Yeats’s noh and world drama: foreign form in tandem with local materials

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Published online: 17 December 2018
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Abstract
In an essay on the Japanese noh drama, “Fenollosa on the noh,” Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908) provides a unique but reverse case of Franco Moretti’s concept of “world literature.” Moretti argues that “the compromise between the foreign and the local is so ubiquitous” that “the encounter of Western forms and local reality did indeed produce everywhere a structural compromise.” I agree with Moretti that the problem is always a structural compromise between foreign form and local materials in the field of world literature. However, I contend that what is at stake in world literature is rather the problem of balancing between close readings of local/global materials and distant readings of discourse at large in structural reconstruction. Even a prominent critic of world literature like T. S. Eliot fails to see the complicated nature of William Butler Yeats’s transcultural interweaving between the foreign form of the Japanese noh drama and the local materials of Irish plays. In this context, I have attempted to provide a case of balancing between the foreign form of the Japanese noh and local materials found in Irish plays, thereby suggesting a new model for the study of world literature. Stimulated by Pound and Fenollosa’s translations of the noh plays, and having envisioned Japanese noh plays as the visionary model for his future theatre, Yeats had a new vision of world drama by investigating the potential theories of “mask” and “ghost,” thereby anticipating the vision of transcultural/transnational world literature and drama.

Keywords Japanese noh drama · William Butler Yeats · Mask · Ghost · East West comparative literature · World literature and drama

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Introduction

Franco Moretti, in his *Distant reading* (2013), provides his understanding of world literature in terms of a “problem”: “World literature is not an object, it is a problem, a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts. That’s how theories come into being; they need a leap, a wager—a hypothesis, to get started.” Moretti further tests the problematics of world literature on a large scale, in particular, in the genre of the modern novel, from the perspective of Euro-centric “compromise between a western formal influence and local materials.”

In cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary systems (which means: almost all cultures, inside and outside Europe), the modern novel, first arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials.

Moretti’s large scale understanding of the novel in world literature spanning “four continents, 200 years, [and] over twenty independent critical studies” lets us see that “when a culture starts moving towards the modern novel, it’s always as a compromise between foreign form and local materials.” What Moretti finds is that “the compromise between the foreign and the local is so ubiquitous,” and also that “the encounter of Western forms and local reality did indeed produce everywhere a structural compromise.” Moretti’s final analysis is that “world literature was indeed a system—but a system of variations. The system was one, not uniform,” and that the study of world literature is “a study of the struggle for symbolic hegemony across the world.”

In an essay on the Japanese noh drama, Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908) in a different vein provides a unique but reverse case of Morettian “world literature,” in which a compromise between eastern foreign forms (Oriental forms) and western local materials (European materials) occurs in “one continuous drama of the art of pure living”:

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1 Moretti (2013, p. 46).
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 50.
4 Ibid., p. 52.
5 Ibid., p. 53.
6 Ibid., p. 54.
7 Ibid., p. 56.
8 Noh is a dance theatre. In Medieval through 19th century Japan, there were dramas such as kyogen (comedies), noh, kabuki, and bunraku. Early dramas were called kyogen and were mostly comic interludes which were traditionally performed between noh performances. Noh drama is a “dance-drama” that was very popular with the rich and powerful elite class of medieval Japan, including the court in the 14th century. It is still performed today. The actors wear the masks of a woman, a demon, or an old man, and they perform with musicians sitting behind the actor and a chorus (jiutai) of eight people on the right side of the stage who narrate the story by chanting. For a discussion of the noh, cf. Sekine and Murray (1990).
9 Pound and Fenollosa (1959, p. 58).
I have spoken of the universal value of this special art-life, and explained how the inflowing of such an Oriental stream has helped to revitalize Western Art, and must go on to assist in the solution of our practical educational problems.\textsuperscript{10}

Fenollosa on the same page further points out the interweaving influence between what Franco Moretti calls foreign form and local materials in terms of “a stronger and stronger modification of our established standards by the pungent subtlety of Oriental thought, and the power of the condensed Oriental forms.”\textsuperscript{11} Fenollosa’s examples of local materials are European and his example of foreign form is Oriental:

[T]he freedom of the Elizabethan mind, and its power to range over all planes of human experience, as in Shakespeare, was, in part, an aftermath of Oriental contacts—in Crusades, in an intimacy with the Mongols such as Marco Polo’s, in the discovery of a double sea-passage to Persia and India, and in the first gleanings of the Jesuit missions to Asia.\textsuperscript{12}

Fenollosa’s catalogue further includes the Romantic movement in the later eighteenth century and the early nineteenth, which was influenced by the scholarly study and translation of Oriental literature; Bishop Percy’s revival of the medieval ballad in relation to the Chinese poetry; Voltaire’s Chinese tragedy modified from a Jesuit translation; Moore, Byron, Shelley, and Coleridge being influenced by the spirit of Persian translations; and Wordsworth’ poetry verging on the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation.\textsuperscript{13} It is my contention, in this context, that the study of world literature is not simply that of “that struggle for symbolical hegemony across the world,” as Moretti argues. Rather, world literature is an “elliptical refraction of national literatures” as David Damrosch perceives in his \textit{What is world literature?} (2003).\textsuperscript{14}

I argue that world literature is, in fact, refracted doubly in a mutual transnational/transcultural transaction of the perspectives, forms and materials, translations, and in encounters with both local and foreign literary texts.

In an essay, “Yeats’s noh: The dancer and the dance,” an introduction to \textit{Yeats and the noh: A comparative study} (1990), Augustine Martin (1935–1995) demonstrates a new vision for the modern drama, while touching on the case of balancing between the foreign form of the Japanese noh and the local materials of Irish plays:

[Yeats] had a radical vision of theatrical possibility and the noh was his inspiration. From it he took all the elements he needed for his new genre—the sense of religion and ritual, the sacredness of place, the omnipresence of the supernatural, custom and ceremony, the eloquence of gesture, mime, dance, the dramatic power of silence and stillness; above all, perhaps, an impersonality which would replace the modern naturalistic preoccupation with character

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{14} Damrosch (2003, p. 281).
and personal idiosyncrasy. He virtually withdrew from the Abbey workshop ‘in scorn of this audience,’ and of these artistic proclivities, after the death of Synge.\footnote{Sekine and Murray (1990, p. xiv).}

In short, Martin provides us with a succinct catalogue of “all the elements [Yeats] needed for his new genre” in terms of the noh plays.

In this context, this article will investigate how Yeats in collaboration with Ezra Pound at Stone Cottage took an interest in Fenollosa’s versions of Japanese noh plays, discovering in them new and exciting possibilities for his own scenic writing, as well as how Japanese noh plays reveal a new vision for the modern drama, by providing structural models for a more stylized, archetypal, and global drama.

**Foreign form: Japanese noh drama and Yeats–Pound collaboration at Stone Cottage**

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) spent the winters of 1913–1914, 1914–1915, and 1915–1916 with Ezra Pound (1885–1972) at a small cottage, named Stone Cottage, in Ashdown Forest, Sussex. This so-called “Stone Cottage collaboration” marks the turning point for the new development in Yeats’s world of theater.\footnote{For the extensive discussion of the Stone Cottage collaboration of Yeats and Pound, cf. Longenbach (1989).} In his *W. B. Yeats: The man and the milieu* (1997), Keith Alldritt gives a dramatic story of how Yeats through Pound encounters the noh plays, and initiates the milieu of world drama of modernism:

A couple of weeks before going to Sussex [1913], Pound, ever on the move through literary London, had been introduced by the Indian poet Sarojini Naidu to an American widow, Mrs. Mary Fenollosa. Her husband, who had died some five years before, had taught philosophy at the Imperial University in Tokyo. Ernest Fenollosa had become passionately interested in the art and literature of China and Japan and at his death he left a good deal of manuscript material which his widow was determined should not be lost. Out of his papers she compiled and edited a two-volume work, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*. Having read Pound’s poetry, she asked Naidu to arrange for her to meet the leader of the new imagist school of poets. Following this meeting Mrs. Fenollosa made up her mind that Pound was the person to make use of her husband’s translations of plays and poems and she entrusted him with the manuscripts, which he then brought to Stone Cottage. Yeats took an immediate interest in Fenollosa’s versions of Japanese noh plays, discovering in them new and exciting possibilities for his own writing for the theatre. They provided models for a more stylized, hieratic and archetypal drama than he had written.
hitherto. It was yet another important instance of the transmissions that helped make for modernism.\textsuperscript{17}

In fact, this literary and spiritual collaboration between Yeats and Pound, as Alldritt narrates, initiates the global modernist movement as James Longenbach in his \textit{Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and modernism} (1989) powerfully demonstrates. Through their collaborative work, Yeats and Pound could enhance the project of world literature by attempting to “bridge the divide between amateurism and specialization, mitigating both the global generalist’s besetting hubris and the national specialist’s deeply ingrained caution.”\textsuperscript{18} Anthony Bradley in his book, \textit{William Butler Yeats} (1979), provides a succinct rationale for Yeats’s adoption of the noh plays as a model for his drama. According to Bradley, Yeats has rejected the conventional theater of realism, and encountered the dramatic form that embodies all he had striven for in the past. What Yeats admired in these Japanese plays and what he imitated in his own plays was “a nonmimetic dramatic form, symbolic and ritualistic in mode and highly stylized in convention” as well as “the impressive continuity of cultural tradition.”\textsuperscript{19}

On the one hand, from the noh drama which he learned about from Pound in the winter of 1913–1914, Yeats came to be provided with the external form and apparatus for \textit{Four plays for dancers}: a chorus, masked players, a climactic dance, and a bare stage with only a patterned screen. In his essay, entitled “Certain noble plays of Japan,” Yeats provides the characteristic scenes on the stage of the noh plays using a painterly description:

The white and purple curtain was no doubt to hang upon a wall behind the players or over their entrance-door, for the noh stage is a platform surrounded upon three sides by the audience. No “naturalistic” effect is sought. The players wear masks and found their movements upon those of puppets. A swift or a slow movement and a long or a short stillness, and then another movement. They sing as much as they speak, and there is a chorus which describes the scene and interprets their thought and never becomes as in the Greek theatre a part of the action. At the climax, instead of the disordered passion of nature, there is a dance, a series of positions and movements, or the pain of a ghost in the Buddhist Purgatory.\textsuperscript{20}

As Yeats himself remarked, he discovered in the noh plays, a “platform” for masked dance, and he adapted the noh in a way to be freed from all the naturalistic stage

\textsuperscript{17} Alldritt (1997, p. 239).
\textsuperscript{18} Damrosch (2003, p. 286). Cf. Kim (2017, p. 91). Damrosch’s definition of world literature in terms of the double “elliptical refraction of national literatures” is relevant for the discussion of the Yeats-Pound collaboration via the Fenollosa–Pound connection. In the collaborative work, American Pound and American Fenollosa translate the Chinese-Japanese languages into English, and Irish Yeats uses the Japanese form of the noh drama. Without this triangular collaboration, this initiation of modernism in terms of world drama would not have happened.
\textsuperscript{19} Bradley (1979, pp. 131–132).
\textsuperscript{20} Yeats (1961, p. 230).
conventions as well as from the audience trained in its conventions. As a result, the noh drama influenced a number of his other plays.

On the other hand, when Yeats read Pound’s translations of Fenollosa’s manuscript, “Fenollosa on the noh,” the internal affective key words for Yeats were “emotion,” “passion,” and “compassion”:

The beauty and power of noh lie in the concentration. All elements—costume, motion, verse, and music—unite to produce a single clarified impression. Each drama embodies some primary human relation or emotion; and the poetic sweetness or poignancy of this is carried to its highest degree by carefully excluding all such obtrusive elements at a mimetic realism or vulgar sensation might demand. The emotion is always fixed upon idea, not upon personality. The sole parts express great types of human character, derived from Japanese history. Now it is brotherly love, now love to a parent, now loyalty to a master, love of husband and wife, of mother for a dead child, or of jealousy or anger, of self-mastery in battle, of the battle passion itself, of the clinging of a ghost to the scene of its sin, of the infinite compassion of a Buddha, of the sorrow of unrequited love. Some one of these intense emotion is chosen for a piece, and, in it, elevated to the plane of universality by the intensity and purity of treatment. Thus, the drama became a storehouse of history, and a great moral force for the whole social order of the Samurai. (Italics mine)²¹

Yeats has already articulated the concept of “emotion” in his essay, “Symbolism of poetry” (1900), in which Yeats touches on the poetic emotion, the equivalent of which one can find in the Japanese noh plays. These “emotions,” evoked by “certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions” are closely related to Yeatsian “passion.”²² In his essay, “The Irish Dramatic Movement,” which appeared in his Explorations, Yeats defines “passion” in his famous rhetorical question: “what is passion but the straining of man’s being against some obstacle that obstructs its unity?”²³ With this “passion,” the depth of the soul of the performer communicates with the soul of the audience, reaching toward the world spirit (anima mundi), the great memory “from whence come the images of the dream.”²⁴ What Yeats wants is the “ritual of passion,” a subjective not an objective “unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many”²⁵ rather than the naturalistic Irish stage of the Abbey Theatre where John Millington Synge and Lady Augusta Gregory were the main dramatists. In fact, Yeats has been working on this passion in his essay, “Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places” which was published in 1914. In another text, Per amica silentia Lunae, finished on May 11, 1917, Yeats further confirms and extends the connection between his vision of the theatre and the Japanese noh plays, giving a name

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²¹ Pound and Fenollosa (1959, pp. 69–70).
²² Yeats (1961, pp. 156–157).
²³ Yeats (1962, p. 252).
²⁴ Yeats (1965, p. 175).
²⁵ Yeats (1962, p. 254).
to the condition of the spirits who remain bound to earth by the “passionate events” of life: the “dreaming back of the dead.”

Local materials: the influence of the Japanese noh plays upon Yeats’s dramaturgy

In their trail-blazing study *Yeats and the noh: A comparative study* (1990), Masaru Sekine and Christopher Murray argue that the cultural milieu of Irish drama makes it inevitable for Yeats to respond with enthusiasm to the Japanese aristocratic drama when Ezra Pound introduced him the translations of Ernest Fenollosa. Their list of attractive aspects of the noh drama includes “the non-naturalistic style, the symbolism, the masks, the costumes, the stylized action, the use of chorus and musicians, the stage bare except for a drawing of a huge pine tree on the wooden backwall, and the minimum of properties,”26 all of which more or less coincided with Yeats’s own ideas on staging. They report that after that, Yeats became involved in Pound’s project, and arranged for the publication of four of the Fenollosa translations (*Nishikigi, Hagoromo, Kumasaka* and *Kagekiyo*) by his sister’s press, the Cuala Press, in September 1916.27

In his introduction to Fenollosa’s translations, entitled “Certain noble plays of Japan,” dated April 1916, Yeats declared that he had written a play inspired by these noh plays: “I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or Press to pay its way—an aristocratic form.”28 This play was *At the Hawk’s Well*, which is the first of the *Four plays for dancers*. The influence of the noh is prevalent in most of Yeats’s plays written after 1916, particularly in such plays as *At the Hawk’s Well* (1916), *The only jealousy of Emer* (1919), *The dreaming of the bones* (1919), and *Calvary* (1920), in the collection entitled *Four plays for dancers* (1921).29

Sekine and Murray’s *Yeats and the noh: A comparative study* includes the revealing aspects of the interweaving of the foreign form of the Japanese noh drama and the local materials of Yeats’s dramaturgy revealed in *Four Plays for Dancers*. Using Sekine and Murray’s text as the basis of the analytic database, this article will deconstruct and reconstruct the intriguing relationship between Yeats’s dramaturgy and the Japanese noh plays. “Mask” and “ghost” can be the two key concepts in the Japanese noh drama, and one can trace the systematic poetics of mask and ghost in both *Per amica silentia Lunae* (which means “the friendly silence of the moon”) and in the first edition of *A Vision* in 1925. What is at stake in these works in relation to

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26 Sekine and Murray (1990, p. 7).
27 Ibid.
28 Yeats (1961, p. 221).
29 Originally Yeats intended to include *The cat and the Moon* (a kyogen) in the *Four plays for dancers* between *At the Hawk’s Well* and *The dreaming of the bones*. Yeats recognized that in the noh cycle a kyogen or farce was usually included, but he did not include *The cat and the Moon* because it was inappropriate “in a different mood as a farce”.

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Yeats’s understanding of the Japanese noh plays is the theory of the mask and the nature of the world of spirits.\(^{30}\)

First of all, in the so-called noh sequence, Yeats’s own theory of the mask particularly finds its foothings in the noh plays, suggesting the rationale for the impersonality on the parts of the actors. In *At the Hawk’s Well*, the Old Man and the Young Man wear masks and the Guardian of the Well and the Three Musicians have their faces made up “to resemble masks.” In the opening stage: “These masked players seem stranger when there is no mechanical means [of lighting] of separating them from us.”\(^{31}\) Yeats makes this point clear in his “Certain Noble Plays of Japan”:

A mask will enable me to substitute for the face of some commonplace player, or for that face repainted to suit his own vulgar fancy, the fine invention of a sculptor, and to bring the audience close enough to the play to hear every inflection of the voice. A mask never seems but a dirty face, and no matter how close you go is yet a work of art; nor shall we lose by stilling the movement of the features, for deep feeling is expressed by a movement of the whole body.\(^{32}\)

Therefore, the use of masks as Yeats discovered in the noh drama will evoke the strange feeling from the audience and “bring the audience close enough to the play to hear every inflection of the voice.” Yeats filled the plays with the convictions that he was systematizing in *Per amica silentia Lunae* and *A vision*, having decided to present Irish mythology in the noh guise.

In “Ego dominus tuus,” the opening poem of *Per amica silentia Lunae* (1917), Yeats provides a concept of the mask in a poetic dialogue between Hic and Ille. Hic argues against Ille and reveals himself as the logical and self-reflective self by claiming that “I would find myself and not an image.”\(^{33}\) Hic further criticizes the esoteric and somnambulist Ille who represents the creative and artistic self. Taking the grain of self against Hic’s criticism, then, Ille argues that he ironically evokes his own “double” who looks most like himself but in fact proves to be “the most unlike.” This double turns out to be the strange and “mysterious” mask. Ille calls this strange and “mysterious” one “the other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self,”\(^{34}\) who is his “own opposite,” “double,” or “daimon.” Ille’s double or anti-self is in fact the Other of Hic’s self. Between the self and the Other, Ille undergoes the act of wearing the Mask. The poet concludes this poem through the voice of Ille:

I call to the mysterious one who yet
Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
And look most like me, being indeed my double,
And prove of all imaginable things
The most unlike, being my anti-self,

\(^{30}\) For the discussion of the theory of the mask in terms of The Other, cf. Kim (1995, pp. 111–131).

\(^{31}\) Yeats (1966, p. 399).

\(^{32}\) Yeats (1961, p. 226).

\(^{33}\) Yeats (1959, p. 321).

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 331.
And, standing by these characters, disclose
All that I seek.\textsuperscript{35}

In \textit{The trembling of the veil}, Yeats himself sums up this argument between Hic and Ille as follows:

Among subjective men (in all those, that is, who must spin a web [or poetry] out of their own bowels) the victory is an intellectual daily re-creation of all that exterior fate snatches away, and so that fate’s antithesis; while what I have called ‘the Mask’ is an emotional antithesis to all that comes out of their internal nature. We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy.\textsuperscript{36}

In the context of Hic and Ille’s debate, the mask is the image of the double or anti-self which has the “deep feeling” of the masked characters “expressed by a movement of the whole body.” This mask represents the “emotional antithesis to all that comes out of their internal nature.” According to Ille, when the emotion is abstracted, it is lifted out of the natural world, and he becomes free when he abstracts his personal emotion from his natural self. This process of abstraction, “existence” or “standing out from itself,” is the act of wearing a “Mask.” This mask is impersonality, freedom from the self, representing the Other.

In “Anima Hominis,” Yeats articulates the act of wearing the mask: “when at last [the character] looked out of [the mask’s] eyes he knew another’s breath came and went within his breath upon the carven lips, and that his eyes were upon the instant fixed upon a visionary.”\textsuperscript{37} When the character in the noh play meditates on the mask, the mask plays the role of symbol or a mere mirror which reflects only the subjective consciousness of the seeing eye. However, if the character in the play is gifted with a penetrating eye, he will look into the supernatural world with the gazing eye. Then, the mask as the symbol or the mirror will become a key to the door of the supernatural realm. In the act of wearing the mask which reveals the disciplinary human will, the character in the play who lives in the finite living world will breathe the double-breath and will fix his double-gaze upon the visionary world.

In Yeats’s \textit{At hawk’s well}, his “first model” noh-influenced play, for example, the Old Man, who has been waiting for fifty years for the well to be filled up with the magical water, warns Cuchulain that gazing directly into Fand’s (the Woman of the Sidhe) eyes lays one open to a terrible curse. On three occasions, the Old Man recounts that he was beguiled into sleep only to the empty well after the waking-up. Cuchulain resolves to stay awake by piercing his foot. Then, the Guardian of the Well, possessed by Fand, throws off her cloak, revealing a dress that suggests a hawk, and begins to dance, “moving like a hawk.” The Old Man who moves like a marionette covers his head to avoid her eyes and falls asleep. In contrast, Cuchulain looks fearlessly into her eyes. Then, water splashes into the well, and although Cuchulain hears it, he follows the Guardian offstage as though in a dream. The Old

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 324.

\textsuperscript{36} Yeats (1965, p. 128).

\textsuperscript{37} Yeats (1959, p. 335).
Man awakens to find the stones wet, but the water has gone, and he curses bitterly. Cuchulain returns, describing how the Guardian eluded him to hide on the rocky hills. In this play, the players wear masks, and in the case of the three Musicians, their faces are made up to resemble masks. In particular, Cuchulain who wears the mask looks out of the mask’s eyes, knowing “another’s breath came and went within his breath upon the carven lips, and that his eyes were upon the instant fixed upon a visionary” as Yeats perceives in “Anima hominis” (soul of the man).

In fact, the poetics of the mask, as articulated in the “Ego Dominus Tuus,” is based upon the relationship between a man and his “daimon.” Yeats himself clarifies the relationship in terms of “desire”: “the Daimon comes not as like to like but seeking its own opposite, for man and Daimon feed the hunger in one another’s hearts.”

And the man and his daimon (double or the anti-self) will be brought together “when the man has found a mask whose lineaments permits the expression of all the man most lacks.”

I would argue that the poetics of the mask I have been explaining so far is what Yeats has in mind when he reads Ernest Fonollosa’s translations of Japanese noh plays. From the noh drama which disciplines the dramatist himself, Yeats wore the Japanese masks of the noh plays and looked through the double gazes of the mask, projecting his vision upon his future plays. Yeats and the characters in his play are thrown into a finite world, struggle in the flux of time and space, discipline themselves to reach the point where they can wear the mask and see through their eyes, the daimon will appear, and they will feel a blessed moment in which everything fills them with affection:

I am in the place where the Daimon is, but I do not think he is with me until I begin to make a new personality, selecting among those images, seeking always to satisfy a hunger grown out of conceit with daily diet; and yet as I write the words “I select,” I am full of uncertainty, not knowing when I am the finger, when the clay.

In the Japanese noh drama, Yeats discovered the dance along with the mask. The dance in the noh drama is “a series of positions and movements” in which “[t]he interest is not in the human form but in the rhythm to which it moves, and the triumph of their art is to express the rhythm in its intensity.”

Yeats’s second key argument in _Per amica silentia Lunae_ is about the ghost. In 1914, Yeats published an essay, entitled “Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places” as an appendix to Lady Gregory’s _Visions and beliefs in the West of Ireland_, and touches on the issue of “a world of spirits,” revealing his interest in ghost:

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38 Ibid., p. 335.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid. pp. 365–366.
41 Yeats (1961, p. 231).
We have within us an ‘airy body’ or ‘spirit body’ which was our only body before our birth as it will be again when we are dead and its ‘plastic power’ has shaped our terrestrial body as some day it may shape apparition and ghost.  

He concludes this essay with his excitement with Japanese noh play, after having provided the two plots of Japanese noh plays of ghost (what is called 

mugen

noh) which he learned from Ezra Pound’s translations of

Nishikigi and Motomezuka.

Yeats reconstructs the plots of Motomezuka and Nishikigi in his own way, revealing his rhetoric and visions of a new theatre of spiritism.

In

Per amica silentia Lunae,

Yeats explains further about the state of the ghost saying that a purgatorial state exists between “Anima hominis” (the soul of the man) and “Anima mundi” (the spirit of the world). The “anima hominis” refers to this world, the realm of experience accessible to the ordinary human being, while the anima mundi refers to that world, the supernatural world of the spirit. The world of the spirit is the “vast luminous sea” of spirit to which artists and heroes aspire. Human beings originate from and eventually return to inhabit this locus of the in-between or interstices and they are bound to earth by the passionate reliving based upon the intensity and the necessity of their lives. The dead spirits are destined to re-enact this retroactive reliving by memory until the passions are expiated. Then the spirits are released from their suffering. In “Anima mundi, VIII,” Yeats remarks that in “spiritism, whether of folklore or of the seance room, the visions of Swedenborg, and the speculation of the Platonists and Japanese play,” we carry our memory to

Anima Mundi,

and that memory is for a time our external world. All passionate moments recur again and again, because passion desires its own recurrence more than any event. For this reason, Yeats argues, a ghost in a Japanese play is set afire by fantastic scruple. And the fire would go out of itself if the ghost ceased to believe in it. However, the ghost cannot cease to believe.

This ghost in a Japanese play set afire and unable to escape memory of it is, in fact, the spirit he knew from

Motomezuka.

The phantom lovers are compelled to wander side by side and never mingle, and they cry: “We neither wake nor sleep and, passing our nights in a sorrow which is in the end a vision, what are these scenes of spring to us.” They also refer to the lovers he knew from

Nishikigi:

That we may acquire power, Even in our faint substance, We will show forth even now, And though it be but in a dream, Our form of repentance.

The lines are from the chorus lines from

The classic noh theatre of Japan,

translated by Ezra Pound, and they summarize the central conceit of several of Yeats’s later plays.

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42 Yeats (1962, p. 61).
43 Yeats (1959, p. 354).
44 Ibid., p. 339.
45 Pound and Fenollosa (1959, p. 85).
To make it clear, we need to know how Yeats retells the original story of two young people in *Nishikigi*, which Yeats himself put in the essay, “Swedenborg, mediums, and desolate places”:

[A] priest is wandering in a certain ancient village. He describes the journey and the scene, and from time to time the chorus sitting at the side of the stage sings its comment. He meets with two ghosts, the one holding a red stick, the other a piece of coarse cloth, and both dressed in the fashion of a past age, but as he is a stranger he supposes them villagers wearing the village fashion. To the priest they seem two married people, but he cannot understand why they carry the red stick and the coarse cloth. They ask him to listen to a story. The two young people had lived in that village long ago and night after night for three years the young man had offered a charmed red stick, the token of love, at the young girl’s window, but she pretended not to see and went on weaving. So the young man died and was buried in a cave with his charmed red sticks and presently the girl died too, and now because they were never married in life they were unmarried in their death. The priest, who does not yet understand that it is their own tale, asks to be shown the cave, and says it will be a fine tale to tell when he goes home. The chorus describes the journey to the cave. The lovers go in front, the priest follows. They are all day pushing through long grasses that hide the narrow paths. They have found the cave and it is dyed with the red sticks of love to the colour of “the orchids and chrysanthemums which hide the mouth of a fox’s hole”; and now the two lovers have “slipped into the shadow of the cave”. Left alone and too cold to sleep the priest decides to spend the night in prayer. He prays that the lovers may at last be one. Presently he sees to his wonder that the cave is lighted up “where people are talking and setting up looms for spinning and painted red sticks.” The ghosts creep out and thank him for his prayer and say that through his pity ‘the love promises of long past incarnations’ find fulfillment in a dream.46

Sekine and Murray’s interpretation of Yeats’s *Nishikigi* puts this dream play in symbolic cultural context.

A travelling monk, who introduces the story, prays for unhappy souls, and consequently communicates with spirits of those he has liberated in a dream sequence. The travelling monk, in this case, set the scene in the northern village of Kyo, and encounters a village couple who recount the pathetic story of a local man who, after wooing a woman for three years, and being constantly rejected, died heartbroken. Their tale is interwoven with repeated references to both *nishikigi* and *hosonuno*. These local handicrafts add realism to the village couple, provide color on stage, and, most significantly, provide poetic images for their ill-fated love: the love tokens the man repeatedly leaves at his beloved’s door, *nishikigi*, or decorated branches. The cloth she constantly wears is *hosonuno*, or narrow cloth, too narrow in practical terms

46 Yeats (1962, pp. 66–68).
to make the two overlapping front sections of a *kimono*, and therefore an apt symbolic description for an ill-matched couple. The supposed villagers lead the monk to the lovers’ tomb, asking him to pray for the deceased.

The monk prays and spends a night by their tomb. The now freed ghosts, delighted, wish to thank the man whose goodwill released them from remorse. No longer earth-bound, they appear in front of the monk, expressing their gratitude by demonstrating the customary courtship rituals of their region. The man, in conclusion, performs a vigorous *okoto-mai* dance, celebrating the fact that he and his beloved will marry in the next life, until dawn breaks, and they disappear. Thus, although the theme of this play is tragic, the conclusion, like that of a medieval miracle play, shows God’s power, symbolized by the priest’s intervention to prevent human suffering.47

In the original Japanese noh play, the spirits of the dead remain bound to earth by the memory of a tragic event in life and are condemned to relive their suffering, often at a place that has become legendary, until they are released in an act of repentance and forgiveness. On the noh stage, this tragic event is represented in the slow and beautiful dance. Yeats’s excitement with Japanese noh drama is closely related to his own accounts of the discovery of “the world of spirits” as well as to the stories and themes of Japanese noh plays in “Swedenborg, mediums, and the desolate places.”

Out of his encounter with the noh plays from Stone Cottage collaboration, Yeats was suddenly awakened an understanding of the nature of the spirits of the dead and came to envision the world of the spirits. In fact, each of Yeats’s *Four plays for dancers*, reflecting the ghost stories from the noh drama, is modeled after a Japanese play: *At the Hawk’s Well* (Yoro), *The only jealousy of Emer* (Aoino-ue), *The dreaming of the bones* (Nishikigi), *Calvary* (Sumidagawa/Miwa). However, the first convincing play to be influenced by the Japanese noh plays in terms of conception, mood, and structure is *The dreaming of the bones* (1917) which is closely modelled on the *mugen* noh, most particularly on *Nishikigi*.

Terence Brown’s synopsis of Yeats’s Irish play, *The dreaming of the bones*, is revealing:

In a place of mountain and sky, a young man meets a stranger and a young girl. The young man is a rebel who has fled from Dublin and the Rising in which he participated and hopes to make good his escape from Ireland by way of the western coast. He is led by the stranger to a mountain summit, where we realize he is in the company of the spirits of Diamuid and Dervorgilla, who in Irish nationalist historiography were the pair of lovers who traitorously invited the Normans into Ireland to serve their partisan cause. They are the primal sinners in an Irish Fall which brought conquest and English rule. In Yeats’s play, they are condemned to spend eternity in erotic longing for one another. Their lips can never meet and they cannot be released from their torment of desire unless one of their race forgives them. The young man is tempted to do so, so

47 Sekine and Murray (1990, pp. 61–62).
affecting is their condition, until recognition dawns and he declares he cannot. Forgiveness, in any moral equation he understands, is impossible." 48

When compared and analyzed in tandem with each other, the Japanese noh play, Nishikigi, and Yeats’s Irish play, The dreaming of the bones, are situated in the First Musician’s mood of shadowy somnambulist spiritism, but in a rhetorical question: “dizzy dreams can spring/From the dry bones of the dead?” 49 In this context, a traveller, a young man, approaches a place of the ruined Abbey of Corcomroe, and encounters a man and young woman, who are mysterious strangers. As in the noh play, the strangers wear masks and gradually reveal themselves to be the spirits of the lovers of whom they speak of. Yeats’s purpose in this play is to adapt the Japanese model of the noh convention and appropriates it for his purposes. The understanding of the relation of spiritual world to the living world in terms of “dreaming back” echoes the mood of a mugen noh play. The dreaming of the bones is the good model for the Irish noh play, and Yeats’s conceit of the “dreaming back of the dead” in The dreaming of the bones is universal as a modernist project of world drama. In fact, Yeats combines Ireland’s past with its present in a single dramatic unfolding, like the play Nishikigli, and discovers the dramatic and theatrical representations of the dreaming back of the dead in his later plays, demonstrating the politics and aesthetics of spiritism.

Most of Yeats’s early drama before 1916 are embedded in anti-realistic and anti-naturalist staging, occult themes, and legendary characters at a moment of profound spiritual conflict: the chorus and musicians in On Baile’s strand (1903) and Deirdre (1907); the supernatural dance in The land of heart’s desire (1894); the tale of a legendary hero at a moment of spiritual crisis in The shadowy waters (1900), Cathleen ni Houlihan (1902), and The king’s threshold (1904); and encountering of mortal with immortal in The countess Cathleen (1892) and The hour glass (1903). However, after the transcultural influence of the Japanese noh plays, Yeats changed his vision of the theatre in terms of spiritism as we have seen in the above.

**Conclusion: world drama as interweaving foreign form and local materials**

T. S. Eliot was in the first audiences of At the Hawk’s Well in 1916, and wrote an influential critique about the range of Yeatsian dramatic vision in the Four plays for dancers in his essay on “Yeats” (1940) which was published in On poetry and poets (1957). According to Eliot, Yeats reveals the internal way of handling Irish myth about legendary heroes and heroines in the earlier plays, and presents the myth “as a vehicle for a situation of universal meaning” as in “with the Cuchulain of The Hawk’s Well, and Emer and Eithne of The only jealousy of Emer” in later plays. But Eliot did not include The dreaming of the bones in the category of “universal men

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48 Brown (1999, p. 242).
49 Yeats (1966, p. 762).
and women.” In fact, T. S. Eliot fails to see the transcultural interweaving between the foreign form of the Japanese noh drama and the local materials of Yeats’s later plays, although Eliot recognizes the potential development of Yeats’s vision of world drama from a different perspective:

Born into a world in which the doctrine of “Art’s for Art’s Sake” was generally accepted, and living on into one in which art has been asked to be instrumental to social purposes, he held firmly to the right view which is between these, though not in any way a compromise between them, and showed that an artist, by serving his art with entire integrity, is at the same time rendering the greatest service he can to his own nation and to the world.

At the beginning of this article, I argue in agreement with Franco Moretti that in the field of world literature, the problem is always a structural compromise between foreign form and local materials. Eliot recognizes this in terms of the “integrity” of the artist. Against the grain of the integrity of the artist, I would argue that Yeats has a new vision of world drama stimulated by Pound and Fenollosa’s translations on the noh plays. Having envisioned Japanese noh plays as the visionary model for his future theatre, Yeats has conceived or restructured the poetics of the mask and the theory of the ghost, thereby gazing ahead at the vision of transcultural/transnational world literature.

For this purpose, I have investigated how Yeats in collaboration with Ezra Pound at the Stone Cottage took an interest in Fenollosa’s versions of Japanese noh plays, and discovered in them new and exciting possibilities for his own writing for the theatre. In fact, this modernist collaboration among the triangular Yeats-Pound-Fenollosa maestros brings the new form of the Japanese noh drama to the forefront of the project of world literature, manifesting Damrosch’s first definition of world literature as “an elliptical refraction of national literatures,” “recognizing the ongoing, vital presence of the national within the life of world literature”.

I have also touched upon how Japanese noh drama reveals a new vision for Yeats as well as for world drama. In fact, Yeats had been working on the concept of passion in his essay, “Swendenborg, mediums, and the desolate places,” which was published in 1914. In another text, Per amica silentia Lunae, finished May 11, 1917, Yeats further confirms and extends the connection between his vision of the theatre and the Japanese noh plays, giving a name to the condition of the spirits who remain bound to earth by the “passionate events” of life: the “dreaming back of the dead.” The understanding of the relation of spiritual world to the living world in terms of “dreaming back” echoes the mood of the mugen noh play. What is at stake for Yeats is the problem of balancing between foreign form of the Japanese noh and local materials of Irish plays. In short, Japanese noh drama for Yeats and Pound provided a structural model for “writing that gains in translation,” provoking a more

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50 Eliot (1957, p. 260).
51 Ibid., p. 262.
52 Damrosch (2003, pp. 281–284).
53 Ibid., pp. 288–289.
stylized, archetypal, global case of world literature than had been written before modernist writings.

Acknowledgements This work was supported by Global Research Network program through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2017S1A2A2050414).

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