)

Heart and blood images are echoed throughout the play. The Dionysiac worshippers tearing a goat to pieces and drinking its blood; their vermilion painted lips; the bread and wine of the Eleven; Calvary; the murder of Dionysus; the references to Troy and bloodshed; the beating heart of Christ; all these images are gathered, in the last song of the Musicians, into an "odour" and a "flame" that overwhelm a whole civilization.

What emerges is another variant of the Noh form. Yeats's

note that I quoted earlier[16] seemed to indicate that Yeats was merely restaging his play for a more select audience, and that the restaging required lyrics for the opening and closing of the curtain. Actually, the songs were necessitated by the play itself. Although submerged, all the Noh conventions were still there, and without the songs to focus them, they would lose their power.

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[16] See above, Chapter VI, p. 77.

# CHAPTER VII

## A FULL MOON IN MARCH, THE WORDS UPON THE WINDOW-PANE, AND PURGATORY

In A Full Moon in March (1935), The Words Upon the Window-Pane (1934), and Purgatory (1939), we see Yeats in complete control of his craft. In these plays we see a freedom from the strictures of the conventions he had elected to work within that we have not hitherto seen. This is not to say that Yeats now rejects the Noh. He merely breaks free of it by establishing his complete mastery over it. The principles he had adopted and then adapted to serve him in the creation of a subjective drama, now become tools which he can use at will. Hence we see some significant departures from his earlier post-Noh plays.

In many ways these plays represent the culmination of his experimentation with Noh. The three principles of the Japanese drama that we have seen him consistently loyal to are the dance, the intersection of the physical and spiritual worlds, and the binding metaphor. Although he uses all of them in these plays, he "features" one of these principles in each of the three plays. In A Full Moon in March the dance becomes the play, in The Words Upon the Window-Pane the séance becomes the play, and in Purgatory, the symbol becomes the play.

1

In A Full Moon in March, Yeats finally gives the dance full value. Here, as in Noh, protagonist and dancer are one, but contrary to Noh, the dancer is not the shade. There is, perhaps, a suggestion that the Queen is supernatural in the fact that Unity of Being is impossible in the context of natural life. Far from being a shade, however, she is portrayed as corporeal woman at Phase 14, on the verge of self-completion. When, in the course of the play, she achieves her completion at Phase 15, she becomes pure spirit, and can be represented only symbolically by the dance. Thus the play can have no meaning without the dance.

The story of A Full Moon in March is wildly beautiful. There are only two characters, a beautiful but cruel virgin queen, and a filthy, lecherous swineherd. The Swineherd, having heard that the Queen will marry the man who can move her heart with song, comes at the full of the moon in March, the most auspicious night of the year, to try his luck. Foul, both in appearance and in mind, he insults her virgin purity. For his insolence he loses his head, but not before he has hinted at a supernatural conception in a prophetic story:

> There is a story in my country of a woman
> That stood all bathed in blood--a drop of blood
> Entered her womb and there begat a child. (626)

After the Swineherd has been beheaded, the Queen, bathed

in blood, begins to sing to the severed head a song of love. The severed head replies in song as the Queen dances her adoration. The dance, which builds to an orgasmic climax, ends with the Queen kissing the dead lips. Then, holding the head to her breast, she falls to the floor. "Crown of gold" and "dung of swine" have met and completed each other. The Queen has attained to Unity of Being on the night of the full moon in March, as was predicted.

In this play all the Noh features are evident, and are completely undisguised. We have once again the bare stage, the mask, the symbolic costuming, the binding metaphor, a chorus and a dance, and in addition to these technical features we have also the concentration, intensity, balance, rhythm, and music of Noh plays. Yet put them all together, and Noh disappears. A Full Moon in March is completely Yeatsian, a magnificent tribute to Yeats's creative genius. It is enough to look at two conventions, the chorus and the dance, to make this clear.

When Yeats first discovered the Noh chorus, it was its distance from the action that interested him. In The Resurrection (1931), as we have seen, the main characters successfully take on the function of chorus and integrate it into the dialogue. Here, however, Yeats once again gives the chorus a separate identity, albeit a different identity from that in the previous plays. It was the ostensible function of the chorus

in the earlier plays to mark the beginning and the end of the play with the ceremony that Yeats calls "the folding and unfolding of the cloth." To integrate this ritual into the play, he wrote songs for the chorus to sing while they were symbolically drawing the curtains. Having completed this ceremony, they would take their places at the back of the stage, now and then commenting and adding information. Their distance from the play was maintained not only by their function within the play, but also by the dignity that they gained from their mask-like faces, their stylized movements, and the beautiful lyrics that they sang.

All of this topples in A Full Moon in March, when two attendants, an elderly woman and a young man, announce in a somewhat Pirandelloesque manner that they are not quite sure of their own function. Their only instructions are to join whenever they like, and with anything at all. This improvisational air, and their announced intention to sing about the dung of swine, suggest that neither they nor the dramatist intend to take themselves very seriously. As it turns out, their song, which mentions the dung of swine only in the thematic refrain, "Crown of gold or dung of swine," (622) is as functional in this play as were all the previous opening songs in all the other plays. As they sing, they draw aside the inner curtain revealing the Queen, seated and veiled. When they have finished their song, they take their places beside their instruments at

the side of the stage, but not to comment objectively as in the previous plays. Although they take no direct part in the action, they remain the attendants of the Queen and do her bidding. After the Queen has decreed the death of the Swineherd and has in effect left the stage, the attendants once more draw the inner curtain.

Again they are left alone with no explicit instructions, and are forced to improvise:

> Second Attendant: What do we sing?
> First Attendant: An ancient Irish Queen
> That stuck a head upon a stake.
> Second Attendant: Her lover's head;
> But that's a different queen, a different story. (626-27)

They sing the song anyway, a rather ambiguous story about woman's cruelty and dead lips that sing. Meanwhile, they once more draw aside the inner curtain. The Queen stands there with the dripping head of the Swineherd held high, and begins her dance. The Attendants now assume a double role. They speak for themselves, commenting upon the action, while, at the same time, the First Attendant speaks for the dancing Queen and the Second Attendant speaks for the dead Swineherd. When the dance is finished, the Attendants, as chorus once again, look down upon the spectacle and ask for an explanation. The answer, which they themselves suggest, is always the same: "For desecration and the lover's night." (629)

All of this is not so much a playing upon a convention

as it is a refusal to be bound by any convention at all. The requirements of every play determine its construction. For instance, Yeats is about to tell us an absolutely preposterous story and show us an orgiastic ritual of love and death that needed very careful audience preparation. Furthermore, Yeats, a dramatist of a subjective phase, is presenting a dramatization of Unity of Being, the absolute subjective phase, to an audience in the final disintegrating stages of an objective historical era. If the chorus is to act as a buffer, then it too must represent the anarchy and chaos of the final objective phases. Thus by contrasting the uncertainty and nervousness of the Attendants with the seeming indifference of the playwright, Yeats achieves a brilliant stroke:

> First Attendant . What do we do?
> What part do we take?
> What did he say?
>
> Second Attendant. Join when we like,
> Singing or speaking.
>
> First Attendant . Before the curtain rises on the play?
>
> Second Attendant. Before it rises.
>
> First Attendant . What do we sing?
>
> Second Attendant. 'Sing anything, sing any old thing,'
> said he. (621)

When they announce that they will sing about the dung of swine, it is a shock indeed, but the shock has been somewhat absorbed by the "off-stage" quality of their preceding lines.

Yeats is true to this principle throughout. The Attendants

remain casual offstage characters who seem to be thrown into situations that they must handle "somehow." They lend a credibility to the incredible events taking place on stage. Even their final song adheres to this principle. As in the opening lines they questioned their function, so now in the closing song they question the events and suggest a possible answer.

I mentioned earlier that in At the Hawk's Well, and the other early dance plays, power was derived from conflict, not, as in Noh, from dance. This is not true here. In A Full Moon in March, as in its companion The King of the Great Clock Tower, the dance takes on a ritualistic significance that it has not previously had. The emotional power comes from the very centre of this Dionysiac ritual. The Queen in her icy virginity is a goddess who has descended "for desecration and the lover's night," and not until that love has been consummated through the dance can the play mean anything. Through this play Yeats has finally released the potential power inherent in ritual dance. It was as such power that the Japanese used the dance in Noh. Yet in Yeats's play the spirit and purpose of the Japanese dance are completely missing. Far from being a purgation which will lead to forgetfulness, as in Noh, this dance is an erotic, Orphic ritual that leads to fulfilment. Death and desecration are here not violent acts that must be expiated; they are necessary sacrifices that lead to Unity of

Being. But the sacrifice is an ecstatic one. We see it in the laughter of the Swineherd when his death is decreed, in his insolent song, and in the frenzied dance of the Queen. What in Noh is so often reminiscent and sentimental becomes here wild and joyful.

Although Yeats in this play has come closer to the source of power in Noh than in any other play, he has left Noh far behind. From Noh he learned principles, but he never took formulas. He had already set the pattern in At the Hawk's Well, although he used Noh much more literally there. It is this refusal to be boxed in by a convention, that freed him to integrate the Noh principles of construction into all of his plays without ever writing a Noh play.

2

On the surface, The Words Upon the Window-Pane (1934) seems a radical departure from any play that Yeats has written since 1916. It is written in prose, it contains no dance, no chorus, no masks, none of the features we have come to associate with Noh. It would appear that Yeats has finally yielded to the popular demand and written a realistic play.

This, however, is a deception. Yeats uses realistic conventions here for exactly the same reason that he had always used Noh conventions: to achieve a desired effect. In fact,

this play is a magnificent fusion of realistic and Noh conventions. That Yeats should use the séance as the context for the typical Noh meeting of the living with the dead, with all its purgatorial implications, is breathtaking by its very boldness; that the séance room should be the shrine where modern man meets the tortured spirit of Jonathan Swift, defines the nature of the tragedy; but that Yeats could make both this realism and ritual organically functional in his play is tribute to his genius as a dramatist.

In The Words Upon the Window-Pane, instead of the ritual dance, the séance itself becomes a ritual, one that would involve the entire audience. A group of initiates have gathered in an ancient house, the house where Stella once lived, for a séance. To their distress, the unsolicited spirit of Jonathan Swift breaks up the established order of the proceedings to relive two separate, but related moments from his life. One concerns an encounter with Vanessa, who tempts him with her woman's body, and the other concerns an encounter with Stella, who tries to comfort his mind. The unswerving love of these women has become a source of guilt for Swift which binds his spirit to the earth.

One can well imagine the impact this play could have on an audience of about fifty people, seated in a large drawing room of an old mansion, with no stage, no lighting,

just a table and a few chairs arranged for the actors in a cleared space. It would not be long before all the sceptics in the audience, like John Corbet in the play, would be waiting as expectantly as the initiates for something extraordinary to happen. Yeats has so skilfully woven into the dialogue a curiosity about Swift, the dead, and spiritualism, that it would be difficult to remain uninvolved.

As in Noh plays, the dialogue in the beginning is used solely to set the mood and to prepare the audience for the entrance of the hero. When Dr. Trench, taking John Corbet on a tour of the house, recounts its past significance, we recognize the now-familiar song of travel. The house becomes, like the well in At the Hawk's Well and the abbey in The Dreaming of the Bones, a shrine where the two worlds can intersect.

Swift's voice, a novel and, in this case, realistic departure from Noh, marks the beginning of the development. The customary mime-dance is enacted by the medium who speaks, like the chorus, for both Swift and Vanessa. Although this dramatization of a spirit is vaguely reminiscent of the Japanese possession plays, it is more realistically integrated. The spirits depart; the initiates pay and leave, and the medium, alone at last, prepares a cup of tea for herself. Into the tea ceremony Yeats builds his climax. Suddenly possessed again by the spirit of Swift, the medium speaks his final despair,

dropping, meanwhile, a saucer she has held in her hand.

It is from the Noh structure operating beneath the surface that this play takes on its ritual significance. But it is from the realism of the séance scene that the play takes on its deeper symbolic meaning.

In his Introduction to The Words Upon the Window-Pane, Yeats points out that Swift's quarrel with his age was a quarrel with a growing tyranny, both of the Few and of the Many.[1] This Yeats sees as a symptom of a disintegrating civilization:

> All civilizations must end in some such way, for the Many obsessed by emotion create a multitude of religious sects but give themselves at last to some one master of bribes and flatteries and sink into the ignoble tranquility of servitude.[2]

The group of initiates with their petty concerns, their unreasoning emotionalism, their resentment at the intrusion of disorder, their mob rule, their total lack of understanding and compassion typify the anarchy that Swift had predicted. In some way, every person in the room becomes a representative of a dying civilization. Placed into such a hollow group, Swift takes on tragic dimensions.

Thus when Swift rejects Vanessa and what she represents --marriage and children--he is rejecting the world into which he was born, and which he struggled so valiantly to reform.

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[1] W. B. Yeats, Explorations, p. 352.

[2] Ibid.

For him procreation means the perpetuation of a doomed race, a race that must end in "madness," or "knavery," or "rascaldom." (610) Though fearing nothing so much as solitude, he yet chooses it. (613) In his choice we see a heroism all the more tragic because suffering and defeat cannot bring him to Unity of Being.

The comfort that Stella can give him is small indeed in the face of this. When he is with her, he becomes more quiet. Miss Mackenna says after Stella has taken Vanessa's place: "Did you notice the change while we were singing? The new influence in the room?" (612) For a moment Stella's words, the words inscribed upon the window-pane, drive away Swift's self-doubt and guilt. But the influence lasts only so long as she is with him. The last line, "Perish the day on which I was born!" (617) is the tormented outcry of a man for whom there is no comfort, no fulfilment.

The Words Upon the Window-Pane is a dramatic tour de force. Using a favorite subject, spiritism, a favorite theme, purgation, and a favorite Irish hero, Swift, Yeats combines a basic Noh structure with realistic conventions of dialogue and staging to create a play neither realistic nor stylistic, yet somehow both.

3

In Purgatory, Yeats gives us his final, uncompromising vision of twentieth-century Ireland. It is a stark tale about an Old Man who, at the age of sixteen, murdered his degenerate father with a jack-knife and now repeats the crime by murdering his own sixteen-year-old son.

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The motivation for this action is supplied by the setting. The two characters are surrounded by symbols of death. A dead tree, the burned-out ancestral home of the Old Man's mother, the hollow hoofbeats of a ghost rider, the spirits of the Old Man's parents re-enacting the shame of their wedding night all work together to drive this old man to a second murder.

An Old Man and his son, homeless wanderers, find themselves standing in front of a mansion fallen into ruin. Recognizing it as the house where he was born, the Old Man begins to recount stories of its past splendour to his indifferent son. While he is talking, he suddenly hears hoofbeats, and sees that the window of the bridal chamber is lit up. Through the window he sees the spirit of his mother on her wedding night, waiting for the arrival of her drunken husband, a groom from her own stables. Hearing at last the hoofbeats, she hurries down to meet him, not caring that he is drunk, for she is overcome by lust. She takes him into her home, sanctified by generations of beautiful, ordered living, and conceives by him the son that is to carry the seeds of her pollution. Now, unable to separate her pleasure from her guilt, she is imprisoned in an endless dreaming back of her crime.

All of this is seen as a shadow-mime by the audience,

with a commentary supplied by the Old Man. The Boy sees nothing. Certain that his father is mad, he tries to steal the money and escape. During the tussle that ensues the scales fall from the Boy's eyes, and he sees with horror his "grand-dad," "A dead, living, murdered man!" (687) The Old Man, thinking to finish the consequences by ending the possibility of transmitting the pollution any further, kills his son.

> Dear mother, the window is dark again,
> But you are in the light because
> I finished all that consequence.
> I killed that lad because had he grown up
> He would have struck a woman's fancy,
> Begot, and passed pollution on.
> I am a wretched foul old man
> And therefore harmless. (688)

But as he stoops to pick up the money his son had dropped, he hears the dreaded sound of the hoofbeats return. He is "Twice a murderer, and all for nothing." (689)

Both the Old Man and his long-since dead mother are victims of Purgatory, and neither can find a way out. Both in attempting to expiate their guilt only dig themselves in deeper. The Old Man, unlike the Young Man in The Dreaming of the Bones, shows a willingness to aid the spirit's release. But he little understands the meaning of compassion. Because the Old Man is himself unpurified, his sacrifice becomes merely murder. Violence--drunkenness, lust and murder--is the context in which these helpless victims of a dying civilization are forced endlessly to perpetuate life.

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Yeats breaks down the distinction between the two metaphysical states in this play. No longer is the world of the living clearly differentiated from the world of the dead. Just as both states are purgatorial, so also both states force their inhabitants into ever-more incriminating acts of passion. Very subtly Yeats illustrates the stage he calls phantasmagoria. The Old Man, while still alive, traces to its consequences not only his own crime, but also his father's. His mother, a shade, is imprisoned in the dreaming back, unable to escape because every repetition of the event brings with it a renewal of her passion.

Purgatory is a logical outgrowth of all Yeats's experimentation with Noh. He has erased from the surface all those features that he depended on so heavily in the first plays. The chorus, the masks, the dance--all are gone. And yet, beneath the surface we see the principles of Noh operating as they have in all his plays.

The Old Man assumes all the roles of a Noh play. He is waki in that he is traveller and intercedes for the shades. He is chorus in that he narrates, comments, and presents the song of travel. He is shite in that he is the protagonist and performs the ritual sacrifice. The shades, intangible, hazy figures at the edge of his vision, are little more than

an echo of the Old Man's thoughts.

There is no dance as such. But the dance in Noh was always an elegant distancing of a ritual. Here we are forced to witness the ritual itself as the Old Man kills his son. This too, is echoed by the shades as they re-enact in a mime-dance the murder of a heritage.

The compactness that he had learned from Noh, becomes here a hard core almost impossible to penetrate. All of Yeats's post-Noh plays are built upon symbol, but none of them have the intense concentration upon one single symbol that this play has. Here symbolism no longer informs the play: it is the play. The dead tree and the ruined house are identical. From neither can new life spring. The parents, the Old Man, and the Boy are all guilty of destroying the life that the house represents. Recounting the past glory of that house, or Ireland if one prefers, the Old Man proclaims it to be dead. To this he appends his own death warrant:

> . . . to kill a house
> Where great men grew up, married, died,
> I here declare a capital offence. (683)

Both the father and the Old Man are guilty of this crime.

Although Purgatory derives much from Noh, it has gone too far beyond its model to be easily recognizable as such. The differences go much deeper than a superficial recognition of particular elements. By virtue of its subject-matter and theme, and by virtue of Yeats's tragic vision, Purgatory

achieves what Noh can never achieve--the tragic effect. This, finally, is the basic difference between all of Yeats's plays and Noh. The emotion in the Japanese plays is too reminiscent, too melancholy for tragedy. Yeats, although he learned how to achieve particular effects from his model, was forced to modify both the external features and the internal structure of Noh in order to be true to his own tragic vision.

# CONCLUSION

As we survey the plays from *At the Hawk's Well* to *Purgatory*, we see a creative artist at work with a dramatic form that was designed not for a Western culture, but for the expression of an Eastern philosophy and an Eastern tradition. Yeats took from this drama as much or as little as he found useful for any particular play. More important, however, that which he took and kept, he made his own by adapting it to his philosophical and dramatic needs.

The Japanese form was ideally suited to Yeats's dramatic temperament. It recognized no great gulf between the world of matter and the world of spirit, and presented each with equal frankness. It assumed that suggestion and allusion created as vivid a picture to the audience as did literal visual detail. Further, it derived its power from symbol and dance, and its beauty from tradition, form, and ritual.

Through several centuries of evolution the Noh had developed a formula and a set of conventions that would stimulate the minds of the spectators to see beyond that which the eye saw. In these conventions Yeats saw a possible solution to the problems with which he, as playwright, had been grappling in his earlier plays.

Although Yeats started from a model, he rearranged the Japanese elements to suit his own dramatic purposes. His first enthusiasm was for the masks, the dance, the chorus, the bare stage, the symbolic design, and the binding metaphor. These

conventions helped him to dramatize internal conflicts and to create an emotion that grew out of idea, not out of character.

However, Yeats was too much an artist to adopt a form that would restrict his own creativity. Thus we see in his later plays a radical modification of conventions that he had used according to a fairly literal Noh prescription in his earlier plays.

It is important to understand that, despite his enthusiastic defense of the Noh form,[1] Yeats was temperamentally unsuited to write "Noh plays." I have quoted Ezra Pound's final assessment of Noh as being "too damn soft."[2] Although Yeats nowhere says so, his consistent side-stepping of the sentimentality inherent in all the Noh plays makes its own comment. From his first post-Noh play, At the Hawk's Well, through to his last plays, Yeats finds ways of adding pith to the softer beauty of his Japanese model, thereby sacrificing that element of spirituality which is the life-blood of Noh.

The human soul in torment is the very essence of Noh; it is also the essence of Yeats. But whereas Noh was concerned with the souls of the dead seeking forgetfulness, Yeats was concerned with the souls of the living seeking fulfilment. Like Noh, he considered passion the all-important element in drama, but unlike Noh, he presented the living human soul harried to a

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[1] See above, Chapter I, pp. 1-2.

[2] See above, Chapter II, p. 20.

point just this side of despair. Thus he exalts the hero who is triumphant in the face of defeat. Yeats would not sacrifice his dramatic vision by enslaving himself to a drama that had only limited tragic and heroic possibilities.

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