THE NOH PLAYS OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS:

ACCOMPLISHMENT IN FAILURE

APPROVED:

Lloyd Parks
Major Professor

Arthur M. Sampson
Minor Professor

E. S. Clifton
Director of the Department of English

Robert B. Toulouse
Dean of the Graduate School

This paper is a study of the effect of W. B. Yeats's contact with Japanese Noh drama on his work. The immediately discernible effect on his work can be seen, of course, in his adaptation of Noh dramatic form to his *Four Plays for Dancers* and *The Death of Cuchulain*. An evaluation of Yeats's adaptation of Noh presents special problems for the critic. There are many instances in the history of literature where one artist successfully borrows another artist's form; in fact, form has always been considered to be a part of the artist's public domain. However, in Western literature, these instances of literary borrowing usually remain within the boundaries of the Western World, and often are limited further by the artist's own time or nationality. When Yeats adapted a fourteenth century Japanese form to the modern Irish theater, he was crossing the boundaries of time, space, and nationality. Such a feat generally requires skills and knowledge most poets do not possess and did not—especially in Yeats's day when accurate literary translations and historical accounts were rare. Yeats embarked on his rendition of Noh under severe
handicaps, and, as a result, his interpretation of Noh has been the object of much criticism.

Such criticism is valid when the purpose of the critic is to compare directly Yeats's plays with Noh plays. However, such criticism can only discuss how his plays fail as Noh drama, for certainly the failure of his plays, given his vague apprehension of Noh, was a predictable fact. Perhaps the critic's emphasis should be on what Yeats accomplished in his attempt to write Noh; that is, on what he has possibly added to man's knowledge of the universality of art. To discover his accomplishments, it seems that a comparison of the creators rather than of their creations would be far more beneficial. Such a study would regard differences as important as similarities, the unreconcilable as important as the reconcilable. Such a study is the purpose of this paper.

It is the thesis of this paper, then, that, despite many handicaps, Yeats's aesthetic background was not only sufficient to discover what suggestion did lie in the limited information available to him concerning Noh, but also sufficient for him to intuit much of what wasn't suggested.

Chapter One introduces the problem. Chapter Two is devoted to an examination of Yeats's aesthetic background in an attempt to show, from his reading, experiences, and development as an artist, that Yeats was well prepared for a project with an Eastern form. Chapter Three supplies the necessary background
information on Noh drama itself. Chapter Four discusses Yeats's study of Noh and his application of Noh principles in his Noh Plays. Chapter Five, by comparing Yeats with Zeami—the classic creator of Noh--attempts to establish that Yeats had an uncanny affinity with the Japanese master of Noh.

The study led to the following conclusion. A man who constantly projected himself into opposing stances in order to discover his identity, Yeats finally gained through his contact with Noh the antithetical self which forced him into the stature of a modern poet. In order for him to oppose himself to the Eastern stance, he first had to project himself into the East. He probably could not have done so if he had not been capable of intuiting the basic concepts underlying Noh--if he had not actually achieved an affinity with the fourteenth century Zen master of Noh.
THE NOH PLAYS OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS:  
ACCOMPLISHMENT IN FAILURE  

THESIS  

Presented to the Graduate Council of the  
North Texas State University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  

For the Degree of  

MASTER OF ARTS  

By  

Carol Ann Bays, B. A.  
Denton, Texas  
May, 1971
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. YEATS'S PREPARATION FOR AN APPRECIATION OF NOH</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. A WORD ON NOH</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. YEATS'S CONTACT WITH NOH</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. YEATS AND ZEAMI: AN UNCANNY AFFINITY</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

We had in Ireland imaginative stories, which the uneducated classes knew and even sang, and might we not make those stories current among the educated classes, rediscovering for the work's sake what I have called "the applied arts of literature", the association of literature, that is, with music, speech, and dance... 1

Japan, another island with a rich heritage of imaginative stories, developed, in the fourteenth century, an "applied arts of literature" which closely approximates the youthful dream expressed above by W. B. Yeats. It is not difficult, then, to imagine Yeats's excitement when he was actually confronted with Japanese Noh drama by Ezra Pound in 1913. The immediately discernible effect on his work of this confrontation can be seen, of course, in his adaptation of Noh dramatic form to his Four Plays for Dancers and The Death of Cuchulain.

An evaluation of Yeats's adaptation of Noh presents special problems for the critic. There are many instances in the history of literature where one artist successfully borrows another artist's form; in fact, form has always been considered to be a part of the artist's public domain. However, in western literature, these instances of literary borrowing

usually remain within the boundaries of the Western World, and often are limited further by the artist's own time or nationality. When Yeats adapted a fourteenth century Japanese form to the modern Irish theater, he was crossing the boundaries of time, space, and nationality. Such a feat generally requires skills and knowledge most poets do not possess and did not—especially in Yeats's day when accurate literary translations and historical accounts were rare. Yeats embarked on his rendition of Noh under severe handicaps, and, as a result, his interpretation of Noh has been the object of much criticism.

An obvious criticism of Yeats's interpretation of Noh is that Yeats saw Noh as a unity of poetry, music, and dance, whereas the real unity of Noh is one of mimicry, music, and dance—mimicry here meaning that the actor mimes the meaning of the text which is being chanted. In other words, poetry is secondary to the unity of Noh, but Yeats made it the primary element of his own Noh plays. Also, as Leonard Pronko has pointed out, critics feel that Yeats missed the spirituality of Noh; Noh has its origins in religion, while Yeats's plays derive from the lore of the occult.²

Pronko has made the superficial, though not entirely unfounded, statement: "It is difficult to repress the idea

that Yeats regards Noh drama as something terribly picturesque and exotic for the aesthete to dabble in, but to which the dramatist is, after all, not ready to give more than momentary interest.”\(^3\) This statement seems to spring not from an examination of the influence of Noh on Yeats’s work but from a statement made by Yeats about the Japanese form: "It is an advantage of this noble form that it need absorb no one's life, that its few properties can be packed up in a box or hung upon the walls where they will be fine ornaments."\(^4\)

Such criticism is valid when the purpose of the critic is to compare directly Yeats’s plays with Noh plays. However, such criticism can only discuss how his plays fail as Noh drama, for certainly the failure of his plays, given his vague apprehension of Noh, was a predictable fact. It would be impossible for the greatest genius to render authentically an art form which he had never experienced first hand. Possibly the emphasis on Yeats’s misinterpretation of Noh made by critics has been misdirected. It should always be kept in mind that Yeats’s ideal was a reconciliation of East and West, not that West should become East. He spent a great part of his early career discovering what qualities of the

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 72.

East could, in reality, be adapted to Western art. Although the time he spent actually working with Noh could indeed be called, as Pronko suggests above, no more than a "momentary interest" in view of the entire body of his work, the concepts with which he was dealing had a profound effect not only on his subsequent plays but on much of his later poetry.

Perhaps, then, the critic's emphasis should be on what Yeats accomplished in his attempt to write Noh; that is, on what he has possibly added to man's knowledge of the universality of art. To discover his accomplishments, it seems that a comparison of the creators rather than of their creations would be far more beneficial. Such a study would regard differences as important as similarities, the unreconcilable as important as the reconcilable. Such a study is the purpose of the following paper.

It is the thesis of this paper, then, that, despite many handicaps, Yeats's aesthetic background was not only sufficient to discover what suggestion did lie in the limited information available to him concerning Noh, but also sufficient for him to intuit much of what wasn't suggested. Yeats's ability to grasp elements of Noh not present in the information available to him is a Japanese phenomenon in itself; he can be compared to a Japanese whose interpretation of a Japanese landscape painting relies not only on the lines, colors, and form on the canvas but on the absence
of line, color, and form in the many unpainted sections of the canvas.

Chapter Two of this study is devoted to an examination of Yeats's aesthetic background in an attempt to show, from his reading, experiences, and development as an artist, that Yeats was well prepared for a project with an Eastern form. Chapter Three supplies the necessary background information on Noh drama itself. Chapter Four discusses Yeats's study of Noh and his application of Noh principles in his Noh plays. Chapter Five, by comparing Yeats with Zeami—the classic creator of Noh—attempts to establish that Yeats had an uncanny affinity with the Japanese master of Noh.

5Excluded in this discussion is a close examination of Yeats's plays, for the emphasis of this paper is on a comparison of the creators rather than of the creations. Several scholars have been working on studies dealing specifically with Yeats's Noh plays. See David R. Clark, "Nishikigi and Yeats's The Dreaming of the Bones," Modern Drama, VII (September, 1964), 111-125, or see William L. Sharp, "W. B. Yeats: A Poet Not in the Theatre," The Tulane Drama Review, IV (December, 1959), 67-82.
CHAPTER II

YEATS'S PREPARATION FOR AN APPRECIATION OF NOH

In the late 1800's, Yeats was much involved in the popular attempt to combine Eastern and Western thought. Charles Johnston, a contemporary of Yeats in the Hermetic Students' Society, commented on Yeats's involvement in the trend:

"Then, at the end of 1884 and the beginning of 1885, came the Oriental epoch, when we saturated ourselves in the Wisdom of India, Yeats being one of the pioneers of a band of youthful philosophers."¹ The year 1885 was probably chosen as the beginning of this epoch because that was the year that Mohini Chatterjee, a Bengali Brahmin, visited Dublin and became acquainted with Yeats and his friends. Chatterjee spoke at several of their meetings, explaining to an extremely enthusiastic and receptive audience the basic principles of Sankara philosophy. It was Chatterjee who provided Yeats with living proof that men could live by doctrines entirely unacceptable to most Westerners.

The following ideas propounded by Chatterjee influenced Yeats's early poetry and also helped to prepare him for similar ideas in Noh. Phenomena, said Chatterjee, spring from false cognition; man is ignorant of ultimate reality. He can only glimpse reality through dreaming, imagination, and contemplation, for the external life of action is illusory, ephemeral, and unreal. He proposed to the eager young men a life of asceticism, a life which must suppress all desire. Even the hunger for truth must be avoided, he preached, for it too breeds desire and illusion. Yeats toys with these ideas as early as the poem "The Song of the Happy Shepherd":

Then nowise worship dusty deeds,  
Nor seek, for this is also sooth,  
To hunger fiercely after truth,  
Lest all thy toiling only breeds  
New dreams, new dreams; there is no truth  
Saving in thine own heart.

Then, later in life when Yeats finally gave up the life of the ascetic and began searching for other possibilities to explain his world, the early, Eastern ideas spring up in his tiny and compact poem "A Meditation in Time of War":

---


For one throb of the artery,
While on that old grey stone I sat
Under the old wind-broken tree,
I knew that One is animate,
Mankind inanimate phantasy.⁴

This illustration points to Yeats's unique way of handling new and old ideas; although he is constantly broadening his perspective in his poetry and changing his viewpoint, he never totally discards an old idea but, rather, refers back to it from time to time to test the validity of a new, opposing stance. Therefore, Yeats's dabblings in foreign ideas—be it in Indian philosophy or Japanese Noh drama—can never be considered as comprising one new and exclusive stage of his development.

Chatterjee's notions of reality also appear in Yeats's early verse-drama The Shadowy Waters. Forgael's dream world is a world of all knowledge, no action. Note the static quality of Forgael's reply to Aibric's argument:

Aibric. When they have twenty years; in middle life
They take a kiss for what a kiss is worth,
And let the dream go by.

Forgael. It's not a dream,
But the reality that makes our passion
As a lamp shadow--no--no lamp, the sun.
What the world's million lips are thirsting for
Must be substantial somewhere.⁵

⁴Ibid., pp. 187-188.

Chatterjee also introduced the ideas of reincarnation to Yeats and his friends. Most appealing to Yeats was the fact that reincarnation raises the soul of man to an immense stature and extends its experience over enormous vistas of time. Hints of reincarnation appear time and again in Yeats's poetry, for example, in his poem "Death":

A man awaits his end
Dreading and hoping all;
Many times he died,
Many times rose again.

The notion of reincarnation when Yeats meets it again in Noh will seem to him, then, a familiar one.

The most significant result of Yeats's encounter with Chatterjee was not his direct use of Indian ideas in his poetry, but rather his application of those ideas to Celtic culture and myth. Soon after his introduction to the idea of reincarnation, he began to find hints of rebirth in Celtic myth. This discovery led to two important aspects of his artistic development. First, he began learning how to reconcile the elements of different cultures with his own, which was certainly an advantage when he undertook his project with Noh drama. Yeats began to "orientalize" Irish material early in his career; probably the most notable example from his early work would be "The Wanderings of Oisin." Then,

7 Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 230.
from his initial attempt to find hints of rebirth in Ireland's mythology, he became enthralled with all of Irish myth and began studying it exhaustively.

Supplementing Yeats's direct contact with the Brahmin Chatterjee was his extensive reading of Eastern literature and poetry. In the mid 1880's he read A. P. Sinnett's two books, *Esoteric Buddhism* and *The Occult World*. He read whatever translations of Eastern works that he could find, notably plays by Rabindranath Tagore. In fact, Yeats wrote an introduction for a volume of Tagore's plays, and several of those plays were later produced by the Abbey Theatre. The Hermetic Students had access to translations of *The Upanishads* and *Buddhist Sutras*, at least some of which Yeats probably read. All in all, he was quite well acquainted with the basic tenets of Eastern thought by the time he was introduced to Noh in 1913, and he had already spent several years trying to reconcile these tenets with Western thought and literature, especially Irish literature. He had evaluated what he considered the negative and positive values of Asia. To Yeats, Asia had the positive values of simplicity, naturalness, prescribed duties, and tradition. He saw negative values in its vagueness, abstractness, and submissiveness.

---

Europe offered him some positive qualities which Asia seemed to lack—history, measurement, flesh, metaphor, concreteness, and aggressiveness.9

Certainly Yeats's association with various occult groups also helped to pave the way for his later appreciation of Noh. In Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society and in Liddle Mathers' Hermetic Students' Society, Yeats found himself in constant company with people who dreamed of reconciling Eastern and Western thought. Of major importance was Mathers' symbolic system which Yeats soon mastered: if one could but let his reveries drift, "the visible world would completely vanish, and that world, summoned by the symbol, take its place."10 It was by way of occult thought that Yeats learned to think symbolically, that he became involved with the idea that images come from somewhere deeper than the conscious or subconscious, an idea which lies at the basis of Noh drama.

Madame Blavatsky had written three books which dealt with various aspects of alchemy, astrology, and magic—_Iris Unveiled_, _The Secret Doctrine_, and _The Key to Theosophy_. Yeats read at least parts of these books. Dume suggests that they were the source for Yeats's "anima mundi," the


10Yeats, _Autobiography_, pp. 162-163.
massive reservoir of mankind which can be evoked by symbol.\textsuperscript{11} Yeats's many experiences with mysticism are well documented, so there is no need to discuss them further here. However, it is interesting to note that even in his days as a practicing mystic, Yeats always consciously assumed the role of Westerner whenever he met someone from the East.\textsuperscript{12} He constantly held to the idea that Europe should learn from Asia, but should not become Asian. His interest lay mainly in "the attempt to establish the characters of Europe and Asia, and to bring together those elements that were reconcilable, while holding firmly apart those that were not."\textsuperscript{13}

Besides his various encounters with Eastern thought and his involvement in occult groups, there remains a third important phase of Yeats's aesthetic background, that background which made him so susceptible to Noh. Generally, this was Yeats's encounter with, and study of, the French Symbolists. Specifically, the play \textit{Axel}, by Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, greatly influenced Yeats's dramatic theory. Arthur Symons introduced Yeats to Villiers' work in 1891, and Yeats saw the first performance of \textit{Axel} in Paris in the winter of 1894. Yeats was at the time looking for a model for the Irish Theater and \textit{Axel} presented to him a concept

\textsuperscript{11}Dume, "W. B. Yeats: A Survey of his Reading," p. 139.
\textsuperscript{12}Ellmann, \textit{Identity}, p. 54.
\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 182.
of drama which he had secretly been searching for; symbols replaced character, events were allegorical, and words were sovereign.\textsuperscript{14} The tendency in \textit{Axel} to favor the supernatural, as seen in Villiers' famous quotation—"\textit{l'infini seul n'est pas un mensonge}" (infinity alone is not a lie)\textsuperscript{15}—was also the tendency of the young Yeats. In fact, as Lloyd Parks has pointed out, Yeats's immediate affinity with \textit{Axel} was based on his specific involvements at that time, notably his study of the occult, his familiarity with symbolic expression, and his commitment to idealism.\textsuperscript{16} A strange link is formed here, for it is these same involvements, reinforced by his enthusiasm for \textit{Axel}, which accounted for his affinity with Noh drama. \textit{Axel} offered a way to combine symbolism, mysticism, and nationalism in dramatic form. Basically, this remained Yeats's goal for the Irish theater even after he discarded \textit{Axel} as a model.

A direct result of Yeats's seeing \textit{Axel} performed was the completion of his own play \textit{The Shadowy Waters}. The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14}Joseph Hone, \textit{W. B. Yeats} (New York, 1943), p. 112.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, \textit{Axel} (Paris, 1890), p. 294.
\end{itemize}
harp in this play serves as a composite unifying symbol, encompassing poetry, Ireland, and life after death, much in the same manner as his Rose symbol does in his early poetry.\textsuperscript{17} Perhaps the fact that he learned how to use the symbol dramatically was the most important result of his encounter with the Symbolists. This skill served him well when he worked with Noh drama, for symbolism is second nature to Japanese art.

Another important factor in the strange linking of \textit{Axel} to Yeats to Noh was the concept of beauty in \textit{Axel}. The general message of \textit{Axel} was "art for art's sake," and beauty was elevated to the point of religion. "The arts contemplate the truth, or reality, by observing the life of the will at its source, before it becomes engaged in blindly manifesting itself in creatures and things—a doctrine attractive to the young Yeats because it preached nothing but beauty."\textsuperscript{18} Yeats was prepared, then, for another art form—Noh—which also deals exclusively with the beautiful.

In sum, Yeats's aesthetic and philosophical background was a more than adequate preparation for his encounter with Noh. He was well versed in Eastern thought, occultism, and symbolism. He had already attempted a reconciliation of

\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 104-105.
\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 12.
East and West by incorporating Indian ideas into his poems; and he also had the experience of adapting a new dramatic form to suit the needs of the Irish theater.
CHAPTER III

A WORD ON NOH

A highly stylized Zen art of the fourteenth century aristocracy in Japan, Noh drama originated in several types of primitive and secular dances of the common people. The two major influences on Noh, Dengaku and Sarugaku, date back to the tenth century. Dengaku, translated "field music," was a fertility dance performed on agricultural holidays. Sarugaku, translated "monkey music," was a series of spontaneous, "monkey-like" movements, accompanied by gay music and, later, by humorous dialogue. Musicians and dancers would travel around the countryside, performing Sarugaku on wagon tops for the peasants. By the fourteenth century, a dramatic form had evolved from these two dances which consisted of singing, dancing, and music; it differed from the two in that story lines had been added to unify the three elements. Also, the humor and spontaneity of the dances disappeared under the influence of Zen Buddhism, the dominant religion at that time. The form remained relatively simple,

1The rise of Zen Buddhism as the dominant religion of Japan in the fourteenth century accounted for the birth of many new art forms: flower arrangement, tea ceremony, landscape gardening, monochrome landscape painting--and Noh drama. All of these Zen arts had their origins in China, however, with the exception of Noh.
however, until the end of the fourteenth century. Then, in the hands of two great masters, Kannami Kiyotsugu and his son Zeami Motokiyo, the singing, dance movements, and music were refined and stylized into the dramatic and tragic form of Noh.

Because the dramatic quality of Noh can be found only in the actual performance, that is, in the unity and harmony of music, dance, and text, any discussion of Noh is limited to a description of the basic principles and conventions which govern performance; Noh, like all of the Zen arts, remains largely undefinable and must be experienced.

The stories of Noh were usually adapted from early court romances, historical sagas, and folk tales. The characters and incidents of the stories were well known to the audience, so the Western conventions of character development and plot were not necessary and had no function in the drama. The emphasis of the play was, rather, on the steady, dramatic unveiling of the "true intent" of a character; that is, a person's inmost nature. The concept of the "true intent" was religious, a belief in a primal force which flows through life and death, through conscious and subconscious.² Ritualistic and symbolic, this art aimed to manifest the "true intent" or, in other words, to reveal through a character.

man's inmost nature. Such a concept elevates art to a position of being a way to salvation, and it also allows no room for wit and humor, since both are products of the intellect, while the "true intent" is a product of the spirit liberated from its ego—and intellect. Noh, then, is often tragic and always serious.

The Noh actor, in his attempt to represent his role's "true intent," is guided by the principle of imitation. He is to imitate nature; that is, to find the aesthetic effect in the natural object rather than in the subjective sphere of his mind. He must constantly strive to become one with the object that he is imitating by minimizing his own ego. A superb actor will eventually reach what is called a state of "non-imitation," a state where he has successfully minimized his ego to the point that his union with the imitated object is no longer conscious. Because the "true intent"

---

3 To relieve the serious tone of Noh, farces called kyogen are performed after each Noh play and are often parodies of the serious message in the play. Such a sharp contrast in mood is foreign to most Western drama. Donald Keene points out that "this is not merely a case of comic relief in the manner of Shakespeare, for the farces last almost as long as the serious parts, and often specifically deride them. But the Japanese audiences have apparently enjoyed the very sharpness of the contrast between the two moods." See Donald Keene, Japanese Literature (Tokyo, 1955), p. 52.

4 Ueda, p. 14.
is the inmost nature of an object, the manifestation of the "true intent" on the Noh stage will not always be the object as it is commonly perceived; Noh often has to do with the supernatural.

This principle of imitation can be further explained by the use of an example. The play Aoi no Ue (the name of a famous court lady), based on an episode from the court romance The Tale of Genji, deals with the story of a rejected woman who, obsessed with jealousy, attempts to destroy her lover's other women. A Westerner dealing with such a story would be tempted to concentrate on the character development of the jealous woman, the conflicts between the woman and her lover, and the suspense to be derived from the destruction of her morals. Noh, on the contrary, relying on the audience's knowledge of the episode, is concerned only with the "true intent" of the woman; that is, with her jealousy. Whereas the climax in a Western play might be the destruction of the other woman or women, the Noh climax comes when that jealousy is revealed in its true form: in the case of this play, that of a demon. The demand on the audience, then, is not that they follow the action and observe the consequences of jealousy, but that they become part of the unveiling process and actually experience jealousy with the actor. The actor, then, in order to capture his audience, will have spent months imitating a jealous woman. He does
not observe her as a subjective object; that is, he does not try to determine how her mind works, why she is jealous, what thoughts and schemes she harbors. Rather, he observes her as a natural object; he imitates every minute movement of her body, aiming to become one with her body, because her physical movements and mannerisms, if imitated completely, will reflect her jealousy. Once he imitates her successfully, he can then express her jealousy through the movements of dance.

Another principle at the basis of Noh is called *yugen*, an allusive term that defies translation. Ueda comes close by saying that it is the "... inner beauty of things outwardly expressed by means of art." 5 This concept of beauty is found in both Buddhist and Taoist doctrines, and it refers to a mysterious and profound essence lying beyond the grasp of human senses. If one can project beyond his senses, he can find beauty in everything, in a withered old man—or in the demon of jealousy. The "true intent," then, is always beautiful. *Yugen* is an elegant, remote, and subtle beauty, and it is transient; one who can perceive *yugen* sees the beauty of a blossom and, at the same time, is aware that it will soon fade and die. *Yugen*, then, carries with it a feeling of sadness.

A traditional Noh performance lasts about six hours and includes five plays. The fixed order of the type of

5Ueda, p. 17.
play performed corresponds with a natural life cycle, the first four plays corresponding to the seasons of the year, and the final play symbolizing the transcendence of time and change. The opening piece of the performance celebrates the order of the universe as it appears on a joyful spring day. The next piece adds yugen to the celebration, setting a mood that can be compared to the enjoyment of the short-lived cherry blossom on an early summer day. The third piece is a play of longing—longing for permanence in nature or for eternity in love—similar to the longing provoked in a person who views the falling leaves in autumn. The fourth piece is a play of grief, wherein personal suffering replaces universal sadness, suffering akin to that felt at the death of winter. The final piece is a play of the sublime, symbolized by the cedar tree that grows green throughout all four seasons. Incidentally, the cedar tree is the only set used in Noh. The order is extremely important in that, for example, one would never leave the theater after experiencing the jealousy in *Aoi no Ue*, a play of the fourth type, without first being soothed by the silent, quiet dignity of the final type of play. The purpose of Noh drama was to transmit the teachings of Zen Buddhism; the order of the plays, moving through the four seasons and then transcending the time and change of the seasons, illustrates how this was done.
As I have stated above, Noh relies on the unity and harmony of music, dance, and text, and, although the experience of Noh can only be suggested here, the music, dance, and text—all highly stylized—can be discussed in some detail.

A Noh orchestra includes two hand drummers, one stick drummer, and a flutist. The music has little melody; it serves primarily to regulate the timing of the dance and to heighten important passages. As a play progresses, what at first seemed to be sporadic drum beats and improvisational outbursts from the flute becomes a rigid and hypnotic pattern which leads the audience, almost subconsciously, to the dramatic climax.

The text is chanted, sometimes by the actors and sometimes by a chorus, which sits to one side of the stage and takes no part of the action. Sometimes a passage will be chanted alternately by the actor and the chorus, producing an eerie, echoing quality that serves to intensify the supernatural intent of the drama. For example, this alternation can be seen in the following passage from the play Sotoba Komachi. Komachi is an old woman who is haunted by the spirit of a lover whom she destroyed in her youth. She made him visit her on one hundred consecutive nights before she would listen to his courtship, and he died on the hundredth night. In this passage, Komachi is gradually becoming
obsessed with her lover's spirit and believes that she has actually assumed his form, reliving his difficult journeys to her house. To heighten the supernatural quality of this transformation, she and the chorus alternate lines:

KOMACHI.
Death may come to-day—or hunger to-morrow.
A few beans and a cake of millet:
That is what I carry in my bag.

CHORUS.
And in the wallet on your back?

KOMACHI.
A garment stained with dust and sweat.

CHORUS.
And in the basket on your arm?

KOMACHI.
Sagittaries white and black.

CHORUS.
Tattered cloak,

KOMACHI.
Broken hat . . .

CHORUS.
She cannot hide her face from our eyes;
And how her limbs

KOMACHI.
From rain and dew, hoar-frost and snow?

CHORUS (speaking for KOMACHI while she mimes the actions they describe).

Not rags enough to wipe the tears from my eyes!
Now, wandering along the roads
I beg alms of those that pass.
And when they will not give,
An evil rage, a very madness possesses me.
My voice changes.
Oh terrible! 6

As the passage also illustrates, another function of the chorus is to chant for the main actor when he is involved in his dance.

Guided by the principle of imitation mentioned above, the dance is a series of highly stylized movements and resembles "slow motion" in films. A standard gesture slowly made, such as the movement of the hand to the eyes, can project great emotion; in the case of the hand to the eyes, sadness. The main actor is "dancing" from the moment he enters the stage, slight movements and seconds of no movement being as essential to his dance as the climax. The finest actor, liberated from his ego and at one with the object of his dance, never breaks the unified flow of movement and non-movement that he establishes at the beginning.

The costume of the dancer is beautiful, colorful, and ornate, in contrast to the bare stage and simple blacks and browns of the other actors, musicians, and chorus. His costume helps him to center all the dramatic emphasis in the dance. The dancer often wears a wooden mask, so carefully carved and designed that Noh mask making is an art in itself. All dancers, of course, are men, and the masks are of young women, old men, and various demons. He may turn from the audience in the middle of a play—without losing the continuity of his movement—and change masks for the climax. In Aoi no Ue, for example, he changes from the mask of a
young woman to that of a demon in mid-performance. Such a moment is always highly dramatic to a Japanese audience.

The text alternates between prose and poetry, poetry comprising the more important speeches. The prose sections establish the background and describe what little action exists, and the poetry works in unity with the music and dance to unveil the "true intent." Incorporated in the text are many allusions to classical poems, all of which are usually known to the audience. Sometimes a famous poem will appear in its entirety in a text, an acceptable practice in Noh drama.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the format of the Noh text for the Western reader is to borrow a pastiche done by Arthur Waley in which he adapts The Duchess of Malfi to a Noh piece of the fourth type.

The persons need not be more than two—the Pilgrim who will act the part of waki, and the Duchess, who will be shite or Protagonist. The chorus takes no part in the action, but speaks for the shite while she is miming the more engrossing parts of her role.

The Pilgrim comes on to the stage and first pronounces in his Jidai or preliminary couplet, some Buddhist aphorism appropriate to the subject of the play. He then names himself to the audience thus (in prose):

"I am a pilgrim from Rome. I have visited all the other shrines of Italy, but have never been to Loretto. I will journey once to the shrine of Loretto."

Then follows (in verse) the Song of Travel in which the Pilgrim describes the scenes through which he passes on his way to the shrine. While he is kneeling at the shrine, Shite (the Protagonist) comes on to the stage. She is a young woman dressed, "contrary to the Italian fashion," in a loose-bodied gown. She carries in her
hand an unripe apricot. She calls to the Pilgrim and engages him in conversation. He asks her if it were not at this shrine that the Duchess of Malfi took refuge. The young woman answers with a kind of eager exaltation, her words gradually rising from prose to poetry. She tells the story of the Duchess's flight, adding certain intimate touches which force the priest to ask abruptly, "Who is it that is speaking to me?"

And the girl shuddering (for it is hateful to a ghost to name itself) answers: "Hazukashi ya! I am the soul of the Duke Ferdinand's sister, she that was once called Duchess of Malfi. Love still ties my soul to the earth. ... Pray for me, oh, pray for my release!"

Here closes the first part of the play. In the second the young ghost, her memory quickened by the Pilgrim's prayers (and this is part of the medicine of salvation), endures again the memory of her final hours. She mimes the action of kissing the hand (vide Act IV, Scene 1), finds it very cold:

I fear you are not well after your travel.
Oh! horrible!
What witchcraft doth he practise, that he hath left
A dead man's hand here?

And each successive scene of the torture is so vividly mimed that though it exists only in the Protagonist's brain, it is as real to the audience as if the figure of dead Antonio lay propped upon the stage, or as if the madmen were actually leaping and screaming before them.

Finally she acts the scene of her own execution:

Heaven-gates are not so highly arched
As princes' palaces; they that enter there
Must go upon their knees. (She kneels.)
Come, violent death,
Serve for mandragora to make me sleep!
Go tell my brothers, when I am laid out,
They then may feed in quiet.
(She sinks her head and folds her hands.)

The chorus, taking up the word "quiet," chant a phrase from the Hokkekyō: Sangai Mu-an. "In the Three Worlds there is no quietness or rest."

But the Pilgrim's prayers have been answered. Her
soul has broken its bonds: is free to depart. The ghost recedes, grows dimmer and dimmer, till at last . . . it vanishes from sight.7

The world of Noh, as seen above, is the world of the subconscious. The dream-like progression of the text, working in harmony with the stylized music and dance, serves, ritualistically, to bring together consciousness and subconsciousness, natural and supernatural, objective and subjective. The result is a serious, religious, aristocratic dramatic form, more closely akin to the fine arts than to drama in the Western sense. Noh, then, is an excellent medium for a dramatic poet.

7Ibid., pp. 53-54.
CHAPTER IV
YEAT'S CONTACT WITH NOH

Yeats first became acquainted with Noh in the winter of 1913, the first of three he spent with Ezra Pound in Sussex. At that time Pound was working on the Noh manuscripts of Ernest Fenollosa. Yeats's excitement when Pound began to explain Noh to him was probably enhanced by the fact that his own project for that winter had filled his mind with ghosts, witches, and supernatural phenomena; he was working on his essay "Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places" for Lady Gregory's Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland. He saw Noh as the medium he had been searching for to create a national Irish theater and soon decided to attempt an adaptation of the form.

Unlike the careful writer or scholar who prepares to study a foreign art form by first studying the language, history, and literature from which it derived (and probably visiting the country from which it came), Yeats worked with the Noh dramatic form without such preparation. First of all, the Pound-Fenollosa text was far from being authoritative; Pound's job was to spruce up the poetry in Fenollosa's texts, the poetry often more of Pound's inspiration than that of the Japanese original. Ellmann notes that "Pound's
versions of Noh convene a kind of grand international fest-
ival with entries from India, Japan, England, the United
States, and Ireland."¹ Yet, even if the Pound-Fenollosa
text had been authoritative, it has been shown that text is
secondary to an understanding of Noh: it must be seen to be
appreciated.

Obviously, Yeats did not know Japanese, nor had he ever
visited Japan. Nor had he ever seen a performance of Noh,
except a few fragmentary amateur performances in London.
However, he did meet a Japanese dancer, Michio Ito, whom he
employed for acting and assistance in his Noh plays. Unfor-
tunately, as Ishibashi tells us, Ito, Yeats's only authority,
was not trained in Noh and understood very little about it.²
Hone relates a story about Ito and Yeats which would probably
cause Japanese and Irishman alike to smile:

One of his collaborators was a Mr. Ito (a traditional
dancer of Japan), who attracted considerable notice
at the London Zoo by prancing about outside the cages
of the birds of prey, and behaving in such a weird way
that people supposed he must be either mad or a fol-
lower of some unknown Eastern religion who worshipped
birds. Presently Mr. Ito was set to evolve a dance
based on the movements of the hawks as they hopped
about and stretched their wings, and Yeats was often
seen beside him at the Zoo, all attention.³

¹Richard Ellmann, Eminent Domain (New York, 1967),
pp. 70-71.

²Hiro Ishibashi, "Yeats and the Noh: Types of Japanese
Beauty and their Reflection in Yeats's Plays," The Dolmen
Press Yeats Centenary Papers, edited by Anthony Kerrigan,
no. 6 (Dublin, 1966), p. 145.

³Hone, pp. 308-309.
Somehow, in this incident, the intense spiritual discipline inherent in the Noh principle of imitation seems to be missing. In a letter to John Quinn in 1918, Yeats hints at the possibility of a falling-out with Ito: "... circumstances have arisen which would make it ungracious to forbid Ito to play The Hawk as he will."\(^4\) However, despite these many handicaps, Yeats was able to intuit from Noh numerous dramatic principles and techniques with which he could fashion plays of his own.

Yeats was excited with Noh because he saw it as a completely symbolic form of drama. For example, each place name used in Noh is carefully selected for the ancient memory it will evoke. Yeats felt that the Irish people shared a common heritage with the Japanese to a degree that this type of allusion could be possible in Irish drama as well. He says in his essay on Noh: "These Japanese poets, too, feel for tomb and wood the emotion, the sense of awe that our Gaelic speaking country people will sometimes show when you speak to them of Castle Hackett or of some holy well ..."\(^5\) Yeats's dream of exciting ancient memory through poetry is expressed in his poem "The Tower":


I pace upon the battlements and stare
On the foundations of a house, or where
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth;
And send imagination forth
Under the day's declining beam, and call
Images and memories
From ruin or from ancient trees,
For I would ask a question of them all.6

The unity of images intrinsic in such a symbolic genre as Noh was especially exciting to a poet like Yeats, one who constantly worked for unified imagery in his poetry. For instance, Yeats uses the dance as a unifying image in his poems; the dance, to Yeats, is pure image. Thus, the use of the dance in Noh as a climax probably suggested to him the impingement of the timeless upon the actual, a recurrent theme throughout Yeats's poetry. Note, for instance, his dance image in the poem "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen":

When Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound
A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,
It seemed that a dragon of air
Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round
Or hurried them off on its own furious path;

So the Platonic Year
Whirls out new right and wrong,
Whirls in the old instead;
All men are dancers and their tread
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.7

Although the dance image appears most often in his later poems, as suggested in the above poem, Yeats probably began dealing with it early in his career, most likely in 1895.

7Ibid., pp. 205-206.
when he and Arthur Symons saw Loie Fuller on the stage in Paris. Yeats, then, was prepared to understand the meaning of the dance in Noh. However, while he could handle the dance as a poetic image, it was a constant problem for him on the stage, especially in the productions of his Four Plays for Dancers. In his preface to the Four Plays, he mentions this difficulty: "... the dancing will give me the most trouble, for I know but vaguely what I want. I do not want any existing form of stage dancing, but something with a smaller gamut of expression, something more reserved, more self-controlled ..."\(^8\) Part of Yeats's problem was, no doubt, that he was laboring under a misconception of the Noh dance; in the same preface he mentions that "... the players must move a little stiffly and gravely like marionettes ..."\(^9\) The idea of an external control, such as strings on marionettes, is far from the idea of inner control in the principle of imitation. However much the dance appealed to Yeats, he was never able to make it an integral part of his plays.

Misconceptions of Noh are also apparent in the music Yeats had written for the Four Plays. Edmund Dulac, Yeats's


\(^9\)Ibid., p. 333.
composer, notes: "In order to apply to the music the idea of
great simplicity of execution underlying the whole spirit of
the performance, it was necessary to use instruments that any
one with a fair idea of music could learn in a few days."10
A Noh musician would certainly gasp at those words. Yeats
and Dulac obviously did not understand the art of Noh music
(nor could they be expected to); they strove simply to sug-
gest an oriental sound by using a bamboo flute, harp, drum,
and gong. Dulac could not surmount the Western necessity
for melody, for all his music for the Four Plays is melodic,
as Noh music is not. Moreover, both Yeats and Dulac were
never aware of the main function of Noh music—to regulate
the dramatic timing. Their music did nothing more than
establish a vaguely Eastern mood.

Yeats had a predilection for Noh masks, and early in
his career he began formulating his extensive theory of the
Mask—the antithetical self—perfected in A Vision in 1926.
Bloom suggests that obscure forms of his theory of the Mask
appear in his works on Blake in the 1890's.11 The abandon-
ment of personal character by use of the mask in Noh was
especially appealing to Yeats. His enthusiasm is apparent
in a letter to John Quinn in 1916: "I hope I am not inco-
herent but I am tired out with the excitement of rehearsing

10Ibid., p. 422.
my new play—The Hawk’s Well in which masks are being used for the first time in serious drama in the modern world."\textsuperscript{12} To Yeats, masks served to enhance the symbolic intent of the drama: "... nor shall we lose by stilling the movement of the features, for deep feeling is expressed by a movement of the whole body."\textsuperscript{13} Dulac also aided Yeats by designing the masks; and, while they fail in their attempts to adapt music to their Noh plays, they show remarkable insight and success with the masks. Photographs of Dulac’s masks show them to be exquisite works of art.\textsuperscript{14} Yeats was extremely optimistic about the future of masks in modern drama:

Perhaps in the end one would write plays for certain masks. If some fine sculptor should create for my Calvary, for instance, the masks of Judas, of Lazarus, and of Christ, would not this suggest other plays now, or many generations from now, and possess one cannot tell what philosophical virility?\textsuperscript{15} Unfortunately, the many generations have yet to answer his question.

The fact that the characters in Noh are usually figures from either history or legend and often appear to be mortals in the first half of the play, and then, at the crisis, reveal themselves as spirits or gods, very probably reminded Yeats of his own images—often natural objects which are

\textsuperscript{12}Wade, p. 610.

\textsuperscript{13}Yeats, "Certain Noble Plays," p. 232.

\textsuperscript{14}Photographs appear in Yeats, \textit{Plays and Controversies}.

\textsuperscript{15}Yeats, \textit{Plays and Controversies}, p. 334.
symbolic of something eternal. Yeats seemed to sense that the emphasis in Noh is the unveiling of the "true intent," a moment when passion becomes perception. David Clark discusses how Yeats treats this in his *Four Plays:*

In *The Dreaming of the Bones,* a young patriot faces eternal spectres of Ireland's own guilt, spiritual enemies more potent than the English and, though deeply moved, refuses to forgive treason or to commit it in subtle form. In *At the Hawk's Well* Cuchulain is once and for all driven from content by the attraction of an impossible high life. Emer, in *The Only Jealousy of Emer,* renounces her essential illusion in order to preserve the object of her futile hope. In *Calvary,* Jesus Christ discovers that his life-sacrifice was based on a narrow understanding of the nature of things and was futile. These conceptions are realities from "the deeps of the mind." It remained only to give them their recognizable (because strange) costumes from myth and dream. The Noh of spirits showed Yeats how.

Yeats saw in Noh how the focus of an entire play could be a single metaphor, emphasizing "the deeps of the mind," bound together by an ancient memory, evocative place setting, the use of masks, the idea of a spirit assuming a human form, and a climactic dance. Earl Miner suggests that one of Yeats's motivations for using Noh was that "... no other form could possibly express satisfactorily 'the tragic image' which the modern world presented to his mind."  


Besides his interest in Noh as a symbolic genre, there was another aspect of Noh to which Yeats was greatly attracted. He could see the possibility of it being the theater's anti-self, in other words, the direct opposite of the naturalistic theater of his day that he had grown to detest. He looked on with disdain as the realism of Ibsen and Archer received acclaim, and soon he began to distrust the common audience. Noh was an aristocratic art form, dealing only with things noble, never with things common and grotesque. By writing a Western Noh, he might win the battle he had waged against naturalistic drama. In an essay entitled "The Theatre," written in 1900, Yeats had already begun his attack on the popular theater. He felt that it prostituted itself to audiences who "... live on the surface of life." He felt that imagination had vanished from the theater, and that it would take generations to restore it. The theater, he says, will not be restored "... until many failures and imperfect successes have made a new tradition, and perfected in detail the ideal that is beginning to float before our eyes." Yeats certainly had sight of his ideal, and perhaps, for this reason, his imperfect Noh plays can be considered an accomplishment in failure.


19 Ibid., p. 170.
In *Plays and Controversies*, written in 1924, Yeats discusses the reforms needed in the Irish theater. One of these was a simplification of scenery and background. He found simplicity itself in the Noh set, with its single painted cedar tree. Also, he propounded the need to liberate the mind. He was able to glean from his study of Noh the ideal of liberation from one's ego, for, in his essay "Certain Noble Plays of Japan," he states: "We only believe in those thoughts which have been conceived not in the brain but in the whole body."21

By examining a quotation from Yeats's essay "The Theatre," written before he came in contact with Noh, we can see how closely Noh must have suited Yeats's needs for his battle with the naturalistic theater:

> We must make a theatre for ourselves and our friends, and for a few simple people who understand from sheer simplicity what we understand from scholarship and thought. We have planned the Irish Literary Theatre with this hospitable emotion, and, that the right people may find out about us . . . and . . . escape the stupefying memory of the theatre of commerce which clings even to them, our plays will be for the most part remote, spiritual, and ideal.22

20 Yeats, *Plays and Controversies*, p. 46.
CHAPTER V

YEATS AND ZEAMI: AN UNCANNY AFFINITY

Yeats had but a vague idea of the creator of Noh: "A small daimo or feudal Lord of the ancient capital Nara, a contemporary of Chaucer, was the author, or perhaps only the stage-manager, of many plays."¹ Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443) was a contemporary of Chaucer, but that is the only information Yeats had correct. The capital was Kyoto, and Zeami was the son of a Shinto priest, Kannami Kiyotsugu. Kannami developed the form of Noh by refining the dances of the common people, dengaku and sarugaku, but it was his son Zeami who perfected Noh into its highly stylized form. His miscellaneous essays lay down the theory, principles of acting, advice to actors and musicians, and so forth. Also, much more than "authors" or "stage-managers," both father and son were responsible for the entire Noh dramas they created; in other words, they performed simultaneously the duties of poet, dramatist, composer, and choreographer. Yeats's competence, however, was limited to poetry and, to a lesser degree, drama; his efforts to supply music and choreography for his "Noh" plays are at best amateurish.

Yet, by comparing the respective theories of art held by Zeami and Yeats, I hope to show that Yeats had an uncanny affinity with the creator of the form he was using as a model. The preceding chapters have attempted to show that Yeats had a predilection for Noh drama and therefore, although his *Four Plays* fail as Noh drama, his understanding and application of the limited information on Noh available to him was remarkable. It is the thesis of this paper, however, that Yeats's aesthetic background was not only sufficient to discover what suggestion did lie in the little he could gather about Noh, but also sufficient to intuit much of what was not suggested. It was the theory behind Noh that Yeats seems to have been able to intuit; and, though Noh was but a passing project for Yeats, what he learned about the concepts in it helped to solidify his own concepts of art. The idea that two great artists unknown to one another can join over the boundaries of time, space, and nationality would certainly be an appealing idea to both Zeami and Yeats. More important, that Yeats could so join with Zeami suggests how universal the principles of art must be.

A primary question in discussing the nature of art is: "what is art?" Zeami's answer to this question is implied in his theory of imitation. A Noh actor imitates the "true intent" of an object; that is, he imitates life not as it is but as it ought to be. According to Zeami, then, art is the
imitation of life as it ought to be, certainly an idealistic notion. Yeats shares this idealism; the idea that life is vastly inferior to art is expressed in his poem "The Dolls":

A doll in the doll-maker's house
Looks at the cradle and bawls:
'That is an insult to us.'
But the oldest of all the dolls,
Who had seen, being kept for show,
Generations of his sort,
Out-screams the whole shelf: 'Although
There's not a man can report
Evil of this place,
The man and the woman bring
Hither, to our disgrace,
A noisy and filthy thing.'
Hearing him groan and stretch
The doll-maker's wife is aware
Her husband has heard the wretch,
And crouched by the arm of his chair,
She murmurs into his ear,
Head upon shoulder leant:
'My dear, my dear, O dear,
It was an accident.'

Life is an accident, Yeats is saying in this poem, and cannot capture the true essence of life in the way that art can. In other words, similar to Zeami, Yeats is saying that life is only what is, and art signifies the essence of what ought to be. Yeats developed this idea early in his career, and it has been shown that a similar idealism present in the play *Axel* was attractive to him. It is not hard to imagine, then, that he was able to detect this concept in Noh.

Also implied in Zeami's theory of imitation is the idea that art is essentially anti-intellectual; one imitates only

that part of life which will produce a sensuous impression. Yeats also exalts the sensuous aspect of art, maintaining that art is anti-intellectual. For example, in his poem "The Scholars," he sharply contrasts the intellect with the artist's imagination:

Bald heads forgetful of their sins
Old, learned, respectable bald heads
Edit and annotate the lines
That young men, tossing on their beds,
Rhymed out in love's despair
To flatter beauty's ignorant ear.3

The anti-intellectualism of Yeats differs from that of Zeami in a subtle way: Yeats's was a reaction against the trend of his day, whereas Zeami's was a natural outcome of his day. This point can be extended to say that while Zeami's art remained in stride with the Zen sensibility of fourteenth century Japan, Yeats's art, more often than not, was at odds with the rationalistic and analytic sensibility of the early modern era.

To both Zeami and Yeats, art, idealistic and anti-intellectual, must rely on images and symbols for its expression. For both, the means of representing an essence (life as it ought to be) is the symbol, and "... the image or symbol is a manifestation of some superhuman power, something through which we glimpse the strange 'other world.'"4 They become reconciled with the idea of a kind of "collective

3Ibid., p. 139.  
4Ueda, p. 23.
unconscious," serving as the dwelling place of man's essential self. To both, art springs from this essential self. However, they differ on the nature of the "superhuman power" which governs creative expression. Zeami sees the great force behind a symbol as something primal which flows through life and death, through conscious and unconscious—and to which man must surrender. Yeats, on the other hand, acknowledges a great force, but, to him, it is to be found in a tragic tension of opposites; for example, in his poem "Meditations in Time of Civil War," there appears the line: "How the daemonic rage / Imagined everything."\(^5\) To Yeats, then, the essence of life is tragic tension, and, to Zeami, the essence of life is the sublime. It is this writer's opinion that further comparative studies might reveal this subtle distinction to be an unreconcilable point between the Eastern and Western sensibilities.

The symbols of both writers, then, have basically the same origin. However, to Zeami, symbol was a part of his heritage; to Yeats, symbol was a result of his artistic development. For example, whereas a Westerner would define a literary genre as explicitly as possible, Zeami, in defining Noh, compares it to "... a silver bowl full of snow."\(^6\) The real beauty of this use of metaphor is the fact that

\(^5\)Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 199.
\(^6\)Ueda, p. 23.
metaphor is natural to the Japanese language and culture, and thus Zeami's students and audiences were able to glean the meaning of the metaphor without further explanation. Certainly such a culture, imbued with symbol and metaphor, would be something of which Yeats would be envious. He felt that Irish culture once had such a quality and that it was destroyed by the Western over-emphasis on logic. In fact, his purpose in adapting Noh was to instigate a movement in theater to revive the symbol as a means of dramatic expression. The element of time figures in here to account for his failure to do so. Whereas Zeami lived in a time when his art was closely bound to the religion and culture, it could be said that the modern Japanese audience is as unable to respond to the symbolic intent of Noh as were Yeats's audiences for his *Four Plays*.

It has been shown that both Zeami and Yeats view the nature of art as idealistic, anti-intellectual, and symbolic. One point remains in both writers' views: art is always beautiful. The concept of *yugen*, discussed above, is very close to Yeats's concept of beauty. To both Zeami and Yeats, beauty is elegant, calm, and profound, mixed with feelings of mutability. It is a pessimistic notion, and both mourned the inherent sadness of a beautiful blossom fading, a beautiful love waning. Note Yeats's poem "Her Anxiety":

...
Earth in beauty dressed  
Awaits returning spring.  
All true love must die,  
Alter at the best  
Into some lesser thing.  

This sadness implicit in beauty seemed to affect both artists in the same way; both moved from a concept of graceful beauty in their youth to a concept of cold beauty in old age. Note Yeats's famous epitaph:

Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by!  

The nature of art discussed above is romantic and aristocratic. Ueda makes the following comment about Zeami, which could easily apply to Yeats as well: "Such a romantic concept of reality would lead anyone to prefer the elegant past to the degenerate present, the refined few to the uneducated mass." Zeami was fortunate to live in an aristocratic culture; Yeats desperately watched the Irish aristocracy being replaced by the democratic middle class.

Although Yeats and Zeami come close together in their ideas on the nature of art, there are several points of methodology where they remain firmly apart. One such point is in what Zeami called (roughly translated) the "way" of Noh. The "way" is a Zen concept, and thus it is the basis behind not only Noh but all of the Zen arts; for example,

7Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 257.  
8Ibid., p. 344.  
9Ueda, p. 17.
it lies behind flower arranging, tea ceremony, karate, and jujitsu. It is the rigid discipline deemed necessary for perfection in any art, rigid to the extent that there is a series of carefully outlined steps which must be followed before one can reach the status of artist, or "master."

This idea is familiar to the Westerner in the area of the physical arts; for example, in karate one must progress through graded levels of competence, designated by different colored belts, before he may become a master of karate. The West has always applied this principle to academics but not usually to art. Inherent in this principle is the condition that a novice is allowed no originality--originality belongs only to the master. Yeats, of course, did not see this in Noh. Perhaps his attempt to write Noh could be compared to the Westerner's attempt to learn karate. Often a Westerner will learn the basics of karate, perhaps to the point of being able to sever a brick with his hand, and he then considers himself skilled; however, when he meets a Japanese master who has been trained in the "way" of karate, he loses. In the same sense, Yeats's Noh plays may seem skillful until compared with the Noh plays of Zeami; Yeats's plays also lose. Perhaps the concept of the "way" is one area in which East and West cannot be reconciled. The few Westerners who have achieved perfection in the Zen arts have had to "become
Eastern" in order to do so—a compromise Yeats was unwilling to make had he had the opportunity.

In the area of artistic methodology, Yeats and Zeami also remain apart on the difficult question: "what is involved in the creative act?" To Yeats, a poem exists not only in its written form but in all the unexpressed elements remaining in his imagination as well. Because much of the poem remains unexpressed, he necessarily feels a sense of loss, then, on the completion of the poem. On the other hand, to Zeami the play exists only in the mind of his audience. Ueda points out: "The writer would never think of writing a play for himself as Yeats did in writing stories and essays; the play does not exist without its audience." To Zeami, then, what is left unexpressed in the imagination cannot be assigned artistic value; rather than feeling a sense of loss as Yeats does, he feels purged when the play is performed and the audience responds to it. Yeats, distrustful as he was of his audiences, could never have reconciled himself to this notion.

Yeats and Zeami also differ on the question of the function of art. Entrenched in Zen philosophy, Zeami saw the function of art to be didactic; the purpose of Noh was to teach the principles of Zen Buddhism. Art became, for Zeami, a way to salvation. Rebelling early in his career

10 Ibid., p. 142. 11 Ibid.
against the didactic nature of Victorian art, Yeats certainly
would not agree with Zeami's position. As has been shown
above, Yeats was attracted to the philosophy of art expressed
in Villiers' play Axel: "Vivre? les serviteurs feront cela
pour nous." (As for living, our servants will do that for
us.) In his early poetry, Yeats elevates the artist to a
plane higher than life. In his poem "Ego Dominus Tuus," for
example, he expresses his idea that those who love the world
can only be disappointed; the artist must go beyond the world
to find his reality:

For those that love the world serve it in action,
Grow rich, popular and full of influence,
And should they paint or write, still it is action:
The struggle of the fly in marmalade,
The rhetorician would deceive his neighbors,
The sentimentalist himself; while art
Is but a vision of reality.
What portion in the world can the artist have
Who has awakened from the common dream
But dissipation and despair?\(^1\)

Arra Garab points out, however, that Yeats made a complete
shift in his view of the function of art in his later years:

Though art and artful resolutions may to the artistic
sensibility seem more alive than life itself, Yeats
in old age discovered what Axel and others of his
tragic generation did not—that art is not life and
our servants cannot live it for us.\(^1\)

Yeats shifts, then, to the sensibility of the modern artist;
that is, he comes to the belief that the artist must live

\(^{12}\) Villiers, p. 283.

\(^{13}\) Yeats, Collected Poems, pp. 158-159.

\(^{14}\) Arra M. Garab, Beyond Byzantium (Dekalb, 1969), p. 99
his life to its fullest. Certainly the modern sensibility cannot be reconciled with the Zen sensibility of fourteenth century Japan.

In sum, those elements in Noh which Yeats could not reconcile with his theory of art usually had to do with Zen concepts, such as the "way." He did, however, share an uncanny affinity with Zeami in his early theory of the nature of art; to both, art was idealistic, anti-intellectual, and symbolic, and its subject was beauty.

The question now at hand is: did Yeats's affinity with Zeami have a significant effect on his work? The direct effect, of course, can be seen in his plays. However, a subtle effect can be seen in his poetry and is more significant since Yeats's greatest artistic achievements lie not in his plays but in his poetry. His reversal, discussed above, from a Romantic to a modern poet late in middle age would not have been possible, perhaps, had he not worked so extensively with Eastern ideas in his early career, especially Noh. In other words, the following development of Yeats's poetic career, described by Garab, might not have occurred had he not become, through his work with Noh, so acutely aware of the Eastern sensibility:

... the winding "way of the chameleon" led Yeats to soul-satisfying Byzantium, and beyond Byzantium to existential ways demanded by the wholeness of his being. Body and soul in their oneness—the whole man—conspired to create a startling world starkly true to dramatic patterns of conflict and crisis. Whatever
the mask he assumed, he remained an existential man of the West, a man of flesh and blood with Europe in his bones. A man of time, our time, he turned aside from unheroic postures presented by the uncomprehending East; and thus the hard lineaments of his chiseled last poems show a poet committed to rising above "All Asiatic vague immensities."^15

A man who constantly projected himself into opposing stances in order to discover his identity, Yeats finally gained through his contact with Noh the antithetical self which forced him into the stature of a modern poet. In order for him to oppose himself to the Eastern stance, he first had to project himself into the East. He probably could not have done so if he had not been capable of intuiting the basic concepts underlying Noh—if he had not actually achieved an affinity with the fourteenth century Zen master of Noh.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Keene, Donald, Japanese Literature, Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1955.


Ure, Peter, Yeats the Playwright, New York, Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1963.


**Articles**


**Unpublished Works**
