Theatrum Mundi Resurrecta: Shakespeare and W.B. Yeats in `Easter 1916' and The Dreaming of the Bones

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Despite his repeated assessments of the importance of his plays to an understanding of his work as a whole, present-day critics of W. B. Yeats are just as likely to ignore this aspect of his writing as were those who in 1923 awarded Yeats the Nobel Prize in Literature not for his drama but ‘for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation’. Nevertheless, Yeats’s drama in fact bridges the apparent opposition in his poetry between introvert mysticism and extrovert nationalism. Readers and critics, confounded by the complicated relationship between mysticism and politics in Yeats, may be tempted to conclude, with Edward W. Said, that ‘Yeats’s whole system of cycles, pernes, and gyres in any case seems important only as it symbolizes his understandable attempts to lay hold of an extremely distant and extremely orderly reality felt as a refuge from the colonial turbulence before his eyes’ (93). Said’s interpretation divides the two clearly into the means and the end and, consequently, subordinates Yeats’s spiritualism to his commitment to the political reality of contemporary Ireland. However, this classification does not always hold good in his works. For example, The King’s Threshold, in which Seanchan, a legendary bard in ancient Ireland, starves himself to death in protest against the neglect of poets’ rights at Court, can be accounted a demonstration of cultural nationalism in opposition to Britain’s rule by force. But actually Yeats himself declared that the theme of the play was the defence of pure art as distinct from the madness of contemporary politics. To take another instance, if we regard the nightmarish silhouette of the Old Man’s dead mother in Purgatory solely as a symbol of the Irish
Ascendancy’s eugenic fears after independence, the play’s significance as a precursor of Samuel Beckett’s theatre will be lost. Also in ‘The Second Coming’, which Said probably had in mind in the previous quotation, the poet’s apocalyptic tremor is in fact an Eliotian attempt to create a collage using images from Virgil, Shakespeare, and P. B. Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’. Thus, it is manifestly wrong to explain away Yeats’s occultism as a tool for expressing voices from his colonized island. I would like to show, in the following argument, that the fundamental antinomy between mysticism and politics in Yeats can best be described in terms of Theatrum Mundi, ‘the Theatre of the World’, and that his integration of Shakespearean dramaturgy into his work constitutes an important undercurrent in the history of Modernist drama, although this has not been given due recognition by critics. The focus of this paper will be on two works from late 1910s, ‘Easter 1916’ and The Dreaming of the Bones.

‘Easter 1916’ is contained in Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921) and was one of the primary causes for Yeats’s winning the Nobel Prize. The interrelationship between politics and occultism in the poem is especially intimate and intricate. What acts as a bridge between these two apparently dissonant notes is the idea of ‘the theatre of the world’ inlaid in the poem. The topos that the world is but a stage and that a stage can therefore stand for all the world is neither infrequent nor new in the traditions of literature. The idea was widespread in Elizabethan drama and evoked distinctively by Shakespeare. Theatrum Mundi is a highly comprehensive idea and, by epitomizing the whole world as a stage, can be used to hold a variety of contradictions magically together. Shakespeare was a lifelong favourite of and even a model for Yeats, who often referred to Hamlet or King Lear in his critical essays and letters. It appears that Yeats adapted the idea of the Theatrum Mundi for his own use in the poem. Histrionic metaphors in ‘Easter 1916’ help represent the fundamental antinomy in the poet’s mind which is succinctly expressed in the phrase ‘[a] terrible beauty’. In The Dreaming of the Bones (1919), a play that also has the Easter Rising as its theme, the divided voice of the poet, one a public figure who feels social responsibility for the uprising and the other a private individual, is more fully articulated. The inheritance from Shakespeare functions powerfully in some of Yeats’s works, and it anticipates, or is rather an undercurrent in, the rediscovery of Shakespeare in connection with the rise of the absurd drama that occurred a generation later, in the mid-twentieth century.
I: Histrionic Metaphors in ‘Easter 1916’

‘Perhaps the English committees would never have sent you my name’, said Yeats, at the lecture in commemoration of his winning the Nobel Prize in Literature 1923, ‘if I had written no plays, no dramatic criticism, if my lyric poetry had not a quality of speech practiced upon the stage [...]’ (Autobiographies 559). As I have mentioned before, his speculation reveals an interpretative gap between the giver and the receiver of the award; while the selection committee appreciates his poetry and its sophisticated cultural nationalism, the poet himself rather holds that the quintessence of his art, including poetry, is linked to its dramatic elements. However, it should be noted that Yeats’s idea of drama is far more comprehensive than what modern people usually assume drama to be. Juxtaposing ‘plays’ and ‘lyric poetry’ which has ‘a quality of speech practiced upon the stage’, Yeats seems to imagine Elizabethan playwrights as his model, who were always called not ‘playwrights’ but ‘poets’ and who observed no clear distinction between plays and poems. In the days when the bardic tradition persisted, they were more or less the same in that both poems and plays were to be heard rather than to be read and were therefore naturally accompanied by a performative element. Yeats’s speech shows that his work aims at reclaiming this performative element for modern poetry.

Thus, ‘Easter 1916’ represents the shock of the Easter Rising in theatrical terms: an apparently binomial opposition of a shift away from the comedy of everyday life towards the tragedy of a catastrophic moment in history. At the beginning of the poem, the poet recollects the calmer days when he kept moderate company with his Dublin friends, who have turned out to be full-blooded participants in the Rising. The life before the Rising depicted in the first verse is full of ‘polite meaningless words’ and the repetition of the phrase makes its meaninglessness still more conspicuous.

I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .]
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
The poet assumed that he and ‘they’ belonged to the same sphere, that is, life like a commonplace farce with hackneyed phrases. The deterministic and static tone used to describe the past acts as an induction into the dynamic of a ‘terrible beauty’ born at that present moment. The stillness of the past is in such striking contrast with the motive energy of the verb ‘is born’ in the present tense that the poet appears forced to alienate himself from them, to reconsider his own idea of the world as a comic theatre. However, at the same time, the apparent binary opposition of tragedy replacing comedy is dissolving itself, for the poet’s idea that man only ‘lived where motley is worn’ is strongly reminiscent of King Lear. When deserted, Lear comes across the blind Gloucester who has just attempted suicide in Act IV Scene vi, and in grim despair he says to the earl, ‘When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools’ (180-1). The echo of King Lear casts a dark shadow on the poet’s remark about the world as a farce and undermines the binarism of comedy and tragedy. The poet’s pessimistic resignation that a life is no more than a poor comedy can be tragic in itself.

Just as Yeats deconstructs his assumption of the world as comic theatre, the tragic epiphany brought about by the Easter Rising is also given a contrary connotation. Listing the names of Irish nationalists such as Patrick Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh, who both took part in the Rising, the poet finally and reluctantly comes to John MacBride, the first husband of Maud Gonne. Although complaining that he was a drunken thug who did wrong to Maud and her daughter Iseult, the poet nevertheless explains why he includes the man’s name:

He, too, has resigned his part  
In the casual comedy;  
He, too, has been changed in his turn,  
Transformed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.  (36-40)

The lines have a double meaning, just as in the first verse: ‘the casual comedy’ parallels the poet’s understanding of the world ‘where motley is worn’. Therefore, the lines apparently suggest that even MacBride, who had been only a lout in the comedy of quiet days, transformed himself into a heroic figure when a catastrophic and tragic moment of
history called for him. Nevertheless, the very same lines also indicate that MacBride was just one of fortune’s fools, made to play an unsuitable role in the dysteleological course of history. In this reading, ‘the casual comedy’ stands for the Easter Rising. One might consider the fact that Yeats draws an analogy between a nationalistic activist and a comic figure in other poems as well. In the fifth part of ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ (1928), ‘The Road at My Door’, for instance, the poet portrays an irregular of the volunteer army as ‘A heavily-built Falstaffian man’, who seems to think ‘to die by gunshot were / The finest play under the sun’ (2 & 4-5). Here, by taking a miles gloriosus figure into the poem, the poet deprives the Civil War of its righteousness not only because he is completely different from a Cuchulain-like heroic soldier, but also because Falstaff’s famous definition of honour as a mere word casts a skeptical shadow on the idealistic view of the War of Independence. The same is true of MacBride; he is another miles gloriosus who reveals the dubiousness of idealism by his own defects. Actually, compared with the rather flat homage to Pearse or MacDonagh, the ambiguous attitude towards MacBride creates a stronger tension between praise and condemnation. A similar effect is achieved in the lines depicting Constance Markiewicz.

Countess Constance Markiewicz, who in fact received a reprieve from execution because of her sex, is treated with much lamentation by the poet. He grieves that a noble woman should degrade herself by espousing the ‘unwomanly’ movement and associating with political activists beneath her. Regretting her younger days which were lost in her ‘ignorant good-will’, he contrasts a graceful girl with an obstinate liberationist woman in rather misogynistic tones.

That woman’s day were spent  
In ignorant good-will,  
Her nights in argument  
Until her voice grew shrill.  
What voice more sweet than hers  
When, young and beautiful,  
She rode to harriers? (17-23)

It is noteworthy that the poet chooses to emphasize her voice as the distinct characteristic of her change in the following two points: for one thing, whereas the change of the worldview as a commonplace comedy into a terrible beauty is subtly insinuated, the change of her sweet voice into a shrill one is given more clearly negative implica-
tions. This functions to lessen the force of the refrain, ‘A terrible beauty is born’, when it returns in the second stanza. For another, this voice is importantly connected with the poem’s concern with passing on and immortalizing the names of compatriots, after the model of the bardic tradition in ancient Ireland. Thus, the political orator and the poet are bound together by their common office of addressing themselves to the public. However, at the same time, the woman’s shrill voice reveals a fundamental conflict between the two as the poet shows in the last stanza that poets’ voice should take a way other than that of stump orators.

O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven’s part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild. (59-64)

Poets are not to speak loudly and bellicosely like radical activists, but to speak softly like a mother talking to her child. Comparing the messenger of the executed to the bewildered mother of a wild child indirectly reveals a viewpoint that regards the Easter Rising no better than a boys’ blustering uproar—hardly unqualified admiration for their achievement. The tone becomes unmistakably more skeptical towards the end of the poem. After entrusting Heaven with the answer to that unanswerable question, ‘O when may it suffice?’, the poet offers another three interrogatives: ‘What is it but nightfall?’ (65), ‘Was it needless death after all?’ (67), and ‘what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?’ (72-3). Among these four, the poet can only answer the second question about nightfall or death; he answers, ‘No, no, not night but death’ (66). His clumsy, even obsessive repetition of the monosyllabic ‘no’ and ‘not’, suggests that he is uncertain of his own words at bottom, and trying to persuade himself. When it comes to the last question, he appears to lose not only the means but also the will to answer. Immediately after he mentions the last question, he abruptly changes the subject and enumerates the names of the executed. In this context, the third refrain in the final lines of the poem has still less power as the slogan for a new era. As the description of the poets’ duty to ‘murmur’ their names effectively controls the following lines, the tone of the last stanza must be low and confused. Thus, as Declan Kiberd points out, the last two lines ‘would be voiced
hesitantly by a skilled reader’ (216).

Nevertheless, importantly, the skeptical atmosphere effused from ‘Easter 1916’ should be described not so much as criticism or denunciation as the product of puzzlement. The poet can no more criticize the participants in the Rising than praise them, and merely hands over the problem of judgment to heaven. To resolve the fearful doubts about what will be the consequences of the event, or whether their blood was shed in vain is, in his words, ‘Heaven’s part’, and the poet’s ‘part’ is just to whisper their names. Here, his mode of expression is again hishtrionic; he compares himself to an actor reading his part. History is an enormous play written by heaven and the poet is an actor who should speak its lines to the audience or all people: this is Yeats’s version of ‘the theatre of the world’ inscribed in ‘Easter 1916’.

As is suggested by a letter to Sean O’Casey, dated on April 20, 1928, Yeats may have taken this idea from Shakespeare and maintained it as the prop for his dramatic movement. Though he took O’Casey’s side when the Dublin audience rioted against The Plough and the Stars in 1926, he confesses in this letter that he is not happy with O’Casey’s new play, The Silver Tasse, and then implies that the Abbey Theatre would reject the play for performance. O’Casey seemed to him to be indulging too much in the expression of his ‘opinions’ about World War I. According to Yeats, The Silver Tasse has nothing substantial beyond the theme’s novelty and some experimental passages. He says that he has perceived O’Casey’s earnest endeavour to declare his views about the matter of political importance as well as to search for an innovative production of drama, and goes on to declare that it is these very things which detract from the play. Good drama should be produced, as Shakespeare’s plays are, more naturally and spontaneously:

Dramatic action is a fire that must burn up everything but itself; there should be no room in a play for anything that does not belong to it; the whole history of the world must be reduced to wallpaper in front of which the characters must pose and speak.

Among the things that dramatic action must burn up are the author’s opinions [...]. Do you suppose for one moment that Shakespeare educated Hamlet and King Lear by telling them what he thought and believed? As I see it, Hamlet and Lear educated Shakespeare, and I have no doubt that in the process of that education he found out that he was an altogether different man to what he thought himself, and had altogether different beliefs. […] And that is why the ancient philosophers thought a poet or dramatist Daimon-possessed. (Letters 741)
Yeats defines literature as the accumulation of a vast range of things—such as history, politics, technical matters in writing, and even the author’s self—which remain unburned through the spiritual flame of the act of writing. He recapitulates the process of this artistic transformation with the word ‘Daimon-possessed’. While his model is the transformation that Shakespeare would have experienced while writing *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, he concludes his reasoning by emphasizing poets’ position as a shaman in ancient Europe. In Yeats’s argument, Shakespeare is directly connected with the pre-modern magician-poet. Unfortunately O’Casey, who could not get along with these ideas about the magic of self-effacement and transformation, left Dublin for London and never returned to the Abbey. It is true that Yeats’s literary belief is hard to accept, but the key to the antinomies in his works lies here. Writing is a trancelike action in which every aspect of life—including political cataclysms or the writer’s private thoughts—is merged and sublimated into a work of art. Yeats attaches more importance to that act itself than to any one of the elements.

II: The Alchemy of the Theatre of the World

Such literary alchemy works well in ‘Easter 1916’ to metamorphose everyday life into the ‘terrible beauty’, with the help of the philosopher’s stone represented in the poem. It was natural for Yeats to adapt the occult arts to symbolize the impact of the Easter Rising. The revolt reminded him of Maud Gonne with whom he had been renewing his intimacy through their psychic sympathies. She frequently saw visions at the time and was active in holding spiritual intercourse with him. A letter from London to Lady Gregory dated May 11, 1916, just about two weeks after the Rising, relates the circumstances of the time, including his first response to the Rising and the seeds of ‘Easter 1916’, his beliefs about literature, and complicated relationship with Maud Gonne. Above all, the letter is important because it is here that the words ‘terrible beauty’ appear for probably the first time:

I am trying to write a poem on the men executed—‘terrible beauty has been born again.’ If the English Conservative party had made a declaration that they did not intend to rescind the Home Rule Bill there would have been no rebellion. I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me—and I am very despondent
about the future. At the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics. Maud Gonne reminds me that she saw the ruined houses about O’Connell Street and the wounded and dying lying about the streets, in the first few days of the war. I perfectly remember the vision and my making light of it and saying that if a true vision at all it could only have a symbolized meaning. This is the only letter I have had from her since she knew of the Rebellion. I have sent her the papers every day. I do not yet know what she feels about her husband’s death. Her letter was written before she heard of it. Her main thought seems to be ‘tragic dignity has returned to Ireland.’ (Letters 613)

In the early part of the letter, Yeats expresses his frank opinion about the Rising, which is not favourable. He fears that the activist uprising would blot out intellectual and artistic independence from politics and reduce his efforts to nothing. This has badly disturbed his confidence in what he had been doing. Wondering that ‘any public event’ should shake him so much, he betrays his doubts not only about the justification of the Rising but of his own principles.

The ambiguity in his assessment of the event increases when he refers to Maud Gonne, who had confessed her spiritual marriage to him in her vision, but interpreted the Rising in a different way from him. His ideas seem to flounder around his mental identification with and concurrent alienation from her. She regards the uprising as a psychic epiphany, for, though she was in Paris at the time when the Easter Rising began, she had a vivid vision of the war breaking out in Dublin. Her belief was that the Rising would trigger a revival of the heroic age in Ireland. It was this kind of identification of the executed with the ancient legendary heroes of Ireland that the Irish public came to hold ever more firmly after their initial antipathy to the leaders of the Rising. This fervent attitude led the nationalists to the Civil War and made Oliver Sheppard’s statue ‘The Death of Cuchulain’, which had actually been made around 1912, being moved into the Dublin GPO as a memorial to the executed. Yeats is rather dubious about such an occultist interpretation as Gonne’s, commenting ‘that if a true vision at all it could only have a symbolized meaning’. However, while he dismisses her dream as too directly realistic for an esoteric vision, his concern over the Rising in connection with her is actually highly realistic. He is deeply anxious about how she would feel at the death of MacBride and diligently sending her newspapers in response to her request for news. One of the factors that induced Yeats to write
‘Easter 1916’ was undoubtedly an attempt to express his sympathy with her at this crucial juncture. As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford points out, ‘“Easter 1916”, a political elegy, is also a poem about love’ (121). The work is deeply shadowed with Gonne behind the description of Markiewicz. Translocating the problem of gender hierarchy into that of the political disturbance, Yeats tries to reorganize the appropriate relationship between himself, Maud, and Iseult in the poem. This motive exerted a considerable influence on the style of ‘Easter 1916’ at the initial stage.

The sentence ‘terrible beauty has been born again’ seems to have derived from Gonne’s words, ‘tragic dignity has returned to Ireland’, and, consequently, takes over its political principles. The adverb ‘again’ indicates that the terrible beauty had already existed once and now has come once more, which follows the above-mentioned idea of assimilating the Volunteers with the Irish legendary heroes. The present-perfect tense is so syntactically natural that the impact of the oxymoron is rather dissipated. Nevertheless, the Cornell Yeats edition of *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* shows that, when he began writing the poem, he adopted ‘A terrible beauty is born’ from the first draught. This astonishing development gives the ‘terrible beauty’ the sense of nowness and of timelessness at once so that the line creates the foundation of the *Theatrum Mundi*. For, the present tense of ‘is born’ focuses on the act of the generation of the terrible beauty—the alchemical integration of terror and beauty—rather than the ‘terrible beauty’ itself. What the poet sees behind the catastrophic change is the act itself by which a particular event at the contemporary period should be identified with the war in the heroic age, and further, transferred to eternity. In ‘Easter 1916’, a variety of ideas such as the policies of the activists, the artistic principles of the poet, and the troubles of love, comes and goes in a fugal manner, but they all converge at the refrain into the main theme: the wonder at the act of transformation. The idea of the theatre of the world that brings all the world to the stage is the best means for Yeats to pursue his theme.

The subject of alchemical transformation is expressed by the image of a stone in the poem. The indomitable hearts of the nationalists are compared to ‘a stone’ in the third verse, which works as a symbol of magical transformation.

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
[..............................]
Minute by minute they live:
The stone’s in the midst of all. (41-50 & 55-6)

By using an elaborate paradox, the poet ingeniously indicates the antinomy of ‘A terrible beauty’ in this stanza as well. As he repeatedly insists, the stream of life will never stop by its nature. That things should change is the only unchanging thing in this world. However, the hearts of the political activists bid defiance to the natural law, chasing ‘one purpose alone’, and pay no attention to seasonal changes nor the transience of this world. It is ironical that their persist-ency against any change finally leads to the catastrophe that made the poet mutter, ‘All changed, changed utterly’. Importantly, he depicts the mind hardened by radical idealism as ‘Enchanted’. His expression of the hearts’ crystallization in magical terms can also be seen in the last verse. The fearful doubt ‘if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died’ insinuates that the Volunteer’s action was not so much heroic bravery as a confusion of emotions. In these two lines, the love that would bewilder them seems detached from their general selves. They are victims rather than victors in history, who are not self-directing subjects but the objects of the alchemy of excessive love. Thus, the image of the stone sung in the verse gradually transforms itself as well. Though it first appears as a metaphor for the nationalists’ obstinate heart, the stone that is in the midst of all living things in line 56 connotes much more. It finally becomes the philosopher’s stone, to use alchemical diction, which is said to have a power of projection, power to change base metals into a precious one. Here it makes every particular matter converge in the idea of the Theatrum Mundi. The executed are not makers of history; they are actors who played a frenzied farce given by history in the same way as the poet himself is a player, and it is immaterial to this great act whether each of the players is Pearse, Connoly, or MacBride.
III: Yeats and Shakespeare Criticism in the Mid-Twentieth Century

The attempt to epitomize the whole world in a piece of work is based on pre-modern thought and conflicts with the Cartesian "cogito" which exercised such an inestimable influence on the modern history of ideas in Europe. Yeats, who was among the pioneers who cast doubt on the logo-centrism in western literature, took over the idea of the theatre of the world from Shakespeare. Yeats recollects in "Reveries over Childhood and Youth" (1915) the strong impression made on him by Henry Irving’s performance as Hamlet, and, even in 1932, the name of Shakespeare heads Yeats’s list made at the request of a publisher to enumerate the writers who had an influence on him. Shakespeare was a model throughout Yeats’s literary career. In 1903, when he was launching forth into establishing a national theatre, he analyses his idea in an essay named ‘Emotion of Multitude’:

I have been thinking a good deal about plays lately, and I have been wondering why I dislike the clear and logical construction which seems necessary if one is to succeed on the modern stage. It came into my head the other day that this construction, which all the world has learnt from France, has everything of high literature except the emotion of multitude [...]. The Shakespearean drama gets the emotion of multitude out of the sub-plot which copies one’s body in the firelight. We think of King Lear less as the history of one man and his sorrows than as the history of a whole evil time. Lear’s shadow is in Gloucester, who also has ungrateful children, and the mind goes on imagining other shadows, shadow beyond shadow, till it has pictured the world. (Essays 215)

Yeats in this passage describes the comprehensive worldview that covers King Lear as a form of spiritus mundi, ‘the emotion of multitude’. The tragic fate of Lear is not just his own. It calls for the tragedy of his faithful subject, Gloucester, then for his wronged son Edgar, until each character’s tragedy converges on the wholly tragic atmosphere itself. What really matters in King Lear is the machinery of ‘a whole evil time’ in which every one should fall regardless of his virtue or vice.

Yeats deliberately counterposes the Elizabethan worldview with the rise of Cartesian individualism in the seventeenth century in ‘The Tragic Theatre’, which first appeared in 1910. Admitting that even persons in Shakespeare’s plays, especially comic ones like Falstaff,
have their individual characteristics, Yeats argues that it is merely the nature of comedy. While comedy essentially depends on differences among the characters, tragedy is its exact opposite. In tragic scenes like Hamlet asking Horatio, ‘Absent thee from felicity awhile’, all should be sublimated into ‘unmixed passion, “the integrity of fire”’ (Essays 240).

Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. The persons upon the stage, let us say, greaten till they are humanity itself. (Essays 245)

According to Yeats, the quintessence of tragedy is that a person on stage should transcend the dykes that separate each individual and become ‘Everyman’; and, therefore, the stage should become the whole world. He frequented Stratford-on-Avon in the 1900s and spent much time in the library of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, but contemporary Shakespeare criticism was not satisfactory to him. He felt that the utilitarian Victorian viewpoint tarnished the value of the Bard. For instance, he detested the idea that Shakespeare depicts Richard II as a bad example and gives a moral warning to the audience, maintaining that his theme in Richard II is ‘the defeat that awaits all, whether they be artist or saint’ (Essays 106). Yeats thought of his own literary principle as a resistance against the dominant discourse of the European literature of the day. This was indeed an insightful opposition that anticipated the revision of Shakespeare criticism in the mid-twentieth century by critics like Frances Yates.

In The Theatre of the World (1969), Yates analyses how the Elizabethan culture and political system were sustained by Renaissance occult philosophy. A human being is a similar figure to the whole universe or the macrocosm, and is, therefore, regarded as the microcosm. The famous drawing of a human body in a circle by Leonard da Vinci illustrates the idea well: a man stretching his limbs exactly fits inside a perfect circle and a square at the same time, both of which are analogues to the macrocosm for their mathematical perfection. The construction of the Elizabethan public theatre was based on this idea, she suggests, so that it became a theatre-in-the-round with a square apron stage. The aim of this kind of theatre is not only to represent the macrocosm in a theatre but also to get the maximum out of the players’ abilities to show they also have the microcosm in themselves. In short, the London public theatres ‘were actors’ the-
atres, depending entirely for their effect on the actors, with few or no visual aids’ (Yates, *Theatre* 124). The Shakespearean type of theatre, which was ‘a predominantly aural theatre, suited to be the vehicle of a great poetic drama’, reflects a time when poets, dramatists and actors were yet to be separated and specialized (124). She summarizes the meaning of this kind of theatre by saying: ‘The Globe Theatre was a magical theatre, a cosmic theatre, a religious theatre, an actors’ theatre, designed to give fullest support to the voices and the gestures of the players as they enacted the drama of the life of man within the Theatre of the World’ (189).

Renaissance England must have seemed to Shakespeare as much out of joint as Denmark seemed to Hamlet. To epitomize the world on a stage is paradoxically to sense the crisis of the world’s falling asunder; it is also, then, the acrobatic feat of tying up the collapsing world. Taking an instance among others, Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* also functions by means of its Neoplatonism as a prop for the reign of Elizabeth I, whose position could be seen as irreconcilable with the establishment in that she was, despite being a woman, the head of a male-oriented, patriarchal hierarchy. Yates concludes that occult philosophy in the Elizabethan age was not an antisocial cult but played an important role in politics and culture during times of public disturbance.

It is curious that the Shakespearean occult philosophy rediscovered in the 1960s by Yates’s positivist study of Renaissance history is very similar to what W. B. Yeats had sought for in his dramaturgy more than half a century before. Thinking that a tragedy should dissolve the individualism of modern philosophy into ‘unmixed passion’, Yeats came to attach great importance to the reinstatement of actors’ body in the same way as on the Elizabethan stage. ‘Certain Noble Plays of Japan’ (1916) shows his attempting to simplify his stage productions when he was engaged on early dance plays like *At the Hawk’s Well* and *The Dreaming of the Bones*:

> And yet this simplification is not mere economy. For nearly three centuries invention has been making the human voice and the movements of the body seem always less expressive. I have long been puzzled why passages that are moving when read out or spoken during rehearsal seem muffled or dulled during the performance. (*Essays* 222)

In his endeavor to curtail theatrical excess so as to make human
voices and movements richly expressive, he virtually declares that his model is the theatre of three centuries before, that is, the theatre of the English Renaissance. He was introduced to a Japanese dancer, Michio Ito, through Ezra Pound around that time and assigned him the role of the Guardian of the Well in *At the Hawk’s Well*, for he was attracted by Ito’s dance which seemed ‘to recede from us into some more powerful life’ (*Essays* 224). His admiration of Ito is based on an atmosphere of esoteric transition from this world into another kind of world.

Yeats’s dramatic investigation of Shakespeare and the Japanese Noh makes an important contribution to his poetry and prose as well. Experiencing the fear of the world’s disintegration through the great disturbance of the Easter Rising, his idea of the Theatre of the World has restructured itself with regard to contemporaneity, which ‘Easter 1916’ very well illustrates. While Yeats’s worldview in the poem directly goes back to Shakespeare, skipping the rise of individualism in modern Europe, it concurrently confesses a highly contemporary awareness of these issues; much more, it reveals itself to be a harbinger of Shakespeare criticism in the mid-twentieth century.

**IV: From Shakespeare—through Yeats—to Beckett**

*The Dreaming of the Bones* plays a correlative part with ‘Easter 1916’ in relation to the Easter Rising and the *Theatrum Mundi*. Though the play is based on *Nishikigi*, a Noh play by Motokiyo, it sets the scene in Ireland on the night of the Rising so that the same theme as ‘Easter 1916’, coping with the anxieties of the contemporary world using a pre-modern dramaturgy, can be represented more clearly. As a matter of fact, the play was not performed on stage until 1931; nevertheless, Yeats was convinced of the value of the play. He says to Lady Gregory in a latter dated June 11, 1917, ‘I have almost finished my Dervorgilla play [*The Dreaming of the Bones*], I think the best play I have written for years’, his only fear about the play being that it may be ‘too powerful politically’ (*Letters* 626).

In this play, the Young Man who joined the Easter Rising comes across the ghosts of Diamuid and Dervorgilla escaping from Dublin to Co. Clare. The lovers once brought the Normans into Ireland for their love’s sake and consequently led Ireland into subordination, and their souls have still lingered in this world by deep remorse for as many as seven centuries. Their souls will be relieved if any living
Irish people should pardon them, but the Young Man rejects the idea, crying ‘O, never, never / Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven’ (442). The Young Man, who cuts into the ghost’s talk and just repeats the same words of rejection, is an exaggerated caricature of the radical nationalists of the day. According to Harold Bloom, he embodies an evil example of idealism. His mind is full of remorse and hatred for the past, which is the very thing that prevents Ireland from achieving true independence. However, he is unpleasant rather than evil, and he is even comical at times. He is also interrupted in his speech by the ghost of Diamuid. The Young Man’s declaration of his nationalistic principle is ungenerous to the couple: ‘when a man / Is born in Ireland and of Irish stock, / When he takes part against us—’ (436). Just as he is about to elaborate on this theme, however, the ghost abruptly offers to show him the way to the hiding place on the hill.

It should be noted here that this stage is constructed according to the manner of Noh and Kyogen, so that the stage is bare without any sign of a hill and the change of places are indicated by the actors’ walking around in circles on the empty stage. Their movement may seem ritualistic and magical to the eyes of the audience. The ghosts are not only the poor souls that plead for help, but also the dangerous spirits that would bewitch human beings. Thus, a utilitarian approach is insufficient to separate good from evil. The youth is a wrongheaded idealist from the viewpoint of the ghosts, but for him, the situation is the opposite, as he cries in the last scene: ‘Terrible the temptation and the place!’ (444).

Just before the dawn—the time when the ghosts should disappear—they begin their magical dance before the Young Man. Their dance is fundamentally different from that of Nishikigi, in which the ghost lovers show the priest a dance of joy celebrating the salvation of their souls. At the climax of their dance, the Young Man cries again his rejection in exactly the same words—‘O, never, never / Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven’. Then, the ghost couple leaves the stage without any satisfaction. Now morning comes, but the encounter will not lead to a future either for the Young Man or for the ghost lovers. He will find a boat of accomplices from the hill and after his escape will pursue the same ideal as before. The ghosts are left to wander around the field, just adding another day to seven hundred years. The ending of *The Dreaming of the Bones* is already suggestive of the obsession with eternal recurrence seen in *The Words upon the Window-Pane* or *Purgatory*. The last song of the Musicians foresees
this tendency in later Yeats:

What finger first began
Music of a lost kingdom?
They dream that laughed in the sun,
Dry bones that dream are bitter,
They dream and darken our sun.  (445)

Distinct from the music in *Nishikigi* or the music of spheres sounding at the climax of romances such as *Pericles* and *The Tempest*, which symbolize reconciliation and harmony, the music of *The Dreaming of the Bones* is that of the dead, the ominous music that bewitches the ears of the living. Nevertheless, the living and the dead are not binary opposites. The dead that ‘are bitter’ now were also the living ‘that laughed in the sun’ once. The connection of the living with the dead helps the audience anticipate that the Young Man too will be dead someday, and then will trouble future generations with his ardent nationalism. The fear of this vicious cycle is correlative expressed in ‘Easter 1916’, reversing the position of the political activists.

We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;  (70-1)

Whereas the nationalist Young Man is disturbed by the dream of Diamuid and Devorgilla in *The Dreaming of the Bones*, the poet in ‘Easter 1916’ is troubled by the executed who embraced their deaths cherishing the same dream of Irish independence as the volunteer in the play. Though the persons may change, the process itself will never change. What Yeats consistently reflects on through the poem and the play is that, ultimately, ‘what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?’ However, there is no answer to this question. The world converging in the two works just demonstrates a relentless process without any judgment that could be a guide for the poet.

Yeats’s ideas about drama are reminiscent of Jan Kott’s interpretation of Shakespeare. Kott’s argument seems also true of *The Dreaming of the Bones*. In *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), Kott investigates the forms of the absurd that Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett have in common. He also points out that ‘Gloucester is Everyman, and the stage becomes the medieval *Theatrum Mundi*’ (146). He maintains, however, that the world epitomized in *King Lear* is not a medieval one in which an Ultimate God sees all. This empty stage of the world in *King Lear* is the earth without heaven: ‘there is nothing,
The blind Gloucester falls over on the empty stage. His suicidal leap is tragic. Gloucester has reached the depths of human misery; so has Edgar, who pretends to be mad Tom in order to save his father. But the pantomime performed by actors on the stage is grotesque, and has something of a circus about it. The blind Gloucester who has climbed a non-existent height and fallen over on flat boards, is a clown. A philosophical buffoonery of the sort found in modern theatre has been performed. (147)

*King Lear* is a grim apocalypse without God in which everyone turns out to be no more than a clown, playing a philosophical farce. In that it shows an ending to a world devoid of Providence, *King Lear* parallels *Endgame* (1958). Based on this analogy between the two playwrights, Kott compares Gloucester and Edgar to Didi and Gogo and, further, to Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* (1956). Having fallen down on a bare stage with Lucky in the second act, Pozzo repeatedly cries for help. Gogo, who confused the crier with Godot and is still uncertain of his identity, calls out to him in the names of ‘Abel’ and ‘Cain’. Taking his desperate cry as an answer to his call, the vagrant says to his mate, Didi, ‘He’s all humanity’ (78). As he puts it, Pozzo here is Everyman, as is Gloucester, though Pozzo’s situation is focused more on buffoonery than on tragedy.

As Kott rightly points out, many of Beckett’s philosophical lines, in fact, follow Shakespeare. However, it is important that the Shakespeare he followed is the Shakespeare Yeats inherited directly from the Elizabethan age and revived in the early twentieth century. It has been known that the shadow of Yeats can be seen, though not obviously, in Beckett’s drama in various ways: for example, Hamm’s bitter cry at the opening of *Endgame*, ‘Can there be misery— *he yawns* — loftier than mine?’ (93), is a parody of Yeats’s version of *King Oedipus* whose performance he saw during the last two years of his student days, and *... but the clouds...* (1977) is titled after the last verse of ‘The Tower’ (1926). Beckett, who was a regular visitor to the Abbey Theatre in his college days at Trinity, especially favoured Yeats’s later plays including *At the Hawk’s Well* and *The Words upon the Window-Pane*. More importantly, according to James Knowlson’s biography, the years Beckett frequented the Abbey were also the times when he ‘completed two full years of English literature,’ and ‘laid the groundwork for his close knowledge of Shakespeare’s major plays’ (69). As studying
classics and watching contemporary plays occurred to him concurrently, it is no wonder that he could take in the latter’s interpretation of the former.

Gogo’s words, ‘He’s all humanity’, are, as it were, Beckett’s version of ‘the emotion of multitude’. The mid-twentieth rereading of dramatic tradition from Shakespeare to Beckett retrospectively discovered the absurdity in the Bard’s plays; but it is misleading to think that the two had been directly connected over three hundred and fifty years. Yeats’s response to Shakespeare and his works during the politically turbulent years of 1916 through 1919 had revitalized a dramatic tradition and definitely set the course which this undercurrent dating from the Elizabethan era was to take in the history of Modernist drama.

Notes


2 In the notes to Plays in Prose and Verse, Yeats comments on The King’s Threshold as follows: ‘[i]t was written when our Society was having a hard fight for the recognition of pure art in a community of which one half was buried in the practical affairs of life, and the other half in politics and a propagandist patriotism’ (Variorum Plays 315). Notwithstanding Said’s favourable interpretation of Yeats poems as working for decolonization, Yeats’s emphasis is sometimes clearly laid on the separation, rather than the harmony, of art and life.

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all further references to Yeats’s poems are to 1950 edition of Collected Poems and line numbers are included parenthetically in the text.

4 The Plough and the Stars also takes up the Easter Rising as its theme. The main reason for the riot was the disparity between the audience’s idealized view of the Rising and the sheer violence represented in the play. For a detailed account for Yeats’s conduct towards the disturbance, see Foster 304-9.

5 Yeats mentions Sheppard’s statue in his last play, The Death of Cuchulain (1939). In the very last lines of the play, the Singer chants: ‘A statue’s there to mark the place, / By Oliver Sheppard done. / So ends the tale that the harlot / Sang to the beggar-man’ (705). Ever since On Baile’s Strand (1903), Yeats’s version of the most famous hero in Ireland is always balanced with images of beggars, the blind, and harlots.

6 Yeats’s quotation is in fact a little different from her own words. What Gonne’s letter says is: ‘I am overwhelmed by the tragedy & the greatness of the sacrifice our county men & women have made. They have raised the Irish cause again to a position of tragic dignity’ (MacBride White 372). However, this argument concerning the perfect tense holds good in the case either of her original or Yeats’s adaptation.
In a comparative analysis of Yeats and P. B. Shelley, Bloom holds that Yeats regards this kind of obstinacy as the blight to his love, Maud Gonne, and his country. This is partly the reason Yeats is interested in Shelley’s revolutionary Romanticism that insists on throwing away any remorse. See Bloom 306-9.

Richard Allen Cave gives some interesting information about productions of this scene. “Though Yeats does not specify this, in productions the circular movement is almost invariably anti-clockwise about the stage, the direction traditionally known as “widdershins” in black magic, which is reserved for the darkest of enchantments” (Cave 325).

The year in parenthesis attached to Beckett’s works shows the first publication of English version of the play. Endgame was originally written in French in 1952 and first performed in Paris in 1953.

Anthony Cronin reports that Beckett was in the auditorium on the very day of the riot against The Plough and the Stars, and that Yeats came on stage in defense of O’Casey. For more details, see Cronin 56-57.

Works Cited


