The Narrator and the *Waki*

Georges Banu

Does Kantor legitimize autobiographical references on the part of his critics? Does Kantor allow us to use autobiographical references to talk about his art and his theatre? A hasty response could be "yes," but the confession-maker would thus be sucked up into the spiraling mistake of duplicating and perpetuating his own discourse. Being aware of this pitfall, I will obviously shun it as best I can, but I will nevertheless mention that during the 1991 Rumanian events which I witnessed as a helpless spectator, the only text that I could read was Kantor's *Milano Lessons*. The reason was probably that I was reminded of his theater which cuts through the veil of appearances and reaches the ultimate kernel of *essence*—the very essence which I first discussed with Jan Kott on the Place de l'Odéon in Paris. There, standing before a theater, we talked about what lies beyond theater, about Kantor.

From the outset, everything suggests that Kantor offered a personal theater, an autobiographical theater where the sheer fact of remembering one's own life brings about a new quality, a difference. In this case, it was precisely the fruitfulness of an individual memory that seemed to have begotten those strange objects, Kantor's last four plays. Feeding on his past, they could be said to stem from an explicit subjectivity that was never blotted out.

Kantor was reluctant to discard the avant-gardes as readily as their former devotees are now prone to do, and he would insistently call upon Duchamp and constructivism, dada and happenings. This medley of avant-garde artists and trends served as the second focus of his theater. The secret of his paradoxical work apparently lay in an alliance between his own past and that of the avant-gardes. Everything seemed to derive from this unnatural marriage which gave birth to a genius bastard that was not quite related to theater nor to painting: Kantor's *œuvre*.

Such an obvious answer may seem disconcerting. But just as in a thriller, the first solution—the explicit solution—does not prove to be the most correct at the end of the investigation. It may be amended, improved, qualified with complementary references.

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The artist in his old age

Kantor belongs to this singular group of artists that come into their own late. It cannot be forgotten that *The Dead Class* marked a dividing line between the innovative artist that he was before and the unique creator that he became after. At sixty years old, faced with aging, Kantor found his *Theater of Death*. Like Giacometti or Beckett, he could then reach the ultimate, "essential" expression of himself which, once acquired, he merely modulated in his plays like so many variations of a theme repeated untiringly. This process is the privilege of creators who have approached the heart of the world, or what constitutes its ultimate truth in their eyes—a founding truth, a saving truth. In the theater, Kantor was one of those exceptional prisoners.

As I said, Kantor injected biographical elements into the practice of the avant-gardes that apparently resisted any personal involvement, any subjective occurrence. Much to our astonishment, this alliance worked because Kantor's tetralogy surpassed his concept of the theatre of personal confessions or provocation. He set out to narrate his past with living signs, just as Proust invented a technique of writing that enabled him to treat memory as epic matter. In that sense *The Theater of Death* could be said to form a concise counterpart to *Remembrance of Things Past*. If Kantor, at the beginning, enlivened the stage in the fashion of the avant-gardes, he later became the equivalent of the Proustian "narrator," and his "Wielopole Regained" took on the mnemonic reality of Combray. Both builders of those temples of memory stood outside their youths and faced what is commonly called the end.

The man in the corner

By elaborating something more than a universe—a narrative mode—it seems to me that Kantor came close to one of the oldest structures in the theater, the structure of Noh. This return was neither a transplant nor a borrowing, but rather an equivalence, an encounter, whereby one culture shed light on another culture and a tradition was the basis for innovation. Following his own path, Kantor reinvented the Noh theater—the Noh of the Western world—but without intending to. I believe that this structural coincidence accounts for the impression of density in *The Theater of Death*. There, as Paul Claudel said about Noh, "'someone,' not 'something,' came about"—Kantor himself. Kantor was present on stage right from the beginning of the performance, yet he stood on the side, "in a corner" like the *waki*, a medium who has the power to restore dead heroes to life. In *The Theater of Death*, the man in black did not awaken the ghosts of such-and-such a place like the *waki*, but the ghosts of his own past. Yet beyond these differences, his approach to theater was similar to the *waki*'s because he too was on the side of the living and turned the stage into the territory of a bygone era which became present again. The universe of his *Theater of Death* displayed the same fracture of temporality as the universe of the Noh theater, both animated by the "man in the corner." Thus, Kantor's theater was buttressed by

autobiographical elements, and he integrated them within a deep, old, traditional structure that today possesses the attributes of anonymity. The narrative of his personal past achieved the impersonal quality of the old, inherited, crystallized order of Noh.

The Noh of the lowest rank

The *waki* conjures up warriors or sorcerers that live on in the minds of the people of a certain area. His role is to initiate and assist the return of the ghost who then performs exploits upon which the *waki* looks as a mere spectator. The *waki* watches these dances impassively with his mind's eye. The past is materialized before him in its own autonomous way.

Kantor, the man in black, stayed away from such abstraction and plunged headlong into the dance of ghosts which he himself orchestrated masterfully. Far from bearing any Japanese trace, his restlessness was linked to European neuroses. But this difference was precisely the reason why he should not be excessively, if not improperly, compared to a *waki*.

In the Noh theater, beneath the rags of the present, the *shite*—the leading character—reveals what he has kept of his former splendor when he was a young prince or a fierce warrior. The return to the past generates some beauty. With Kantor, on the other hand, the resurrected universe partook of the carnival, the fair, the boisterous parade of shameless ghosts. To paraphrase, it could be said that Kantor imagined "the Noh of the lowest rank." But in so doing, he achieved the synthesis of the two complementary forms of theater that alternate in a Japanese performance: Noh and Kyogen, the high and the low, the dream and the orgy. *The Theater of Death* was interesting because it brought together the structure of a Noh narrative and the content of a Kyogen performance. While it was neither sought nor calculated, this kinship is worth mentioning because it posits the encounter of a solitary artist with an age-old tradition. For both, to quote Kantor again, theater is "the place of a secret passage, the ford between the hereafter and the world of the living."

On stage, Kantor stood at the intersection between "being of memory," the Proustian narrator, and a "role of memory," the Noh *waki*. He based his theater of mnemonic subjectivity on the order of an ancient form.

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