

Pound, Yeats, and the Noh Theater

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A WHILE AGO a company of Japanese Noh players visited my home town, Charlottesville, Virginia, and I watched some of their performances. I was struck by their impossibly slow and sudden, incisive movements, neither gesture nor pantomime nor dance in any Western sense, but a kind of studious surrender to vectors outside human agency. I felt sometimes that they were performing a karate designed to injure the air, other times that they aspired, through their deep rough intonation, to be organ-pipes or conduits of wind. Like most of the audience I left in a state of happy confusion, and yet, though we had seen little and understood less, we had attained a better acquaintance with the Noh theater than had Yeats or Pound or any of those early twentieth-century poets who hoped to find a sort of dramatic salvation through the purity and severity of the Noh drama. This essay does not treat the actual practice of the Noh—I could not do this in any case—but treats certain exuberant fantasies bred in considerable ignorance of the Noh theater. This invention by means of imitating a misunderstood precedent is a more usual state of affairs than it may seem, for the great renewals in the history of art have often found it convenient to claim the prestige of some extremely remote sanction: when the opera originated in Florence, at the end of the sixteenth century, its inventors claimed to be reviving the musical drama of classical Greece. Of course Peri and Caccini and Vincenzo Galilei knew almost nothing about the music of classical Greece, and the little they thought they knew turned out to be wrong; but this pleasant hope of recovery of long-forgotten aesthetic truth allowed their imaginations the necessary freedom for invention. What the Greek theater was to time, the Noh theater was to space: a settled and elaborate body of conventions existing at a great distance and susceptible to almost any interpretation.

I do not mean that Yeats and Pound did not do everything they could to discover what the reality of the Noh theater was; it is simply that there was little they could do in England in 1913 to educate themselves properly. When Yeats in 1916 wrote his essay on the Noh, “Certain Noble Plays of Japan,” he complained that the war had required the closing of the Print

Room of the British Museum, so that he had to rely on old memories of the designs of the Japanese theater; and almost everything that Yeats and Pound knew about the Noh came from two sources. The first was the body of scattered notes left by an American scholar named Ernest Fenollosa, who died in 1908, just before Pound could have met him, but who metamorphosed in death into the occult bridge between East and West needed by Pound for his translations of Noh and of Chinese poetry. As Pound presents it, Fenollosa's life

was the romance par excellence of modern scholarship. He went to Japan as a professor of economics. He ended as Imperial Commissioner of Arts. He had unearthed treasure that no Japanese had heard of. It may be an exaggeration to say that he saved Japanese art for Japan, but it is certain that he had done as much as any one man could have to set the native art in its rightful pre-eminence and to stop the apeing of Europe. . . . When he died suddenly in England the Japanese government sent a warship for his body, and the priests buried him within the sacred enclosure at Miidera.

(Pound, *Translations*, p. 213)

Shortly after this description of the scholar as swashbuckler—just the sort of scholar Pound liked best—Pound tells the story of the famous Noh actor Umewaka Minoru, who lived through the revolution of 1868, and, when it seemed that all the implements of the Noh theater, the great masks and costumes, would perish, managed to save them by selling the clothes off his back. Thus Fenollosa and Minoru are both heroes of the highest rank to Yeats and Pound, those who save the implements of art from destruction; and indeed the life of Fenollosa is almost a little Noh play of its own, in which the mild-mannered scholar, a museum collector and a putterer in antiquities, suddenly reveals himself as a transcendental apparition, sage and sacred, given a burial fit for a god.

I suspect that Fenollosa actually knew something about the Noh theater, and that Pound might have worked from more corrupt texts in making his translations; but his other source was more exciting, more dubious. Somehow Pound managed to find a starving Japanese dancer, named Michio Ito, who seemed to know all about the dances which are placed at the climax of every Noh drama; and Yeats was sufficiently intrigued that

he appointed Ito to dance the role of the Guardian of the Well in his own pseudo-Noh play, *At the Hawk's Well* (1917). In fact Ito's training had been of a different sort; he had studied with Eugene Dalcroze, the inventor of a system of motion and gesture called "eurhythmics," designed to make one's body express the quality of rhythm and melodic phrase which one heard. In D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) Gudrun Brangwen performs, in order to hypnotize a herd of cattle, a little eurythmic ballet using Dalcroze gestures. One of Dalcroze's students also became Nijinsky's coach when the *Ballets Russes* came to Paris. After studying with Dalcroze, Ito left for New York and danced at the Village Follies, where Ruth St. Denis, of the famous Denishawn modern dance company, first worked on her return to the United States. We see that the origins of Ito's dance style were not some priestly cult in Japan, but in the confused provenance of modern dance. Ruth St. Denis herself, according to many historians, decided to become a dancer when she saw a poster for "Egyptian Goddess" cigarettes and visited Coney Island to see what Egyptian dance was really like; and to some extent this will serve as a parable for what Yeats and Pound did, as they sought to remold modern theater from sources so remote from their culture that they bore as much resemblance to their ostensible origin as the poster girl bore to Egyptian antiquity.

Ito's effect on Yeats and Pound was no less striking because of its bastard beginnings. When Yeats saw him dance in a drawing-room he found him

the tragic image that has stirred my imagination. There, where no studied lighting, no stage-picture made an artificial world, he was able, as he rose from the floor, where he had been sitting cross-legged, or as he threw out an arm, to recede from us into some more powerful life. Because that separation was achieved by human means alone, he receded but to inhabit as it were the deeps of the mind. One realised anew, at every separating strangeness, that the measure of all arts' greatness can be but in their intimacy.

(*Essays and Introductions*, p. 224)

It is as if Ito were heaven-sent, so perfectly did he embody everything Yeats wanted in his new theater: gestures immemorially old, at once intimate and eerie, a passion wordlessly raised to new pitches of intensity,

the anti-self of the talky realistic hateful theater made manifest. Indeed the Noh theater was appropriated *in toto* to provide a model for the kind of art desired by early modernism, in order to prove an historical myth about the perversion of an ancient and devastating theater, realized in Sophoclean Greece, lost forever in the West, but miraculously preserved in Japan and available today.

In Yeats' essay on the Noh we find what seems to be a contradiction in his praise of the Japanese theater: he celebrates it at once for being completely unmechanical, the art of sheer body, and for being a kind of glorified marionette-show (pp. 223, 226). This paradox seems to be at the heart of Yeats' hopes for creating a new sort of play; and I think it is worth a digression into nineteenth-century aesthetics to try to account for it. What amazed Yeats about the Noh was that it appeared to be a full-blown version of just the theater he had been struggling to realize, with varying degrees of success, ever since he helped found the Abbey Theatre in 1902; indeed in his essay he points with interest to the proto-Noh features in his play *The King's Threshold* (1904), and to the many similarities between Irish myth and Japanese. The Noh, then, as far as Yeats is concerned is less a Japanese invention than a distant echo of what the Irish national theater ought to be; and when Pound translates certain Noh passages in a kind of Irish dialect ("There never was anybody heard of Mt. Shinobu but had a kindly feeling for it" — *Trans.*, p. 286), he is helping Yeats to perfect his Hiberno-Japanese hybrid drama.

The nineteenth century found that Oriental art could be appropriated for almost any Occidental purpose. One of its most useful functions was simply to provide an image for the other world, the domain of the spirit, which was defined as whatever was least like our ordinary sensible nature. Oriental art was valued, then, for producing a shiver of the unnatural. Hans Christian Andersen, in his fable about the competition of a real nightingale with a wind-up toy nightingale, has the mechanical version imported from the court of the Japanese emperor; and this seemed to fix a lasting association between the Orient and the world of sheer artifice. It is to this tradition that Yeats appeals when he compares the Noh drama to a sublime puppet-show; and it is explicitly to the fable of the emperor and the nightingale that Yeats appeals when, ten years later, he writes "Sailing to Byzantium," in which he claims he desires to become a golden bird singing to a drowsy emperor, after he is gathered into the artifice of eter-

nity. But, in addition to the myth that modern Europe is banal, fat and insipid, while the East is complicated and supernatural, there arises a countermyth, according to which modern Europe is decadent, exhausted, withered into abstraction, while the East is the kingdom of bodily vigor, without any dissociation between thought and feeling, soul and body. It is this countermyth that Yeats is thinking of when he praises the Noh for its presentation of the physical body: if modern European drama consists simply of talking heads yammering in the void, then the Noh is the place where the whole body emotes. It is easy to represent a laughing man, unless your face is covered with a mask; then you will have to make your whole self a corporeal projection of laughter.

Parallel to this peculiar hope of Yeats, the hope of a pseudo-Eastern theater at once extremely physical and extremely disembodied, is the attitude towards the Orient of Igor Stravinsky. In *The Rite of Spring* (1913—just the year that Pound discovers the Noh), Stravinsky tried to find in his imagination of pagan Russia a prehistorical vitality, the piercing rhythms of nature before mankind severed himself from natural intensities; and when Nijinsky choreographed the ballet he looked to the resources of physical expression similar to those in which Michio Ito was trained. This clearly is the myth of the superior physicality of the Orient. But both before and after *The Rite of Spring* Stravinsky worked on an opera based on Hans Christian Andersen's fable, *The Nightingale*; what is interesting about the opera is that, while Andersen's fable and Stravinsky's libretto make it clear that the pathos of the real nightingale is more admirable than the soulless twittering of the mechanical nightingale, Stravinsky's music makes, at least to my ear, an entirely different impression. The music of the real nightingale is swoony coloratura, in many broken phrases, as if the bird always limped as it flew; while the music of the mechanical nightingale, represented not by a soprano but by the orchestra, is impelling, implacable, more fit for a god of war than a toy bird. I take this as a sign that Stravinsky felt that the mechanical was more fascinating than the organic; and in his later career he again shows this, for example in the *Symphony in Three Movements* (1945), the first movement of which depicts the goose-stepping troops of Hitler in rhythms not far removed from those of the mechanical nightingale, and in his opera *The Rake's Progress* (1951), written to a libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman. In this, Stravinsky's only other full-length opera, the theme of *The Nightingale* returns in

a different guise: Tom Rakewell is forced to choose between two girls, the pallidly faithful Anne Truelove, a thin Mozartean soprano, and the bearded lady Baba the Turk, whom the Devil induces Tom to marry in a kind of *mariage gratuit*. Baba the Turk is, interestingly enough, a wind-up toy, who turns into a piece of furniture when a cloth is placed over her chattering head; indeed, the music she sings even sounds like the music of a mechanical bird, rigid permutations of scales. It is another contest between the organic and the inorganic, between the humane and the mechanical; and again it is not clear that the artifice is not more fascinating than the woman.

The over-physical and the unphysical seem diametrically opposed; and yet the rhythmic ferocity of the human sacrifice in *The Rite of Spring* and that of the mechanical nightingale are in fact quite similar in Stravinsky's music. It is the same convergence of opposites that we find in Yeats' theory of the Noh theater; both Stravinsky and Yeats seem to feel that in the deepest part of nature there is something unnatural, uncanny. Yeats and Stravinsky both sought this union of nature and unnature in Oriental art. The roots of this conjoining, however, go far back into nineteenth-century aesthetics. In Kleist's essay on the marionette theater, written near the beginning of that century, Kleist hypothesizes that every ballet-dancer tries — and fails — to imitate the perfection of movement achievable by marionettes whose limbs are weighted with pendulums to ensure an infallible symmetry of motion and counter-motion; Kleist goes on to discover an approximation of the divine in this sort of puppet-rhythm, so that there is a convergence of the automaton and the god. Kleist knew nothing of the Noh theater, but its attempt to reduce and stylize human movement into a sacred marionette-show could be taken as the culmination of his dream; as in another sense it was the culmination of Mallarmé's dream, later in the nineteenth century, of a theater of silence, in which, as he says in his essay "Ballets":

the dancing woman . . . is not a woman, but a metaphor assuming one of the elementary aspects of our form, sword, cup, flower, etc., and . . . suggesting by the wonder of abridgement and impetus, with a corporeal scripture what it would take many paragraphs of descriptive prose and dialogue to express . . . a poem disengaged from all the apparatus of writing.

Just as Mallarmè and Yeats and Pound tried to liberate poetry from every discursive, prosaic element, so it became possible to see in the Noh theater a kind of poetry liberated almost entirely from the verbal, a pure immanence of symbol interspersed with a little hieratic chanting. It may be that this dream now seems to us impossible or grotesque; Thomas Pynchon seems to have thought it so, for in his novel *V.* (1963) he rehearses a parody of the *Ballets Russes* performing *The Rite of Spring*, an imaginary ballet performed entirely by full-sized automatons, except for one human dancer, a girl so infatuated with the inorganic that she arranged to have herself murdered on stage when a stake impales her as a human sacrifice. To Pynchon, if not to the rest of us, every fascination with mechanical analogues of human life is a deep transgression against the organic principle of the cosmos; but to sympathize with early modern art requires some sense that the unnatural may have value and importance.

It is now time—or past time—for us to look at what Pound and Yeats found when they inspected the texts of Noh plays. In Fenollosa's notes Pound discovered a plan for presenting a suite of Noh plays in a single evening's performance: this plan had six parts, first a play about the era of the gods, second a battle-piece, third a "wig-piece" or play about women, fourth the Noh of spirits, fifth a piece about the moral duties of man, sixth a panegyric play about the lords present at the performance (*Translations*, p. 220). Behind this plan was an elaborate rationalization about the Noh drama as an epitome of human life, moving from divine prehistory to war and love, the affairs of the world, and then to a superseding of the mundane in the presentation of spiritual reality. Pound thought that the battle-pieces were the usual boring martial exploits and considered the chief interest of the Noh to lie in the spirit-plays; Yeats of course agreed, though so many of Yeats' pseudo-Noh plays contain battle episodes that he presumably did not share Pound's distaste for that variety. Most of the Noh that Pound translated could be considered the Noh-of-spirits sort; and when we study these we find a few simple dramatic patterns.

In the Noh of spirits, there is rarely anything that could be called a story; such action as there is to be found is usually accomplished during, and by means of, the climactic dance. In the simplest plays a travelling priest, often a folklorist or a connoisseur of landscape, meets a humble old man or old woman; after a series of interrogations it dawns on the priest that what appears to be a vagrant, a beggar, or a leech-gatherer, is actually

a spirit of a great man triumphantly remembering the scene of a mighty deed, or a genius loci, rejoicing in the delectation of his locus. The metamorphosis is accomplished by means of a costume change and a change of mask; there is no scenery on stage, nothing but bridges and potted pines, and the painted pine tree that is the backdrop of all Noh plays. The dramatic action, then, is only a movement towards enlightenment: what is surrounded by material illusion at last reveals itself in its true supernatural glory, a glory that reaches its perfection in the characteristic dance of the spirit. It is not the sort of dramatic action that we are accustomed to, but in certain recent movies we find something similar to it. For example, Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is Noh-like in that it has neither heroes nor villains, no action except the tantalizing unveiling of a remarkable and nearly incomprehensible spectacle; since we do not like in the 1970s or 80s to speak of spirits, Spielberg substitutes an extraterrestrial being, which is all that is now acceptable of the otherworldly; where a Noh play would have a climactic dance, Spielberg substitutes an increasing visual magnificence of unearthly forms. I doubt that Spielberg was influenced by Noh drama, but I believe that this movie and the Noh share a common aesthetic goal, an attempt to provoke a delirium of wonder. In his essay of 1917, "Per Amica Silentia Lunae," Yeats tells the plot of his favorite Noh play and says that in it the spirits have attained the condition of fire, the exact opposite of the terrestrial; and he reminds his readers that in his play, *The Hour-Glass*, a beggar writes on the walls of Babylon that "There are two living countries, one visible and one invisible, and when it is summer there, it is winter here, and when it is November with us, it is lambing-time there" (*Collected Plays*, p. 197; *Mythologies*, pp. 356–57). Yeats thought that he found in Noh drama the anti-world that he had long sought, the anti-world that he elsewhere calls Faeryland or Byzantium.

The favorite Noh play of Yeats, and one of the favorites of Fenollosa and Pound as well, was the *Nishikigi*. The title is a word that means charm-sticks; the play is about two lovers: a man spends three fruitless years erecting charm-sticks to woo a young woman, who disdains him and chooses instead to spend her time weaving a cloth; the spirits of these two implore an itinerant priest to marry them, for in death the young woman wishes she had been less oblivious of the young man's charms; the play ends with the marriage-dance of the two shades. Yeats liked many

things about this play: the plot was identical to that of a story he had heard in the Aran Islands of Ireland; the sense of the interconnectedness, the mutual dependence, of the quick and the dead was agreeable to him; and most of all he liked the artistic unity of it, the fact that the whole is

a playing upon a single metaphor, as deliberate as the echoing rhythm of line in Chinese and Japanese painting. In the *Nishikigi* the ghost of the girl-lover carries the cloth she went on weaving out of grass when she should have opened the chamber door to her lover, and woven grass returns again and again in metaphor and incident. The lovers, now that in an aëry body they must sorrow for unconsummated love, are “tangled up as the grass patterns are tangled.” Again they are like an unfinished cloth: “these bodies, having no weft, even now are not come together. . . .” and when at last the prayer of the priest unites them in marriage the bride says that he [the priest] has made “a dream-bridge over wild grass, over the grass I dwell in. . . .”

(*Essays and Introductions*, p. 234)

Ezra Pound was similarly impressed:

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 *Nishikigi* . . .

(*Translations*, p. 237)

Both Pound and Yeats are agreed that the *Nishikigi* possesses unity, but they seem to agree little about the quality of that unity: Yeats sought an artifact, in this case the girl’s woven cloth, the properties of which seemed to sum up the drama, while Pound sought some striking natural detail, in this case the red leaves and the snow emblemizing the transitoriness of nature as opposed to the invulnerability of the spiritual world. In a footnote to the passage I just cited, Pound speaks further about the relation of the Noh play to the Image with a capital I:

This intensification of the Image, this manner of construction, is very interesting to me personally, as an Imagiste, for we Imagistes knew nothing of these plays when we set out in our own manner. These plays are also an answer to a question that has several times been put to me: "Could one do a long Imagiste poem?"

Imagism, the literary movement which Pound and a few friends had begun a few years earlier in 1912, defined an Image as "an emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time." This definition would seem, on the face of it, to preclude lengthy poems, poems more than an instant in length, while facilitating poems such as this most famous one:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd :
Petals on a wet, black bough.

This and many other Imagist poems depend on a simple principle of superposition: a striking detail is presented, and then, as if painted on a transparent film in front of the first surface, a second picture, bearing certain formal similarities to the first, is made manifest. First the telling appearance of the faces on the subway platform; then the picture is recast, indeed in this case Orientalized, into the alien aesthetic of petals and branches. It is a readjustment of focus, a deliberate act of altered perception. The central importance of the Noh drama for Pound's career is that it enabled him to see that a poem could be longer than two lines, and yet have a quality of instantaneity to it: for the Noh theater, with its spareness, its anti-discursiveness, was continually working toward an instant of breakthrough, of buckling between the spiritual and the mortal worlds. The beginning of a Noh play, the whole lead-up to the dance, is static, what Fenollosa calls sculptural (*Trans.* p. 273); nothing happens, no action violates the integrity of the composition; then there is a revelation—the old beggar turns out to be the spirit of a celebrated warrior—an instant of metamorphosis; this is the dramatic equivalent of the superposition of the brief Imagiste poem, a sudden perception of the hidden aesthetic content of an ordinary thing. When Pound came in the *Cantos* to write a long, very long, poem, he made the immanence of nature-spirits, the instantaneous evocation of glassy forms in air, a major feature of his project; and

he learned from the Noh drama something of how to accomplish what he called the “bust thru from quotidien” (*Selected Letters*, p. 210). Indeed Canto 4 (1919) seems in places on the verge of becoming a Noh play, with its tissue of references to old Japanese people who turned into trees:

The pine at Takasago
 grows with the pine of Isé!
The water whirls up the bright pale sand in the spring's mouth
“Behold the Tree of the Visages!”
Forked branch-tips, flaming as if with lotus.
 Ply over ply
The shallow eddying fluid,
 beneath the knees of the gods.

(4/15)

Yeats received a more orthodox influence from the study of the Noh that he and Pound undertook from 1913 to 1916, when Pound spent the winter months living in Sussex with him. The simplest way to describe the pseudo-Noh plays which he wrote from 1917 until just before his death in 1939 is to call them fairly straightforward Irish equivalents of Noh plays with unhappy endings tacked on. Almost every Noh play in Pound's collection ends benignly, the spirits happily manifest, the priest fortunate to behold; but in Yeats' plays there is a quality of urgency, of desperation quite foreign to the mysterious calm of the original. In general Yeats is less interested in the manifestation of a disguised spirit than in the shivery moment when a man feels himself translated into a domain of greater-than-human intensities; when Yeats does treat the theme of the manifestation of a disguised spirit, in *The Words upon the Window-Pane* (1934)—which is not much like a Noh play in any case—the disguised spirit turns out to be that of Jonathan Swift, whose distress is unrelieved by the seance that invokes him; indeed Swift inflicts his feverish wretchedness on the medium herself. The clearest example of Yeats' revision of Noh themes is found in *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), which is a re-writing of our old friend the *Nishikigi*; but in Yeats' version the dead lovers who beg a passer-by to grant them peace, to let them marry, are frustrated, for they are Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, the traitors who brought foreign armies into Ireland in order to pursue their adulterous

love, and no one will forgive them their crime. Their final dance is not, as in the *Nishikigi*, a solution, a reconciliation, but instead a further display of the tangledness that can never be untangled. In most of the later pseudo-Noh plays Yeats mingles the Noh themes with the themes of Wilde's *Salomé*, for he came to understand the passage from the earthly to the unearthly almost exclusively as a severing of the head, a literal disembodiment; while the climactic dance occurs, the severed head sings, as in *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1935). The culmination of this can be seen in *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), in which Cuchulain's wife Emer dances the final dance in front of the severed head of her husband, represented by a black parallelogram mounted on a stick; this gesture neatly combines the disengagement from terrestrial life with a kind of abstract art, the cubism that Yeats thought the most appropriate representation of the supernatural. Noh drama labors to effect an impression of the abiding spiritual forces latent in common life; but Yeats' pseudo-Noh labors to show that common life must everywhere be quelled, quenched, sacrificed, so that the unearthly may grow vivid.

When Yeats in 1935 sent to Pound the manuscript for *The King of the Great Clock Tower* — which is one of his greatest works — Pound returned it with one word: putrid. But, in one of those odd reversals which literary historians refer to as ironical, Pound himself, ten years later, arrested for treasonous radio broadcasts and caged in the army detention camp at Pisa, found himself returning again and again to themes very like those of Yeats' play, themes of the desperate prostration of the poet caught amid forces beyond his control, seized and about to be hanged, and yet trying to see through his present circumstances into the world of divine energies, imperishable art, before the authorities cut off his head. One of Pound's methods in the "Pisan Cantos" is to try to understand what is around him as a manifestation of dormant forces in the landscape. Thus the mountain in the distance becomes Mt. Taishan, a sacred mountain in China; the Negro soldiers impinge without knowing it upon the sacred mysteries of African tribes; every common thing is invested with a fringe of eeriness. There are Japanese soldiers in Pisa, too, and they introduce into the detention camp the world of the Noh play:

Says the Japanese sentry : Paaak yu djeep over there,
some of the best soldiers we have says the captain

Dai Nippon Banzai from the Philippines
remembering Kagekiyo : “how stiff the shaft of your neck is.”
and they went off each his own way
“a better fencer than I was,” said Kumasaka, a shade.

(74/442)

The two references here are to Noh plays which display a near-unearthly heroism and magnanimity: Kagekiyo was a young man who single-handedly routed an army of thieves, and commented, when he tore the vizard from an enemy’s helmet, “how stiff the shaft of your neck is;” then both hero and villain broke into laughter. Kumasaka is the spirit of a famous brigand, who in death decided to make reparation by protecting the countryside he once ravaged; in the play he praises the bravery of the boy who killed him. Both become images in the “Pisan Cantos” of a kind of delirious candor and generosity, a temper that dismisses all the pettiness and faction, immorality, of earthly life, in favor of a superhuman loftiness of spirit. It is a spirit that Pound would like to cultivate in himself, but cannot quite attain.

Several times in the “Pisan Cantos,” fragments from the Noh plays drift into consciousness, sometimes as a reminder of an ethical ideal, other times as a vision of extraterrestrial beauty. Once he remembers the aerial spirit of the play *Hagoromo*, whose feather mantle was found by a mortal who would not surrender it until the spirit taught him her dance, a symbolical representation of the phases of the moon; she agreed, but said that she could not perform her dance without her cloak; the mortal suspected trickery, but was chastened when the spirit told him, “With us there is no deceit:”

the moon’s arse been chewed off by this time
semina motuum
“With us there is no deceit”
said the moon nymph immacolata
Give back my cloak, *hagoromo*.
had I the clouds of heaven
as the nautila borne ashore
in their holocaust
as wistaria floating shoreward

(80/500)

This is both a visitation from the realm of superhuman beauty and a presentation of an ethical ideal, for the moon nymph appears in the midst of holocaust to announce that in her other-world there is no such thing as a lie; the motto of Keats' Grecian urn—beauty is truth, truth beauty—is a governing principle in the "Pisan Cantos." Elsewhere in these Cantos it seems that the ethos of the Noh plays, their extreme austerity and economy, can do battle with those aspects of the lower world that Pound hates:

Greek rascality against Hagoromo
Kumasaka vs/ vulgarity

(79/485)

In Yeats' "Byzantium" the marble statues of the palace do battle against the formless ocean pouring in upon Byzantium; I take it that Pound here assigns a similar function to Japanese dramaturgy. The Noh play is asked to rectify the world, much shaken by the events of the Second World War.

But Pound does not claim that he personally lives up to the ideal that the Noh theater offers. On a rainy night the wind blows open the flaps of his tent, and he imagines that it is a *hannya*, the evil spirit of the Noh, that is embodied in the wind:

As Arcturus passes over my smoke-hole
the excess electric illumination
is now focussed
on the bloke who stole a safe he cdn't open . . .
and Awoi's *hennia* plays hob in the tent flaps
k-lakk thuuuuuu
making rain
uuuh

(77/465)

In the Noh play *Awoi No Uye* the Lady Awoi is exorcised of her pathological jealousy when the exorcist manages to embody, to incarnate that jealousy as an evil spirit, a *hannya*, which is then susceptible to dismissal.

Pound therefore imagines that he is justly persecuted by his own ill will, his own spitefulness; as he puts in a passage a little before this,

J'ai eu pitié des autres
probablement pas assez, and at moments that suited my own
convenience

Le paradis n'est pas artificiel
l'enfer non plus.

(76/460)

The citations from the Noh plays help Pound to establish that his life in the detention camp is a kind of theater, governed by strict moral laws, a psychomachia populated by good and evil spirits. In a sense the whole of the Noh drama becomes a character, a setter-of-terms, in the larger drama of Pound's imprisonment and his vision of transfiguration.

Not only does Pound remember passages from Noh plays; his thoughts also keep turning to the time when he translated them, his sojourn with Yeats from 1913 to 1916. He even recollects Michio Ito, living in extreme poverty:

So Miscio sat in the dark lacking the gasometer penny . . .

“How Ainley face work all the time
back of that mask”

But Mrs Tinkey never believed he wanted her cat
for mouse-chasing
and not for oriental cuisine.

(77/469)

Henry Ainley created the role of Cuchulain in Yeats' first experiment in Noh theater, *At the Hawk's Well* (1917). Chiefly, however, Pound keeps turning over and over in his mind his memories of Yeats; I think it fair to say that Yeats is the dominant character in the “Pisan Cantos” besides Pound himself. He dwells on Yeats' dreams of nobility (74/433); he remembers several times how Yeats looked at the sea-cliffs near Pound's home at Rapallo and murmured “Sligo in Heaven” (77/473; cf. 114/793); he thinks of snatches of Yeats' poems and imitates Yeats' Irish accent (80/496); he takes Yeats as an exemplar of fierce devotion to beauty

(80/511), just as in other places he takes the Noh drama as a stern ideal; and in one of the remarkable passages in the *Cantos* it appears that Yeats himself, remembered in the act of intoning his poem “The Peacock,” turns into a sort of aesthetic ghost:

There is fatigue deep as the grave.
The Kakemono [a painted scroll] grows in flat land out of mist
 sun rises lop-sided over the mountain
 so that I recalled the noise in the chimney
as it were the wind in the chimney
 but was in reality Uncle William
downstairs composing
that had made a great Peeeeeacock
 in the proide ov his oiye
 had made a great peeeeeeeacock in the . . .
made a great peacock
 in the proide of his ooyee

proide ov his oy-ee
as indeed he had, and perdurable

a great peacock aere perennius . . .
at Stone Cottage in Sussex by the waste moor
(or whatever) and the holly bush.

(83/533-34)

That holly bush is a small detail indeed, but it seems to look back to an earlier passage in the “Pisan Cantos”:

and for that Christmas at Maurie Hewlett’s
Going out from Southampton
they passed the car by the dozen
 who would not have shown weight on a scale
 riding, riding
 for Noel the green holly

Noel, Noel, the green holly
A dark night for the holly

That would have been Salisbury plain . . .

(80/515)

In passages like these the outer world grows dim, and supernatural beings start to teem, to grow urgent and clamorous. There is no reason why an essay should not end with an outrageous suggestion, and so I will offer one. The “Pisan Cantos” are in a sense a huge Noh play, in which Pound plays the role of the priest seeking enlightenment, and Yeats plays the role of the spirit, who once seemed to be little more than a fussy old man, but who in death is revealed to be a sort of disengaged spirit of poetical creativity. Pound remarks in his anthology of Noh translations that the only Western equivalent of the Noh play is the seance (*Trans.*, p. 236); and the remarkable passage from Canto 83, near the end of the sequence, in which Yeats’ nearly disengaged voice, resounding like wind in the chimney as he reads his poem “The Peacock,” almost verges itself on a sort of seance in which the ghost of Yeats shows itself to Pound in weird splendor, makes a terminal dance of words.