Qu’est-ce qui arrive? Some Structural Comparisons of Beckett’s Plays and Noh

"Beckett and Noh" may sound a farfetched subject, for unlike Yeats or Claudel or Brecht, Samuel Beckett is, on his own evidence, quite unfamiliar with Noh; much less has he ever tried to imitate or steal the riches of this ancient theater form of the East. The absence of actual influence, however, would be all the more significant if it could be shown that the two theater forms, with a vast temporal and spatial distance between them, do share some fundamental characteristics.

"Nothing happens, nobody comes," complains Estragon. This would remind any "Japanalogist" of Claudel’s famous dictum: "Le drame, c’est quelque chose qui arrive, le Nô, c’est quelqu’un qui arrive."1 One is almost tempted to suspect that Beckett is here making a conscious allusion to the insight of the French playwright-diplomat. But the allusion, if conscious, should be surprising for its wry obliqueness. For if one can claim that Waiting for Godot is a negation of the European notion of drama wherein some action must take place, one can also claim that the play is at the same time a negation of the essential dramaturgy of Noh insofar as Claudel is right in the second half of his dictum and insofar as Estragon is right in the second half of his complaint.

Or maybe negation is not exactly the word. For something does happen, or indeed many things do happen, on this place
dubiously called "The Board" (the stage): businesses with hats and shoes, gestural mimicries, dances, games, quarrels, even an attempt at suicide. But none of them are "real" dramatic actions: they are all "pseudo-actions" performed simply to kill time, all "non-events" tending toward no logically climactic moment. Similarly, someone does come if you count Pozzo or Lucky or the boy. But they are obviously not that "someone" who, by "arriving," is supposed to make Noh what it is, any more than they are Godot himself.

Here some remarks on the origin and the structure of Noh would be in order. Noh is closely connected with the ancient Japanese belief in the unpacified spirit of the dead. The unquenched passion of love, grief, or hatred endows the dead with a sort of immortality, and the ghost is compelled from time to time to emerge out of the Buddhist purgatory in a corporeal form that was his or hers in life and visit the world of the living in order to gain a partial relief from present torments by telling someone the story of his or her agony, somewhat in the manner of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. In the typical structure of a so-called Fukushiki Mugen-Noh (dream-noh in two parts), the Shite (protagonist) first appears as an ordinary village woman and then, after an exit, reappears as a veritable ghost to enact her life story before the eye of the Waki (secondary character), a traveling priest, who finally manages to pacify her agonized soul by the power of his prayer. Noh in this light could be regarded as theatrical transformation of a ritual of exorcism of the demonic power of the dead.

But in a slightly different though related light, the protagonist of Noh could also be taken for a specimen of what Japanese anthropologists call "mare-bito," literally, a "guest," but a special kind of sacred guest. This "epiphanic" stranger was entertained by the villagers with sumptuous hospitality in the hope that he would turn himself into a benevolent spirit and sanctify the village with his holy blessing. One might think of the Oresteia, in which the Erynies (the Furies) are transformed into the Eumenides (the Kindly Ones), who the Athenians hoped would bless the city of Athens. Of course, Zeami's theater is conceived in a scale that is anything but Aeschylean;
it is far less epic and totally apolitical, far more refined in its private lyricism—so much so that you could almost call it a "minimalist" art. Nonetheless, it is important to see in Noh a form of "holy theater" whose ultimate aim lies in making an epiphany possible, that is, in preparing a space, a kind of "void," so that this empty space may be filled in by the arrival of a strange guest, a sacred spirit in a human form, a god incarnate.

What is to be stressed in this connection is the importance of the Waki, for it is he who actually does the preparing for the epiphany. Much more than a simple traveler, he is a priest possessed with a shamanic power to perceive (or indeed evoke) a supernatural presence (one notices here a curious reversal: he, a stranger from elsewhere, meets an indigenous spirit, a ghostly inhabitant of the place). He is a medium requisite for the supernatural hero to take flesh momentarily. It is even possible to argue that the central action of a Noh play, the "coming" of the Shite in the second part, really takes place in a dream of the Waki, which is why it is called a "dream-noh." In any case, the audience finds itself at one with the Waki in an atmosphere taut with tension, waits for the apparition, watches the Shite dance out his or her undying fire of passion, and finally experiences a certain catharsis, be it Aristotelian or not, of fear and pity.

Now some of the structural peculiarities of Waiting for Godot would seem to be illuminated by the light shed by the above observations on Noh. Didi and Gogo are seen to be not so much the real protagonists (Shites) as the secondary players (Wakis) who wait for the Shite to arrive. Of course they are far from resembling the serious-looking priest of Noh; they are much more like the comedians of Kyogen, a genre of farce usually performed as an interlude between two pieces of Noh plays. As for Pozzo, his arrival in the first act gives the Wakis an illusion that he might be the awaited Shite, which, however, is quickly proved to be false. And although his reappearance in the second act, much transformed and probably revealing his true identity, does remind us of the Shite in the second part of Noh, he is after all a "pseudo-Shite," a miserable caricature of
the true Shite, who is supposedly none other than Godot. Thus Didi and Gogo have to go on waiting for a true epiphany, and Godot’s failure or refusal to come must leave the space, the stage, empty and unblessed with the visit of a ghostly guest. No transformation of reality, no communion of the sacred and the profane, takes place. No catharsis is allowed to the audience.

It may indeed be doubted if the coming of Godot, should it take place, would be of any help to Didi and Gogo, for the fact that his name itself sounds like a parody of God might imply that all they can hope for is an endless sequence of “pseudo-epiphanies” of “pseudo-Gods.” One almost wonders if that is not precisely the state of modern man as envisioned by Beckett and if that is not precisely the state of Western theater as embodied in the structure of Godot. I would submit that both situations are made poignantly conspicuous by the very absence of those elements that constitute the vision and the dramaturgy of Noh. Perhaps it is not so frivolous as it may seem to call Godot a kind of “anti-Mugen-Noh.”

Another aspect in which Godot sharply contrasts itself with Mugen-Noh is its attitude toward the past. The Shite in Noh is an apparition from the past, often a very distant time; he or she is dead, but the past is not; the presence of the Shite, which is as it were the time past made flesh and voice, is even more potently present than that of any human being alive. In contrast, everything in Godot is here and now (though “here” and “now” in this play are admittedly ambiguous enough in comparison with the unitary time-space scheme of a realistic play). The “dark backward and abysm of time” whose memory might torment the characters is deliberately dismissed; there is an almost hysterical revulsion against the “remembrance of things past” whenever the characters are faced with questions concerning the past. All this, of course, may be a paradoxical testimony to their obsession with time, and it is true that Didi and Gogo listen to the voices of the dead in the air, but there is no such encounter of the living and the dead, of the time present and the time past, as we find in Noh.

After Godot it seems as if Beckett keeps approaching with
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ever increasing seriousness an austere theater that, both in its skeletal bareness of structure and in its thematic obsession with past and memory, reveals a special affinity with Zeami's creation. *Endgame* is a play concerned with eschatology, the imminent end of a game that is Western civilization itself. But in spite of (or perhaps exactly because of) that, we witness the characters being haunted by poisonous memories. Out of the dialogue between Hamm and Clov emerges their deep love-hate relationship nurtured since their first contact when Clov was a child. We even see the time past literally present in Hamm's parents, still alive in the ash cans that obviously are parodies of graves. However, this play is probably too fiercely dramatic in content and too complex in form to make us feel its latent affinities with Mugen-Noh, and we have to wait for *Krapp's Last Tape* to meet a really suitable example.

The play presents Krapp on the stage as the protagonist (Shite), but in this seeming monodrama, he is also playing the role of Waki, at least during those spaces of time in which he is straining his ears to listen to his own taped voices. And it is these voices that take the role of Shite during those moments. It goes without saying that there is a world of difference between the disembodied voices, on the one hand, that, coming out of a modern machine, with mechanical repetition narrate the stories of past passions (or “pseudo-passions”), and on the other hand, the overwhelming physical presence of the Shite in Noh, who both narrates and beautifully “dances out” his old but still-too-real passion, just as the half-crazy forgetful old man listening to his own voices is difficult to identify with the sane and intelligent priest who both watches and listens to the “other” character. And Krapp is of course utterly incapable of exorcising or pacifying his former self. Nevertheless, we find in *Krapp* the first unmistakable emergence in Beckett's canon of an essentially Noh-like structure: the voice (Shite) arriving out of an alien time-space dimension versus the character (Waki) listening to that voice.

The purest example of this structural principle is *Not I*. Here we have, on the one hand, a Shite reduced to a bare outline of a “Mouth” of a woman, emerging out of the darkness and re-
counting what she pretends to be another woman’s life, though it is only too clear that it is her own life that she is narrating and that her babbling is an inadequate but compulsive attempt at reliving her earthly life. And we have, on the other hand, a typical Waki, whom Beckett calls “Auditor,” vaguely priest-like with his hooded figure, facing “Mouth” diagonally across the stage (as in Noh), listening intently like a confessor to her voice, and apparently trying ineffectually to absolve the tormented soul.

But we must remember that Not I is a rare exception in its clear-cut separation of the two roles. All the other plays by Beckett show a more ambiguous “doubling” of Shite and Waki, or (to put it the other way round) “splitting” of ego and alter-ego. Krapp cannot be a Waki pure and simple because both the voice and the life it narrates are his own. Or take Eh Joe. One might think that Joe, the ostensible hero who remains silent throughout this television play, gets relegated to the role of Waki when the Beckettian Shite appears as a female voice. But one is reminded by the voice itself where it comes from: “You know that penny farthing hell you call your mind. . . . That’s where you think this is coming from, don’t you?” In Noh the Shite makes his or her entrance from the “Kagami-no-ma” (the looking-glass room), which is not simply a greenroom but symbolically represents an “other world,” a purgatory, the depths of Jungian collective unconscious. Joe’s “mind” does look as if it were a Beckettian version of Kagami-no-ma, but one must admit that this “penny farthing hell” is, if anything, more Freudian and personal than it is Jungian and archetypal (it is a superb joke that Joe’s mind is materialized as a television set out of which issues a voice). The fact that the voice, albeit not his own, comes from his own mind and recounts his own life should deter us from claiming him to be a pure Waki.

Rather it is our impression that Joe, with his face close-up and frozen in a tense expression, resembles what in Noh is known as “Hita-men” (Shite in a maskless role), and the muteness with which he listens to the voice could be compared to that particular style of Noh action called “I-guse,” whereby the Shite sits utterly still and dumb while the chorus (“Ji-utai”) chants long passages that are sometimes a description of his
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misfortune and sometimes of his interior monologues. It should be noticed that the chorus in Noh has the astonishing freedom to enter inside the protagonist’s mind and voice his own thoughts, hence the splitting of speech and act, as in I-guse, which the Western audience of Noh often finds very irrational and confusing.

So I would suggest, at the risk of making my argument rather too complicated, that what we find in Eh Joe is the tripartite structure of Noh (Shite, Waki, and chorus) telescoped into a double structure. Joe listening to the woman’s voice is at the same time the Waki listening to the Shite and the Shite listening to the chorus. Conversely, the voice is the Shite emerging out of “elsewhere” into the presence of the Waki at the same time that it is the chorus narrating to the Shite his own life story.

It will not be difficult to detect a similar device not only in earlier plays like Krapp but also in most recent plays. That Time is an amalgam of Krapp and Eh Joe, for here is an old man sitting in the dark just listening to his own voices from three different periods of his life. He is a helpless passive Waki victimized by the aggressive, ghostly voices, but he is also a Shite caught in his anguished efforts to come to terms with his own past as narrated by those voices. Rockaby likewise splits the woman’s physical presence in a rocking chair and her recorded voice. What is new about this play (for Beckett never repeats himself) is that the voice uses a third-person pronoun: “... till in the end / the day came / in the end came / close of a long day / when she said / to herself / whom else / time she stopped.” This produces an effect quite different from the first person used in Krapp, the second person in Eh Joe and That Time, or even from the third person in Not I, which, as I have pointed out, has a different dramatic structure. One of the most curious moments in the play occurs when the woman joins the voice, speaking in unison: “time she stopped.” Although one is reminded of Krapp joining in the laughter of the taped voice, the closest parallel one can think of will probably be the impression one gets when the Shite in Noh joins the chorus to recite a third-person narrative describing him.

Ohio Impromptu is unique in having two characters on stage, Listener and Reader. Except for the fact, however, that the
voice of *Rockaby* is here incarnated as Reader, the fundamental structure remains unchanged; for it is suggested that Listener and Reader are, despite their separate identities, those halves of a split self that we are by now familiar with (see Beckett’s direction that they be “as alike in appearance as possible”). And what Reader reads from the book is clearly a story of Listener’s life, forcing upon him (Listener) a cruel realization of his life as a failure.

Beckett started writing plays at the point in the history of the Western theater where all the realistic conventions of drama, including the assumption that the theater has nothing to do with the sacred, broke down, and it seems to be that, in his ruthless effort to strip the theater of everything that is not absolutely necessary, he has arrived somewhere close to where Zeami started six hundred years ago. In both Zeami’s and Beckett’s theater, nothing happens (everything has already happened), but someone does come out of an unknown “sacred” country that Beckett in one of his latest plays, *Ohio Impromptu*, calls the “profounds of mind.” That “someone” is at once “the other” and one’s deepest self; that “country” is at once “unknown” and half-remembered. Of course, Beckett, under a malediction undreamed of by Zeami, has had to delve down into the depths of modern self-consciousness where it threatens to turn into solipsism, autism, and schizophrenia (“that way lies madness”). It is a triumph of Beckett’s art that he has successfully incorporated the very structure of the split soul of the modern man. Zeami’s ideal of theater consisted in “transmitting a *hana* [i.e., flower] from mind to mind.” Although in Beckett’s “theater of mind” what is transmitted from mind to mind is something too bleak to be called “flower,” we are grateful to him for creating a theater that is as deeply concerned as Zeami’s with the agonies of a soul that badly needs pacifying.