

Red-Letter Days: (Mis)Translation, Abortive Action, and the Masks of Identity in Robert Lepage's Film *Nô*

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The film drawn in 1998 from the *Words* section of *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* is titled *Nô*, both after the Japanese theatre genre and the English word for the negative answer to the Quebec sovereignty referendum of 1980.¹ For it disavowed nationalist activists such as one of the main characters: Michel, a writer whose failed attempt to translate his concerns about language and identity into revolutionary action is depicted during the October Crisis of 1970. Around his girlfriend Sophie, a young actress representing Canada at the Osaka Expo, allusions abound to Yukio Mishima, presaging the Japanese writer's own abortive nationalist coup on November 25, 1970, and to the paradox of translating letters into action, a central theme of the latter's life and work. It is linked in *Nô* to a central theme of Lepage's oeuvre: the impossibility of faithful translation, that is ultimately the ineradicable hiatus between linguistic signs and the original realities they are supposed to reproduce, or between an elusive originary presence and delayed artful re-presentation.

This is eloquently conveyed in the very first image of the film, starkly depicting the time-gap that will drive its tragi-comic action through miscues and other out-of-step happenings. Two alarm clocks side by side, one on Montreal time and the other on Tokyo time, are meant to provide coordination between the lovers, and yet come to stand for an ultimately explosive mistiming, a non-coincidence between worlds (East and West, male and female, art and action) that may want to connect but do not. This is either because they are out of synch or due to some other mismatch, perhaps in the very nature of identity as a mask, like the *persona* (or Greek *prosopon*) as ancient actor's mask that is the original sense of our word « person ». These two clock faces may already be such masks, adding like an extra layer the time-delay of re-presentation to the elusive presence of the moment of truth. The first shot after the title sequence of a *Nô* play likewise consists of two masks for sale side by side in their boxes a souvenir shop : the smooth face of a woman and the wrathful face of a demon, suggesting a warrior. During the *Nô* play, the two faces of Hanako and Harold, secondary characters who will succeed in connecting

against all odds, also appear side by side reflected in the glass panes of their respective translation booths, pointing to the ambivalent mediating role of language in this series of metaphors of duality.

But the first sense of bad timing suggested by the two alarm clocks is also the last one to be shown applying between the central characters Sophie and Michel; in their conversation in the 1980 epilogue, when the subject of having a child comes up, it turns out Michel may want one now more than she does, but would have found it impossible to have one if Sophie had announced she was pregnant in 1970, when « they » wanted to change the world through political activism. As indeed she was at the time: the first sign of her pregnancy came when she became nauseous and had to leave the *Nô* play at the beginning. This was the same play being reported about in the TV news Michel was watching in Montreal, where *Nô* was presented as a heritage of the samurai warrior class. And as Lepage has said in an interview, *Nô* is Japanese identity; so, conversely, national, political, and even personal identity may be theatre, as will be demonstrated by Mishima's theatrical coup embodying the samurai code down to *seppuku*—i.e. ritual self-disembowelment, as well as by the histrionics of another playwright's FLQ activism.² The *Nô* play in question (a fictional one, since its plot does not appear in listings of the repertoire) is summarized by the TV journalist voiceover as being about an exiled young woman who, having attempted to drown her sorrows in an impetuous stream, finds her way back by following the glow of a fire lighted by her warrior lover.

This is actually Sophie's story in the film, a fact symbolized when her friend Hanako gives her a parting gift of a fan she says is the same one as in the *Nô* play. For Sophie is a young woman exiled in Japan by her work as an actress, who will drown her inner turmoil about the child she carries in sake and bourbon, on the dance-floor of the notorious Quebec Pavilion disco, and in the arms of the dismal Canadian attaché Walter, before coming back to her senses and starting to recall her commitment to the nationalist activist Michel when she is woken up by the on-again off-again red neon glow of a big Japanese character outside her hotel window. This kanji character for « *ho* », meaning « store », may call to mind the Chinese character for « Great » outlined by a dotted pattern of greeting fires for ancestors on the slopes of Mount Nyoigadake overlooking Kyoto during the Bon feast of the dead. In this lurid red glare, Sophie suddenly feels nauseous, due no doubt to the combined effects of her pregnant state, of the sight of the man in her bed, and of to the pangs of her conscience.

I may however point out that the shape of this red letter on which scene 20 opens suggests it is the crux of this comedy of errors, where all the storylines intersect. It is thus a direct echo of the shattered glass of the camera of the photobooth that François-Xavier, the fellow troupe member whose unrequited love Sophie escaped in Walter's arms, has struck after slapping himself several times over before it, re-enacting the involuntary violence of the practice slaps he received from Sophie in rehearsal, and whose impact he felt as that of love itself: a *coup de foudre* or thunderbolt not unlike the red character as a repeated violent flash. François-Xavier's punch through the photobooth's pane is itself intercut with the shattering of the windows of the Montreal basement apartment where Michel and his comrades have been preparing to deliver a bomb to explode at noon. This is why Michel was keeping two alarm clocks, as seen in the film's opening shot: one was destined to be used as a timer for the bomb, but he had been using it until then to keep track of what time it was for Sophie in Japan. However, his accomplice had not noticed this different time when joining the alarm clock to the bomb, and Michel realized in the nick of time this meant it would explode prematurely at 10 A.M.—That is at midnight Japan time, when Walter's wife Patricia missed the last train for Tokyo at the Osaka Expo station and thus had to come back to town, where she would eventually discover her husband's unfaithfulness. But first, while recomposing in front of the photobooth's mirror the mask of her hairdo and make-up, as she had upon first arriving in Osaka, she finds the pictures of self-battering just left there by François-Xavier; leaning inside, she is startled by a final flash as she inspects the shattered glass.

Walter had phantasized about his infidelity in the very same spot early in the film when she first touched up her face while talking to him, thereby distracting him so that his own photobooth images were ruined. The cracks in their individual masks were thus shown in relation to the widening rift between them, culminating in Patricia's request for divorce. In spite of keeping up diplomatic appearances of a united couple, their minds had been in different places all along.—Perhaps not unlike Quebec and the ROC, to use the simile applied to their own couple by Michel and Sophie when they muse about the 1980 referendum and come to the conclusion of founding a family. But in 1970, their ties are already deeper than their strained relations, geographical distance, and independent ways might suggest. It is their interference with Michel's activist plot that causes it to blow up in all their faces, due to the unsynchronized clocks by which they live their emotional attachments and vocational commitments.

Their entanglement reaches even further, since Sophie's hints to her friend Hanako at the karaoke bar suggest her pregnancy may be the result of an encounter with one of Michel's comrades. René is then glimpsed watching uncomfortably as Michel calls Sophie's room and is answered by a sleepy Walter, leading him to assume she has found someone else. Not only has she betrayed him with his friend, but she has literally slept with the federalist enemy. And yet, Sophie is moved to rush back to her warrior lover upon hearing he is in danger of being arrested under the War Measures Act signed by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau at four in the morning of October 15. That was the very moment when she had unexpectedly called from Japan intending to tell him of her condition, which led to a breakdown in communication as the arrival of Michel's comrades interrupted this counter-productive exchange of misunderstandings, which prompted a fellow actress to suggest to Sophie her boyfriend could only have answered the door for another woman at that time of night. Political involvement is thus significantly mistaken for erotic involvement.

Consequently, betrayal hangs like a threat over love relationships as it does in its primary context of political affiliations, which is explicitly invoked to present it as being in the nature of language itself in an exchange at the karaoke bar where Sophie has found refuge from her hotel room. There she finds the interpreters Harold from Vancouver and Hanako from Hiroshima, and asks the latter about the song she just interpreted. Harold translates her answers for the benefit of their Afghan colleague Aziz: « It's called *Sukiyaki*. Someone sings it in French, but the translator really screwed up the lyrics. The spirit is totally different. » Hanako thereupon proceeds to relay the opinion of « un ami écrivain qui dit que les mots sont comme des masques, et qu'à cause des mots, la pensée est travestie. » But Harold translates instead that « because of words, thoughts are betrayed; » a translation that, though not incorrect, proves its own point by failing to render the double-meaning of « travesti » in French, where it first means « disguised into something other than its original nature, » and therefore is used of a « transvestite » who dresses like the opposite gender. If this is clearly an allusion to the female roles played by male actors in Nô theatre, the character of Hanako seems to be referring to an appropriated version of the real-life literary figure of Yukio Mishima. For the celebrated author of *Confessions of a Mask* who ended up acting upon this conviction that words stand in the way of the truth they point to, and so deliberately turned upon himself the sword whose unity with the pen he proclaimed as a samurai ideal worth living and dying for once more. Hanako contrasts the case of her friend with that of Rimbaud, who stopped writing and turned to arms-dealing, but was not political as such, unlike the real Mishima, who did not altogether

abandon literature, even as he devoted more and more time and energy to the private army he had recently founded: the Shield Society, as explicitly pointed out by Patricia during her political exchange with Sophie at the restaurant earlier. But of her fictional Mishima who remains unnamed, Hanako says: « C'est vraiment triste qu'il se soit tu si jeune, » which Harold, hearing « tué » instead of « tu » for « fallen silent », presciently translates as : « It's very sad that he killed himself at such an early age. » Protesting that this is not what she meant to say, Hanako then laughingly comments : « Traduttore, traditore », which Harold translates as « Translator, traitor. »

Lepage's poetic device of having silence misconstrued as suicide (be it that of the man Mishima or of any writer insofar as he sacrifices his art on the altar of politics—as does Michel) shows that by betraying the masks that words are, translation can get to the actual truth better than the original utterances themselves. This is the justification of art as a lie that tells the truth, and never more so than when it does not conceal the fact that it is a lie, and so openly uses masks, like Nô actors. This bears comparison with the scene in Robert Lepage's *Tectonic Plates* where Jennifer, the transsexual host of a literature program on New York public radio, to soothe her would-be Alaskan lover Kevin's shock at being told she is not a real woman, suggests his mistaking of her as one should be seen not as a lie, but as poetry, and so truth of a kind; whereupon Kevin strangles her to death, since he cannot admit of any but a literal correspondence between words and reality, and focuses his rage on her speech organ to close the gap.

In Lepage's *Nô*, this gap between appearances and their referents, that is also the space of poetic truth, is shown by the actor whose broad masculine face clearly exceeds on all sides the diminutive mask of a delicate princess in the Nô performance over which opening titles are shown right after the television statement of the synopsis of the play, which as we have seen tells the truth of the whole film in poetic nutshell. This stands in sharp contrast to the constant role-playing of the diplomat Walter and his journalist wife Patricia, who claims she opted for truth over her first love of theatre, and spitefully portrays actors as exhibitionists who are mere tools of another's creativity. For she deems the creative act to be a solitary one, and therefore expresses contempt for collective creation of the kind practiced by members of the Quebec troupe, and of which she ironically happens to be a creature as a character in a Lepage production! When the masks of conventional clichés and false friendliness briefly fall off as a result of Sophie's drunken outburst in the restaurant, Patricia explicitly likens Quebec's left-wing nationalist terrorists to Japan's right-wing equivalent in Yukio Mishima's ultranationalist private army, underlining

the contradiction between his shadowy politics and his brilliant artistry.—A contradiction that might also apply to the obscure Quebec writer Michel, if he actually bothered to publish anything. For is it not Michel rather than Mishima who has pretty much forsaken artistic practice for political activism?

Hanako's unnamed writer friend is thus at some level a Michel/Mishima composite, who is also lampooned in the mock-patriotic ending of *La Dame de chez Maxim's*, the obscure Feydeau play doctored by Lepage's troupe in *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* to fit their narrative's concerns about colonialism and nationalism. In the process, it has also become a play about Mishima, which recovers the cycle's discarded original idea of having the imaginary Quebec troupe perform one of Mishima's *Five Modern Nô Plays*. The trace of this ambivalence carried all through the cycle's creative history³ appears in the film when Patricia needles Sophie by suggesting an unflattering comparison between Feydeau, the superficial author of the comedy she stars in, and the probing novelist Mishima; but she does not seem to realize how this comparison actually applies in the case of this particular play, as Mishima might have granted, since he was conscious that very often people cried when he was being humorous and laughed when he was dead serious, as with his private army. The tragic and the comical are always but a hair's breadth away from each other in life as on the stage. The serious politics of committed artists who indulge in messianic nationalism can thus be read into the oracular pronouncements of the prostitute played by Sophie when she hides under a carpet and rises like a ghost, just as such supernatural figures from the past or from other realms intervene in a Nô play. The ghost commands Mme Petypon to go wait next to the obelisk on the Place de la Concorde until a man speaks to her a word that will cause her to beget a son. As a king, « this child will be the man for whom France has been waiting. He will rule the country. Well, see you later! It's time for me to vanish into space, and head back to the heavenly sphere. » The doctored Feydeau play within an adapted Lepage play then ends with chorus shouts of « Pour la patrie! » and « Vive la France! » All this calls to mind the providential man Charles De Gaulle, admired by Mishima—who had the general's tailor design his own army's uniforms, but also especially important for Quebec nationalists like Michel. For as Sophie points out about French Canadians' linguistic alienation as a colonized people, unwittingly proving her own point by invoking France's authority: « Même le général de Gaulle l'a dit, 'Vive le Québec libre', tabarnak! »

De Gaulle's famous word from the Montreal City Hall balcony at the end of his triumphal ride up the Chemin du Roy from Quebec City on the occasion of the 1967 Montreal Expo—this word did at the time seem to beget a child:

through it, Old France was authorizing New France to come into its own as the sovereign nation of Quebec. At one level, this is the child whose fate is undecided until it spontaneously aborts once the indecisive Sophie has actually made it back to her nationalist lover's Montreal address, as she is roughly apprehended by policemen investigating the blasted crime scene. Ten years later, this «child»: the project of a sovereign Quebec, aborts again with the «No» that decides the outcome of the non-violent, legal route to sovereignty culminating in the 1980 referendum. Though Sophie points out this is no mere abortion for the victorious believers in the continuance of the Canadian project, Michel quickly adds that the status quo cannot resolve anything, for lack of a substantial common project between English and French Canada. This is an allusion to the even more ambiguous outcome of the 1995 referendum, fresh in the mind of Lepage as he made the film a couple of years later, as reflected in its ending, where the conversation of Sophie and Michel veers from the public to the intimate while keeping the vocabulary of the political within the metaphor of the couple. Sophie seems to be saying neither yes nor no to Michel's idea of having a child to cement their union: an indecisive «Quin» is her answer at first, which is interpreted as a 49/51% electoral result, so that Michel sets out on a campaign to win her over by non-verbal means to a simple majority assent of 50% + 1. The film ends as they are about to actually make love rather than talk about their relationship, and Lepage's closing words in the script, saying that this «announces a fruitful future», also apply to the political sphere. Yet it is beyond the sphere of overtly political, ideological discourse, with its insistence on bringing all questions back to yes-or-no answers, that a wordless answer is provided by life itself, by the dumb fact of daily coexistence, both more straightforward and more complex in the acknowledgement of the mutual entanglement and coemergence of individual and collective selves than the rigid masks of explicit definitions and exclusive identities would allow.⁴ Sophie and Michel are thus also saying yes to the ambivalent mixed bag that is actual Quebec identity, with an implicit acceptance of whatever their future child may turn out to be (perhaps even queer, if we read back this political ambivalence into the gendered metaphor).

Aside from contrasting with federalist bourgeois liberal Patricia's insistence that a woman has to choose—as she has—between motherhood and an active professional life, this acceptance of what might be considered like an abortive runt by rigid standards of ideological purity is clearly linked to the miscegenational love between the translators Harold and Hanako. Their parting kiss in the flash of the Osaka photobooth was visually likened to the flash of the Hiroshima explosion that had robbed Hanako of her eyesight, and that provided a bridge with the bomb blast in Michel's apartment by way of the

flash of a police investigator's camera surveying the scene as Sophie arrived there. Hanako was stunned by the stranger Harold's loving acceptance of her, having never thought a man would want her as a wife since Hiroshima survivors are not popular in Japan, due to the likelihood of their having deformed offspring. By wanting her nevertheless, Harold also accepts in advance the monstrous that might result from their mixed union if conventional standards of normalcy were adhered to. It is significant that early on in the film, the Japanese superhero Ultraman is battling a mutant monster on the television screen while Sophie is phoning Michel to tell him she is expecting—a child to be embraced or an unwanted growth to be expunged? She is not sure herself, and this ambivalence will haunt her like a monster until its object is killed off by the A bomb/FLQ/photo(booth) flash. As for Hanako, Harold's unconditional acceptance sealed by a kiss prompts her to remove her glasses for the first time since the flash of Hiroshima blinded her. Her mask, likened from the start with Nô masks, and even reminiscent of Ultraman, comes off to reveal blue eyes that transgress Japanese standards of national purity. The wordless, erotically enacted acceptance of the potentially monstrous difference and politically scandalous ambivalence of complex selves is the key to both couples' destinies, and to that of their respective countries, love being but a creative form of the trauma that masks and words both mediate and perpetuate. It is not the first time in film history that the ambiguous power of love is equated with the force that blasted Hiroshima and with the scars that it left; but Lepage has proven amply worthy of tackling the theme of *Hiroshima mon amour* anew from the angle of Quebec's unsuspected connections with Japan around issues of identity, coming to a head in their respective terrorist crises forty days apart in the fall of 1970.

Footnotes

- ¹ Robert Lepage, interviewed by Michel Coulombe at the end of the book version of the script of *Nô*. Laval, QC: Les 400 coups, 1998, p. 100.
- ² *Id.*: «Le nô est un art identitaire, c'est le Japon. Au début du film, un acteur nô met un masque de femme, se recentre, et entre dans ce cadre. Au même moment, au Québec, un dramaturge en pleine crise d'identité, loin de celle qu'il aime, met son masque de révolutionnaire et entre en scène.»
- ³ I owe these valuable inside reports on the play's development to a conversation with Karen Fricker after this paper was delivered at Canada House on June 2, 2006.
- ⁴ Lepage's position can be likened—down to the intemperate reactions it elicits from orthodox Quebec nationalists—to the one that historian Jocelyn

Létourneau, of Quebec City's Université Laval, was then about to articulate, seeing the ambiguity and ambivalence of the Quebec identity as of the Canadian identity as distinctive, valuable, pragmatically worked out national traits rather than as a failure to achieve a true national identity, e.g. in his article « Pour une révolution de la mémoire collective. Histoire et conscience historique chez les Québécois francophones » in the first issue (Fall 1998) of the review *Argument*, the organ of a new generation of « post-Quiet Revolution » Quebec intellectuals (see Christian Roy, « Echoes of George Grant in Recent Critiques of Post-Quiet Revolution Quebec », in Ian Angus, ed., *Athens and Jerusalem: George Grant's Theology, Philosophy and Politics*. University of Toronto Press, forthcoming), corresponding to a new wave of Quebec cinema of which Robert Lepage has been seen as the first exponent (see George Melnyk, « Quebec's Next Generation, From Lauzon to Turpin », in *Cineaction*, No. 61, 2003, pp. 10–17).

