

INTRODUCTION

The Exact Moment

‘I have come to the conclusion that you had better start a new issue of the Collected Works with a volume of dramatic criticism’, Yeats wrote to his publisher, A. H. Bullen, on 16 March 1913. ‘It would contain the only serious criticism of the new craft of the Theatre. It is the exact moment for it.’¹ Fifteen years earlier, not long before the first production of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, Yeats had used very similar language when writing to William Sharp about founding a theatre. ‘Our Irish Literary Theatre – always supposing there is no war – will come at abosutiely [*sic*] the right moment. Last year would have been too soon.’² In the period between these two letters – 1898 to 1913 – Yeats never lost a fundamentally theatrical sense of the importance of ‘the exact moment’. In the larger scheme of things, Yeats’s writing for the theatre is imbued with a profound historical sense of living at a juncture of crisis and possibility, a window of time in which it would be possible, and perhaps even necessary, to create a new poetics for the theatre. From the mid-1890s onwards, he would seize that moment, not just by writing and staging plays, and by co-founding and managing the theatre that would become the Abbey in 1904, but also by writing about the theatre in contexts ranging from newspaper articles to public lectures, and all the while shaping a major body of theatre theory. We can now begin to see the totality of this work as an organum for the theatre as significant as that of any of his European contemporaries in the first half of the twentieth century.

The title of this book – *Yeats on Theatre* – is deliberately intended to invoke those transformative collections of twentieth-century theatre theory, books that have been with us for more than half a century and continue to shape the ways in which we watch and make theatre. This bookshelf would include John Willett’s *Brecht on Theatre*, Artaud on *Theatre*, Sartre on *Theater*, and others.³ However, unlike those books, *Yeats on Theatre* is not an anthology. We are now at a point in Yeats studies where the vast bulk of his writing – including many of his unpublished

manuscripts – have become available in scholarly editions, including a 2003 volume entitled *The Irish Dramatic Movement* in the most recent collected works.⁴ However, even the title of this volume betrays the historicist road by which Yeats's theatre has most often been approached: as the work of the co-founder of a specifically Irish theatre that was part of a wider cultural nationalist movement. It is certainly the case that reading Yeats in this way has been richly productive, and has produced some of the best writing on Yeats's theatre that we have, going back to volumes such as James Flannery's *Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* and forward to a long list of more recent work, which would include Ben Levitas's *Theatre of Nation*, P. J. Mathews's *Revival*, or Lauren Arrington's work on the Abbey and the Irish state.⁵ There have been some exceptions to this approach, most notably the work of Katharine Worth, who places Yeats 'at the centre of the modern movement in the theatre',⁶ and more recently Michael McAteer has argued for an understanding of Yeats's theatrical practice in a wider tradition of European theatre, placing him alongside figures such as Pirandello or Ernst Toller, arguing that 'whatever their shortcomings in the theatre, Yeats's plays contributed significantly to the major developments in European theatre between 1890 and 1939, including Naturalism, Symbolism, Expressionism and Surrealism'.⁷ And yet, such voices are still relatively rare, and as recently as 2015, Alexandra Poulain would observe of Yeats that 'the amount of work devoted to his plays is still negligible compared to the impressive scholarship which addresses other aspects of his work'.⁸ That same year, Fintan O'Toole declared it 'shameful' that Yeats 'still gets such a raw deal in his own theatre',⁹ the Abbey. It is rarer still to find Yeats considered as a theorist of theatre, someone who continually obliges us to rethink what theatre has been and could be, in the way that continues to be true of Brecht and Artaud, for instance. Writing in 2012, Pierre Longuenesse would describe Yeats as a 'victim of paradox'; a writer widely known and admired as a Nobel Laureate, his theatre is 'little known among the community of scholars of theatre arts' ('victime d'un paradoxe', 'peu connu . . . de la communauté des chercheurs en arts du spectacle').¹⁰ And yet, the argument here is that this is precisely where Yeats belongs. When read as a coherent (*albeit* evolving) whole, Yeats's theatre theory has more than simply historical value, or meaning within an Irish context: it is an account of what theatre per se can be.

On the face of it, this might sound like a self-evident claim. After all, Yeats began his speech to the Royal Academy of Sweden when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923 by suggesting that 'the English committee would never have sent you my name if I had written no

plays, no dramatic criticism, if my lyric poetry had not a quality of speech practised upon the stage, perhaps even . . . if it were not in some degree the symbol of a movement'.¹¹ And yet, Yeats's biographer Roy Foster once characterised Yeats's claim that the Swedish Academy was honouring him for his contribution to the modern theatre as 'laughable'.¹² At its most basic, the tendency to overlook Yeats as a theatre artist comes from a habit of mind of seeing him as a poet first and foremost, who happened to write for the stage; for whom, indeed, the theatre was often a sort of unfortunate distraction, in the same category as astrology or attending séances. For his part, in 1908, for instance, Yeats felt the need to assure his American patron John Quinn that 'I dont [*sic*] want you to think that I am so stage struck that I am neglecting my real work writing poetry'.¹³ As Foster comments of Yeats's increasing involvement with the theatre from 1900 onwards, 'to many, WBY . . . seemed to be obeying a deceiving voice as he plunged further into drama and away from lyric'.¹⁴ Even today, 'as far as readers of Yeats are concerned', notes Bernard O'Donoghue, 'even the most committed tend to reserve the right to ignore the plays altogether, or just to bring them in where they cast light on the poems'.¹⁵ In this respect, one of the earliest studies of his late plays, by Helen Vendler, sets the tone, when she lumps together *A Vision* and the late plays on the grounds that they are worth studying primarily as context for 'the post-1917 poetry'.¹⁶ It would be possible to multiply examples here, and for many years it would have been a comparatively rare Yeats scholar who wrote, as Karen Dorn did in 1984, that 'Yeats was involved in some of the most innovative theatre of the early twentieth century'.¹⁷ Even Nicholas Grene, who has written at some length on the Yeats's theatre, at one point expresses the view that 'Yeats is, in the last analysis, a great dramatic poet and not a great poetic dramatist'.¹⁸

Once we overcome the propensity to see Yeats's theatre work as an unfortunate diversion, assembling a coherent body of theory from the writings of an instinctively anti-systematic thinker who railed against 'abstraction' presents its own challenges. As much as Yeats spent so many of his days founding societies and tracing the lineaments of complex systems, and displayed an almost compulsive instinct to turn any passing observation into a principle or a theorem, he was equally capable of denouncing (on principle, one might say) abstract thought of all kinds. 'If we do not see daily beautiful life at which we look as old men and women do at young children', he warned in his 1909 journal, 'we become theorists'.¹⁹ Admittedly, being an anti-systematic thinker allergic to abstraction is not necessarily an impediment to influence in the world of theatre. It never stood in the way of Artaud, for instance, of whom

Grotowski (another not-notably-systematic thinker), wrote: ‘his writings have little methodological meaning . . . they are an astounding prophecy, not a program’.²⁰ By this measure, Yeats – who it will become apparent shared rather more with Artaud than we might have thought – was capable both of astounding prophecy, and of ‘a program’. When Yeats’s writing on the theatre is put together as a whole, it not only reveals a coherent philosophical framework; it also contains a series of practical precepts that constitute a workable theatre aesthetic.

Along with the challenge of assessing the theories of a thinker for whom ‘theorist’ was a pejorative, there is also the thorny question as to how seriously we can take a body of dramatic theory developed in tandem with a dramatic *oeuvre* that has long been seen as lacking in a stage life. Terence Brown puts it succinctly: ‘Yeats’s plays have found few advocates beyond enthusiasts in the academy.’²¹ Again, this view might be countered in two ways, firstly by tracing the performance history of Yeats’s plays, which would show not only that they have been performed more often than one might think, but that they can be very effective when they are performed, with recent examples including Simon Starling’s theatre piece and installation *At Twilight* in 2016.²² Leaving aside, for instance, the Lyric Theatre in Belfast’s commitment to Yeats’s plays in the 1950s, there has also been a critical legacy of performance as research that goes back at least fifty years. It extends from Reg Skene’s *The Cuchulain Plays of W. B. Yeats* (1974), based on his production of the Cuchulain cycle in 1969, through to Flannery’s and Worth’s work in the 1970s, both of which drew on their respective authors’ production experience of the plays. More recently, Akiko Manabe has been producing *kyogen* productions of Yeats’s Nō plays to explore the ways in which the Japanese forms he adapted can be fed back into the plays,²³ and Melinda Szuts has been producing the Plays for Dancers in order to better understand their use of stage space.²⁴ From the opposite tack, we could simply accept the judgement that Yeats is no Synge or O’Casey when it comes to filling an auditorium, and once again draw a parallel with Artaud. The question then becomes: when was the last time anyone saw a production of *The Spurt of Blood* or *The Cenci*? The answer does not make Artaud any less interesting or valid as a thinker about the theatre. Indeed, precisely the reverse is probably true, and there is a line of argument that runs through figures as diverse as Susan Sontag, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze that would insist that this failure to produce a commodifiable artwork is precisely where Artaud’s genius is located. As Foucault puts it, ‘Artaud’s madness does not slip through the fissures of the work of art; his madness is precisely the absence of the work of art’, and his

theatre thus constitutes what Jane Goodall calls ‘art without works’.²⁵ At the very least, the case of Artaud should remind us that we do not have to be convinced as to the stage-worthiness of Yeats’s plays to take him seriously as a theorist of the theatre.

All of these questions have been swirling around for many years, and they will resurface in various forms as we assemble the various strands of Yeats’s theatre theory. Most are entangled in one way or another with the question of Yeats’s own sense of himself as a thinker in the vanguard of modernist innovation, which once again can (and has) been argued either way. Ronald Schuchard, for instance, maintains that Yeats resisted ‘realism and modernism in all their forms to the end’, but there are equally good arguments for Yeats as a kind of exemplary modernist figure.²⁶ The simple answer here is one that applies, in some form, to almost any critical crux that comes into focus with Yeats: his thought proceeds by opposites. ‘We are in the midst of a great revolution of thought’, he declared in 1897, ‘which is touching literature and speculation alike; an insurrection against everything which assumes that the external and material are the only fixed things, the only standards of reality.’²⁷ That note of supreme assurance rarely wavers, even if it becomes more acidic and querulous in the later years. It is only in sidelong glimpses, such as an entry in an occasional journal he kept in 1908, that we find him wondering ‘if I am a romantic of some kind, or only an ignorant man, puzzled in the middle of a revolution that has changed all about him’.²⁸ All certainly was changing in the years that Yeats was most closely involved in writing about the theatre, and his stance in the 1890s and early 1900s is often that of the prophet at a time when all around him the basic foundations of theatre – and of thought – were being questioned and reformulated. His posture would change as the world around him changed; but he never lost the assurance that he saw further than those around him.

Yeats’s sense of himself as a revolutionary in the theatre is grounded in his experiences of the 1890s, when he had a tangible sense of seeing something new coming into being. For instance, his 1897 announcement of ‘a great revolution of thought’ was made in the course of a review of Maurice Maeterlinck’s *Treasure of the Humble*, which one critic has called ‘the most crucial and tangible link between both writers’.²⁹ ‘It is idle to think’, Maeterlinck writes, ‘that, by means of words, any real communication can ever pass from one man to another.’³⁰ It is easy to dismiss this as the typical of the strain of pseudo-gnostic mysticism that runs through so many symbolist pronouncements of the 1890s. However, it can equally form a point of departure for what we now recognise as the problematic of

language on stage. That line could take us through Artaud (writing in 1925 that ‘All writing is filth’³¹), through to Beckett (writing to Axel Kaun in 1937 that ‘language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things [or the nothingness] lying behind it’³²), and on to Jacques Rancière, who, as Emilie Morin reminds us, has recently returned to Maeterlinck as a key theorist of ‘the impersonal and unconscious conditions of speech itself’.³³ A parallel line might take us through from the Heidegger who writes that ‘we human beings remain committed to and within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else’,³⁴ and hence on to the post-phenomenological problematic of language that begins with Derrida’s reading of Husserl, where it has lodged as arguably the central crux in contemporary thought, a situation that Alain Badiou sums up as ‘the materialist dialectic’ in which ‘there are only bodies and languages’.³⁵ At the very least we need to keep in mind that when a writer such as Yeats is making sweeping pronouncements on the nature of language (for instance), he is doing so at a moment when language is being subjected to an interrogation from which we have not yet recovered.

Yeats was fond of quoting Blake’s line from *Jerusalem*, ‘I must create a System, or be enslav’d by another Man’s’;³⁶ however, Blake’s lines meant something very different in 1820 than they did in 1920, when the systems of others were collapsing. Yeats’s frantic work to create his own system is an effort to recover the ground of metaphysics, and in this respect, he can be placed alongside the diverse projects of Heidegger and Eliot in his own time, or Badiou in our own. In the case of Badiou, Yeats emerges unexpectedly as our contemporary. As a kind of thought experiment, we can step out of the various narratives of modernism that might be evoked (political, philosophical, technological), and see him as another kind of contemporary, in the light of Jean-François Lyotard’s observation in *The Postmodern Condition* that ‘a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern’. First of all, we need to state clearly that this is not a belated attempt to find a putative ‘postmodern Yeats’; the time for that has long passed. However, if we strip away all of the popular baggage that has attached itself to the word ‘postmodern’ and has made it all but unusable, there is a phrase in Lyotard’s formulation that may help us to capture what is so elusive in Yeats’s thought, giving it the paradoxical shadow both of the out-of-date and the yet-to-appear: ‘not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant’.³⁷

In this light, if Yeats has never had a comfortable home in the modern theatre of the first half of the twentieth century, it may be that his work for

the stage makes more sense in the frame of an aesthetics of postdramatic performance practice. Again, this is a position that needs nuanced language; ‘modern theatre’ is not necessarily synonymous with ‘modernist theatre’, much less, as Hans-Thies Lehmann reminds us, is ‘postdramatic theatre’ simply the theatrical mode of the postmodern.³⁸ At the very least, it is worth asking if Yeats’s theatre makes more sense in the twenty-first century than it did in the decades immediately after his death in 1939. In particular, we need to ask if in his attempt to salvage the category of truth, while at the same time recognising that any truth must find its home in bodies and in language, Yeats is asking a question that is as urgent in our own time as it was in his.

This idea of a constant nascency might be a way to explain why, in spite of his comments to Bullen in 1913, Yeats never really writes a comprehensive organum for the theatre (short or otherwise), although a few essays – ‘The Theatre of Beauty’ and ‘A People’s Theatre’ come close, as does the collection of early essays that he brought together at one point as ‘The Irish Dramatic Movement’. To put it simply, it may be that the fugitive nature of Yeats’s writing on the theatre has its own significance. It can be read as a persistent rewriting of the moment at which time, space, language, self, and representation were all coming undone, but when a condition that existed before their undoing – let us call it ‘truth’ – could still be summoned. From his earliest lyric poems through to the abstract speculations of *A Vision* to the final angry outbursts of *On the Boiler*, at the foundation of all that Yeats wrote was an attempt to counter (but never overcome) a world in which, as he put it in a poem first published in 1893, ‘time and the world are ever in flight’.³⁹ One of the things that makes Yeats much so of his time, and increasingly of ours (in spite of his artful adoption of the archaic), was his Heraclitean sense of perpetual flux, his acute awareness of time not as duration but as transformation.

In this sense, Yeats takes seriously Bergson’s comment (made the year before Maeterlinck’s remarks on silence) that ‘to perceive is to immobilise’.⁴⁰ In the early lyrics (and in the early plays), this temporal acuity takes the form of an aesthetics of the transient, an appreciation of a beauty – epitomised by the fleeting minutes of twilight – that by its nature cannot last, a proleptic mourning for that which is not yet gone. As his work develops, the same sense of being caught up in an unappeasable whirlwind of change produces its opposite, the longing for fixity. ‘Only an aching heart’, he writes in ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’, ‘conceives a changeless work of art.’⁴¹ From early in his career, Yeats

clearly believed that the role of the artist was both to embrace and to resist in the same gesture the constant flux of the world. The artist had to grasp the necessity of change (and hence of destruction), to accept it (in what was a form of tragic heroism), and ultimately to inhabit it. Only from that position was it possible to forge its antithesis: the ‘changeless work of art’, which is nonetheless doomed ultimately to be swallowed up once again. ‘Like all proper Romantics’, George Mills Harper once observed, ‘Yeats believed that the creation of a new order necessarily entails the destruction of the old’, citing Blake’s lines (well known to Yeats), ‘All that can be annihilated must be annihilated/ That the Children of Jerusalem may be saved from slavery.’⁴² Again, the parallel with Heidegger is worth making, here in relation to Heidegger’s concept of *Destruktion*: the ‘loosening up of this hardened tradition’⁴³ that masks Being – even if, in Yeats’s case, that ‘tradition’ was increasingly of his own making.

Underlying this acute awareness of *Destruktion* as necessity was a mode of thinking that was fundamentally theatrical. This goes deeper than having an actor’s carefully cultivated sense of timing (always keeping in mind that for Yeats, no less than had been true for his countryman, Oscar Wilde, the public life would always be a performance). ‘There is a relationship between discipline and the theatrical sense’, Yeats writes in *Estrangement* in 1909: ‘If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are and assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others. Active virtue as distinguished from passive acceptance of a current code is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask.’⁴⁴ The artist (and the artist as the epitome of what it was to be human) was, for Yeats, effectively an actor. Just as the ‘aching heart’ conceives ‘the changeless work of art’, the adoption of what Yeats calls ‘a second self’ is the embrace of that which is opposite to ourselves, to our times, and hence to the negative sense of ‘tradition’ that underlies Heidegger’s *Destruktion*. Like acting, the cultivation of a mask requires a discipline; and, like acting, it is active, conscious, and only accomplished through the mastery of a craft which must be exacting, but which also acknowledges its own ephemerality. When the curtain goes down, the performance is over until it starts again. Theatre, as Alain Badiou reminds us, ‘is a circumscribed event. There can be no permanent theatre.’⁴⁵ In short, in those first years of the twentieth century, in a world suddenly bereft of permanence, a particular vision of theatre increasingly became for Yeats more than just a metaphor for wider questions, but the most fitting site through which those questions could be

asked, if not answered. To put it simply, the theatre, for Yeats, is never simply the theatre. It is a mode of active thought.

We can understand the extent to which Yeats's thought was theatrical at a foundational level by turning briefly to what must be one of the most remarkable records any artist has ever produced of their thought in the making: the experiments with automatic writing. This can bring us into territory that any critical practice founded on a hermeneutics of suspicion will find difficult to traverse. 'In studying Yeats's long exploration of the realms of magic, mythical beings, and communication with spirits', admits Catherine Paul, '[we] . . . must take very seriously the province of the supernatural – a province with which modern scholarship, like empirical science, is deeply uncomfortable.'⁴⁶ Almost immediately after his marriage to George Hyde-Lees on 20 October 1917, Yeats's wife began producing automatic script, in page after page of replies to questions dictated to her by spirit mediums. From late October 1917 until 29 March 1920, Yeats and George spent many hours on their automatic writing sessions, which were followed in turn by a series of what they called 'sleeps', or trances, during which George produced more writing, a phase that lasted until the summer of 1922. In the end, they produced, as George Mills Harper relates in his exhaustive account of these materials, '3600 pages of AS [automatic script] in some 450 sittings, several NBs [notebooks] containing records of visions in sleep, two large workbooks, and a card index or file containing 782 cards', apart from anything lost or misplaced.⁴⁷ Once this material is mentioned, of course, the problematic nature of its provenance hovers into view; to put it simply, we have to ask if we need to believe in ghosts to take it seriously. 'The proportion of conscious to unconscious suggestion relayed by George will always be debated', Roy Foster comments: 'but for much of the time she must have known what she was doing'⁴⁸ – as in the message from the spirits on 28 April 1919: 'Let medium take hot bath then write.'⁴⁹ Nonetheless, if there is no need to become a card-carrying spiritualist to take Yeats's thought seriously, we also need to recognise that the world beyond the visible for him was complex, densely populated and, above all, real. 'My own belief', he declared in a letter to Sturge Moore in 1926, 'is that we know nothing but "spirits and their relations"'.⁵⁰

One way to cut the Gordian knot of the automatic script is simply to bracket the question of the origin of the manuscripts (and the unanswerable question as to whether we are reading George, George formulating Yeats's own ideas and feeding them back to him, or, indeed, George channelling actual spirits), and concentrate on the resulting documents as records of thought in a raw form. In this respect, we can see the so-called

'*Vision* papers' as at least partly a record of the languages through which Yeats thought, where we find ideas formulated in terms of astrology, eschatology, psychology, and theories of history, as well as attributing symbolic meaning to a tangled personal life, with the figures of Maud and Iseult Gonne never far from the spirit instructors' minds. From the outset, however, what is important in the present instance is that we can also see both Yeatses thinking through theatre as well. The very earliest of the automatic writing sessions, in George's hand, dated 8 November 1917, begins: 'Turn to the quarter from which Cuchulain comes, then turn to the opposite quarter and invoke him as though you had not the real Cuchulain there' – which is effectively the plot of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, the 'new Cuchulain play on the Noh model – very dramatic & strange', which Yeats had reported working on five days earlier in a letter of 3 November 1917 to Lady Gregory. 'Much that I have felt lately seems coming to it [the play].'⁵¹ By January 1918, the Yeatses were devoting long stretches of the automatic writing sessions to asking their spirit advisors about the theatre in various ways, initially equating the characters in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* to ideas such as 'love', 'desire', and 'passion'. Yeats also used the automatic writing sessions to reflect on the nature of his own thinking, and on the role of theatre in shaping it. 'Is my play a true dream', Yeats asked the spiritual counsellor (or 'Control') known as 'Leaf' in Oxford on 7 January 1918. 'Perfectly true', the spirit responded.⁵² Later in that same session, Yeats asked about equating the meanings of *On Baile's Strand*, *The Green Helmet*, *At the Hawk's Well*, and the 'present play' (*The Only Jealousy of Emer*) to symbols in the zodiac. Later again, Yeats asked: 'What questions do you prefer?' 'Plays because in your minds [*sic*]', came the response.⁵³ 'Are every bodys [*sic*] imaginative works capable of interpretation like these four plays of mine?' Yeats asked a different spirit instructor, Thomas, on 14 January 1918. 'No', he was told. 'Certain are symbolic of their own progress.'⁵⁴ By March of 1919, in a session in which Yeats asked the spirits about the process by which they were communicating with him, the spirits' description of their own habitation is distinctly (perhaps even suspiciously) theatrical, when Yeats is told that in the 'world of spirits' there was a 'dramatist who worked through agents, who each see only their part'.⁵⁵ Again, in this moment of heightened self-reflection – attempting to understand what was an extraordinarily intense period of reflection on the nature of his own thought – the paradigmatic model to which Yeats's mind returns time and time again is the theatre.

In the years between the beginning of the automatic writing in 1917, and when Yeats finally completed *A Vision* in 1925, he spent long months trying