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Jacqueline GENET

Dance in Yeats's Plays, a Quest for Unity

If dance is everywhere in Yeats's works, prose, poetry, dramas, with many interactions between the genres, it especially shapes the choreography of his dramas. Already in his first plays, Yeats shared the interest for drama of the fin-de-siècle writers; producers and dancers worked on his text, collaborating with him. After the dream of the ideal world of Tir-na-nOg perceptible in *The Land of Heart's Desire*, Yeats, acquainted with the Noh, wrote his *Plays for Dancers* which gave a great importance to dance and whose main interpreter was Michio Ito, a Japanese choreographer and dancer. These plays are all the richer for the introduction of a personal Western touch, the adaptation on stage of the quest for Unity, giving a concrete shape to a complex symbol which recurred in his prose and poetry.

Si la danse est partout dans l'œuvre de Yeats, prose, poésie, théâtre, avec de nombreuses interactions entre les genres, elle modèle particulièrement la chorégraphie de ses pièces. Dès ses premières pièces il partage l'intérêt que portent au théâtre les écrivains de la fin du siècle; sur son texte et en collaboration avec lui travaillent metteurs en scène et danseurs. Après le rêve du monde idéal de Tir-na-nOg perceptible dans The Land of Heart's Desire*, Yeats, initié au nô, écrit ses* Plays for Dancers *qui accordent une grande importance à la danse et dont Michio Ito, chorégraphe et danseur japonais, devient le principal interprète. Il enrichit ses pièces d'un apport occidental tout personnel, l'adaptation sur scène de la quête de l'Unité, concrétisant une symbolique récurrente de sa prose et sa poésie.*

Sturge Moore's bookplate for Yeats's daughter was a dancing girl in the middle of the sea; for himself Yeats chose Joseph Campbell's *The Dancer*—"In his feet music/On his face death," and Walter J. Turner's poem with the same title about a girl dancing with "that strange look, / Unhappy, still, and far away."[1] Dance is everywhere in Yeats's works, following the evolution and heterogeneity of his creation. "Only one symbol exists, though the reflecting mirrors make many appear and all different" (*A Vision* 1962, 240): this is Yeats's definition of the thirteenth

1. This was first pointed out by Frank Kermode (Kermode 1976, 58). Walter J. Turner was a poet and music critic for *The New Statesman*.

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cone or of the sphere which transcends the gyres and which, in *A Vision*, is compared to "some great dancer." Dance shapes the choreography of his dramas thanks to the collaboration of modern dancers, in the same quest for Unity of Being.

Literary and artistic background

In the 1890s, Yeats who shared the great interest of the fin-de-siècle writers for the figure of the dancer, focused his attention on the figure of Salome. Thanks to the Rhymers' Club which he had founded with Ernest Rhys in 1891, he met many artists, among them Arthur Symons who introduced him to French Symbolist poetry and for whom dance had the intellectual as well as the sensuous appeal of "a living symbol." Huysmans's novel *A Rebours* drew the portrait of Des Esseintes, a "decadent," and referred to the painting of Salome by Gustave Moreau considered by Yeats as one of the "greatest myth-makers and mask-makers" (*Aut.*, 555). Oscar Wilde's French play *Salome* (1891) was inspired by Huysmans and Moreau and the English translation illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley. The play was praised by Joyce, Mallarmé and Gide. Yeats praised Beardsley's *Salome*. Yeats's dancer was also shaped by the influence of real dancers, combining the dancer of Mallarmé who insisted on aesthetic qualities and Symons's admiration for the music-hall dancer with "her body's melody," as he put it in his poem "To a Dancer." The movements had to be controlled by rhythm. In 1894 Yeats went to Paris where he attended the performance of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's *Axel*; it was the time when he recruited Florence Farr (Mrs Emery); struck by her qualities, her diction, her "sense of rhythm," he invited her to play in *The Land of Heart's Desire* in 1894. She helped him to recover the ancient art of verse-speaking to the accompaniment of music (*EI*, 13-27).

In 1909 Diaghilev arrived in Paris, revolutionizing ballet with prominent dancers. This marked a renaissance of dancing with "liturgical, poetic and music-hall aspects […]. The Ballets Russes demonstrated the correspondence of the arts" (Kermode 1961, 28). From a simple entertainment, dance became high art with many innovations. Symons wrote about Loie Fuller (1862-1928) in "The World as Ballet," the first section of an essay in *The Dome,* dated 1898 and entitled "Ballet, Pantomime and Poetic Drama." She was an American dancer and actress who led a troupe of Japanese dancers. Her arrival in Paris coincided with the beginning of Art Nouveau and the emergence of the Symbolists. She inspired the most distinguished writers and painters. She performed an unconventional dance in Paris at the Folies Bergère, in a whirl of flowing materials which she extended with sticks, as illustrated by Toulouse-Lautrec in many lithographs—an oilsketch of her is exhibited in Albi Museum. Mallarmé who saw her in 1893 was struck by her "serpentine dance" carried out with multicoloured lights. She is present in Yeats's works: in "The Message of the Folklorist" (1893) he refers "to the poetry of ciga-

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rettes and black coffee, of absinthe, and the skirt dance," (*Uncollected Prose* 1, 285) and his poem *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* insists on her grace in an Ireland torn by violence:

> When Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound
> A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,
> It seemed that a dragon of air
> Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round
> Or hurried them off on its own furious path;
> [...]
> All men are dancers and their tread
> Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong. (*Var. Poems*, 428)

The association of the dance and the dragon which destroys our civilization is a proof that man is capable of artistic creation amid chaos. Loie Fuller's device was used in *At the Hawk's Well* to create wings for the hawk-guardian of the well, by making the dancer's arms longer with sticks held inside the gown. She launched other pioneers like Isadora Duncan, Gordon Craig's mistress, whose portrait was drawn dancing with floating ribbons. Yeats became familiar with innovative dance and saw in the dancer a potential for expressing philosophical issues.

Ninette de Valois: Yeats's main dancer from 1927 to 1934

Yeats chose Ninette de Valois as a dancer. Very early on she developed a love of dancing. At her father's death, her family left Ireland for England where she took ballet lessons. Yeats met her in the foyer of the Festival Theatre in Cambridge in 1927 where she had devised the choreography of *On Baile's Strand*. He invited her to return to Ireland where she established a school of ballet at the Peacock Theatre and became Yeats's choreographer and dancer. She choreographed *Fighting the Waves* to the music of George Antheil, with Hildo Krop's masks, and danced the role of Fand, expressing all the emotions which should be suggested by a dancer. She also worked for *The Dreaming of the Bones*, *At the Hawk's Well*, *The King of the Great Clock Tower*. Yeats gave her creative freedom; she succeeded in throwing a bridge between theatre and dance. In July 1933, she choreographed a revival of *At the Hawk's Well* in which she performed the role of the Guardian of the Well. After the opening of *The King of the Great Clock Tower* where she played the part of the Queen, she left Yeats to devote herself to the Sadler's Wells School of Ballet—later the Royal Ballet.

Yeats's first plays

The attraction of faeryland as expressed in a dance appears in Yeats's early plays such as *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), in which Mary, a young bride who misses her past freedom, is reading a book about Princess

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Edain who "came into the land of Faery," "And she is still there, busied with a dance" (*Var. Plays*, 184). She would like to leave her dull house and ride with the faeries on the wind, "And dance upon the mountains like a flame" (*Var. Plays*, 85). A faery child speaking human language is let into the house, given honey and milk. When a priest has put away the crucifix, she begins to dance; the stage directions state: "She dances," with no other indication. The dance imagery is that of the ideal world of Tir-na-nOg, the Faeries' kingdom. Mary's soul flies from her. This play combines reality—as far as it is a protest against dull reality—and the world of Faeryland.

Though there is no dance in *The King's Threshold* (1904), it is mentioned several times: first as an expression of joy: the First Girl is fond of dancing and complains because she cannot practise it: "[…] I love dancing more than anything" (*Var. Plays*, 286). Then Seanchan, the poet, associates dance and love: "Your feet delight in dancing, and your mouths / In the slow smiling that awakens love" (*Var. Plays*, 294).

Finally dance is raised to the level of an art: Seanchan, who opposes the King because he has excluded him from the council, addresses the Chamberlain: "You have driven away,/The images of them that weave a dance/By the four rivers in the mountain garden (*Var. Plays*, 294), to which the Chamberlain answers: "You mean we have driven poetry away" (*Var. Plays*, 289).

In *Deirdre* (1907), when Fergus is about to "dance and sing" because he thinks he has achieved the union of opposites, the reconciliation of Naoise and Conchubar, his joy vanishes and the dance is cut off with the appearance of the dark men, the instruments of Conchubar's murderous purpose.

When Gordon Craig produced Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and *A Masque of Love* (1901) Yeats grew very enthusiastic and learnt much for the production of his own plays: "It was the first beautiful scenery our stage has seen. He created an ideal country where everything was possible, even speaking in verse, or speaking to music, or the expression of the whole of life in a dance" (*EI*, 100-101). Because of Craig's simple scenery, his use of ivory-coloured screens drawing the audience's attention to the dancers with their economy of movements and their masks, Yeats was ready to adopt many characteristics of the Noh plays.

Dance in Japanese Noh plays and in Yeats's *Plays for Dancers*

Yeats became acquainted with the Japanese plays translated by Ernest Fenollosa, whose work was finished by Ezra Pound, with whom he spent the greater part of his winters from 1913 to 1916. In a Noh, speech, music, song and dance were necessary together. This was in keeping with the desire of the artists during the decadent period, who were longing for the unity of all the arts. This alliance "created an image of nobility and strange beauty" (*EI*, 229). As Yeats mentions in section V of *Certain*

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Noble Plays of Japan, Noh theatre had become

> popular at the close of the fourteenth century, gathering into itself dances performed at Shinto shrines in honour of spirits and gods or by young nobles at the court, and much old lyric poetry, and receiving its philosophy and its final shape perhaps from priests of a contemplative school of Buddhism. (*EI*, 228-229)

The theme of a Noh play could be "a battle, or a marriage, or the pain of a ghost in the Buddhist Purgatory" (*EI*, 230). This form of drama corresponded to Yeats's own aspirations: "Everyone here is as convinced as I am that I have discovered a new form by this combination of dance, speech and music" (*Letters*, 768).

Michio Ito, Yeats's dancer from 1914 to 1916

For his own Noh plays, Yeats chose Michio Ito. He was born in Tokyo in 1892, left at eighteen for Europe, became a professional dancer at twenty-two, returned to Japan in 1942, died in 1961. It was a performance in Berlin by Isadora Duncan, a "Symbolist dancer" as she was called, which triggered his interest in dance. In 1912, he enrolled as a student at the Dalcroze Institute near Dresden where he studied eurhythmics, a music-teaching method based on bodily rhythm, as well as music and dancing which presented some affinities with Kabuki.[2] In London, Ito was invited by an art-patron, Lady Ottoline Morrell, in Yeats's presence:

> As he danced, [Ito's] movements were marvellously beautiful [she wrote. He] would ask Philip [her husband] to play a tune through, then think about it for a few minutes, and then start his interpretation of it, wild and imaginative with intense passion and form. (Morrell 276-282)

Later he performed in theatres and danced accompanied by Arnold Dolmetsch who had made this "beautiful instrument, half psaltery, half lyre, [with…] all the chromatic intervals within the range of the speaking voice" (*EI*, 16). Yeats thought Ito was able to reach the depths of the mind. To the question "Is dancing art?" Ito answered: "As long as it expresses an idea—yes. Nothing […] is art without an idea behind it. […]. A dance […] is the music's idea rendered visible" (quoted by Caldwell 4). If an idea, present in the text, expressed by music, is made visible in the dance, there is an identification of three arts: "When I dance [Ito says], the music does not accompany me—we become as one. Sometimes the instrument has the melody, sometimes I have it, and sometimes the melodies are intertwined" (quoted by Caldwell 98). The idea, subjected to rhythm, becomes symbolic. Ito played the part of the

2. Kabuki is the traditional Japanese popular drama with music, dance, mime, spectacular staging and costuming, with a constant interplay between actors and spectators, appealing more to the senses than to the intellect.

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Guardian of the Well in *At the Hawk's Well*, "performed for the first time in April 1916 in a friend's drawing-room […]. A few days later it was revived in Lady Islington's big drawing-room" (*Notes Var. Plays*, 417). For these two productions, Edmund Dulac, designer and musician, imagined the costumes, the lighting, the cloth used for the curtain, wrote the music, made the masks and played the part of the First Musician. Because of Ito's talent, as rehearsals progressed, Yeats cut speeches and songs and relied more and more on the dance. During their association, Yeats revolutionized his dramaturgy, adapting the rules of the Japanese Noh to his dance plays.

Yeats's borrowings from Noh plays

Dance in Noh plays is always coordinated with the theme, with words. This relation is obvious in Yeats's plays: "All the great masters have understood that there cannot be great art without the little limited life of the fable, which is always the better the simpler it is, and the rich, far-wandering, many-imaged life of the half-seen world beyond it" (*EI*, 216). Dance, a creation without words, satisfied his distrust of words. Loie Fuller, the emblem of the new aesthetics, thought that "motion and not language is truthful" (Kermode 1961, 65). Yeats found dance more expressive than words: "I wanted a dance because where there are no words there is less to spoil" (*Var. Plays*, 1052), says the Old Man in *The Death of Cuchulain*. Far from interrupting the narrative, dance makes it progress, at the same time revealing the characters' feelings. It could also prolong a moment of stillness—on this matter Yeats, knowing little about dance, left artistic freedom to the choreographer and dancer. Aware of the excellence of Ito's interpretation for *At the Hawk's Well*, he suppressed some written passages in successive versions, relying on the dance which was amplified in order to entice Cuchulain to follow the Guardian of the Well.

In *Fighting the Waves*, a prose rewriting of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, dance episodes mark the successive stages of the narrative. The first in the prologue shows Cuchulain's fight against the waves:

> A man wearing the Cuchulain mask […] dances a dance which represents a man fighting the waves. The waves may be represented by other dancers; in his frenzy he supposes the waves to be his enemies; gradually he sinks down as if overcome, then fixes his eyes with a cataleptic stare upon some imaginary distant object. (*Var. Plays*, 530)

Then the stage darkens and is empty when the light returns. The second is Fand's enticing dance in the middle of the play:

> The Woman of the Sidhe, Fand, moves round the crouching Ghost of Cuchulain at front of stage in a dance that grows gradually quicker as he awakes. At moments she may drop her hair upon his head, but she does not

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> kiss him. She is accompanied by string and flute and drum. Her mask and clothes must suggest gold or bronze or brass and silver, so that she seems more an idol than a human being. This suggestion may be repeated in her movements […].The object of the dance is that having awakened Cuchulain he will follow Fand out; probably he will seek a kiss and the kiss will be withheld. (*Var. Plays*, 554)

The final dance is Fand's lament over the loss of Cuchulain who has come back to life: "Fand […] enters and dances a dance which expresses her despair for the loss of Cuchulain. As before there may be other dances who represent the waves. It is called, in order to balance the first dance, 'Fand mourns among the waves'" (*Var. Plays*, 564).

Narratives and dances set two characters side by side in a conflicting relationship. In Noh plays a character from our real world, the *waki*, faces the *shite*, a god, a spirit or a ghost. Two characters are also present in Yeats's Noh plays. In *At the Hawk's Well*, Cuchulain finds in front of him the Guardian of the Well, a supernatural creature, woman and bird, who "gives the cry of the hawk" (*Var. Plays*, 406-408). Her dress suggests the bird; when she starts dancing, she moves like a hawk. Cuchulain cannot tell whether she is "bird, woman, or witch." He cannot resist her magic spell; she lures him away from the water of immortality. She takes the place of the Sidhe of the preceding plays, transmuted from goddesses into witches. *The Dreaming of the Bones*, inspired by the Noh *Nishikigi*, features the encounter between a young man and two ghosts. Death is on the stage and dramatic tension arises from the disappearance of the border between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This conflict between two beings implies opposed attitudes. The Old Man—Yeats's spokesman—in *The Death of Cuchulain* refers to the poet's philosophy:

> I am writing a play on the death of Cuchulain […]. My "private philosophy" is there […]. To me all things are made of the conflict of two states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each other's life, live each other's death. That is true of life and death themselves. (*Letters*, 917-918)

After the hero's death, the Morrigu appears; she is the figure of death: "The dead can hear me and to the dead I speak" (*Var. Plays*, 1061). She organizes a dance of resurrection: "I arranged the dance"; she is Emer's choreographer. When the Morrigu has placed the head of Cuchulain on the ground and has gone out, Emer runs in and begins a dance which is minutely described in the stage directions (*Var. Plays*, 1062). To the blind murderer who asks him if he is ready to die, the hero answers, referring to his soul: "I say it is about to sing" (*Var. Plays*, 1061). Emer's dance reflects the conflict between hatred and love; first "she seems to rage against the heads of those that have wounded Cuchulain, perhaps makes movements as though to strike them, going three times round the circle of the heads." The number "three" stresses the ritual side of the dance. Then turning towards the head of Cuchulain: "She moves as

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if in adoration or in triumph. She is about to prostrate herself before it […]. She seems to hesitate between the head and what she hears. Then she stands motionless. There is silence, and in the silence a few faint bird notes.” In the Irish folklore the soul becomes a bird after death, as announced previously by Cuchulain.

The conflict of life and death through two characters, with the theme of the singing head which haunted Yeats, appears in all its violence in *A Full Moon in March* and in *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, two plays suggested by a prose-story:

> In the first edition of *The Secret Rose* there is a story [*The Binding of the Hair*] based on some old Gaelic legend. A certain man swears to sing the praise of a certain woman, his head is cut off and the head sings. […] In attempting to put that story into a dance play I found that I had gone close to Salome’s dance in Wilde’s play. (*Var. Poems*, 840)

The theme of *A Full Moon in March* is the union of spirit and matter, represented by a Queen—ideal beauty—and a Swineherd with a repulsive physical appearance and an insolent, suggestive speech:

> […] look long at these foul rags,
> At hair more foul and ragged than my rags;
> Look on my scratched foul flesh. Have I not come
> Through dust and mire? There in the dust and mire
> Beasts scratched my flesh […]
>
> My mind is running on our marriage night,
> Imagining all from the first touch and kiss. (*Var. Plays*, 981-982)

The Queen is to be won by he who sings his passion best. Offended by the Swineherd, she has him beheaded. She lays the severed head upon the throne. Then the head sings and the Queen, a symbol of death-in-life, another Salome, dances before the head, a symbol of life-in-death. First “her dance moves away from the head, alluring and refusing”; later:

> she takes the head up and dances with it to drum-taps, which grow quicker and quicker. As the drum-taps approach their climax, she presses her lips to the lips of the head. Her body shivers to very rapid drum-taps. The drum-taps cease. She sinks slowly down, holding the head to her breast. (*Var. Plays*, 988-989)

The Queen achieves union with the severed head in an erotic dance reminiscent of Salome with the head of John the Baptist. This is a desecration, a rape, almost a form of cannibalism; her senses being aroused, she is the *femme fatale*, acting with violent, sadistic cruelty. Yet it is also a “dance of adoration” leading to the kiss, an expression of love and pleasure; hatred and death on one side, love and pleasure on the other reach their paroxysm in this co-existence. The kiss engenders a horrible, poignant ecstasy.

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In the other play with a similar theme, *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, the climactic part begins when the Stroller's severed head is brought before the King and the Queen. The King asks his wife to dance in order to express her scorn for the Stroller. She starts dancing with the head first on the throne, then on her shoulder. After her song and dance, the head sings, as the Stroller had foretold, and this song is followed by another dance of the Queen. Then the Clock strikes and "at the last stroke she presses her lips to the lips of the head" (*Var. Plays*, 1003). The ritual dance expresses the conflict between love and hatred, and offers a reconciling image of life and death, of matter and spirit; the First Attendant, "singing as head" exclaims: "[…] What marvel is / Where the dead and living kiss?" (*Var. Plays*, 1003). Comparing Wilde's *Salome* with his own characters, Yeats thought that the first play was "a mere uncovering of nakedness," whereas his own work was "a long expression of horror and fascination" (*Letters*, 827). At the same time, according to the King, the Queen is "[a] screen between the living and the dead" (*Var. Plays*, 993). She becomes an aesthetic creature, a reconciling object of art. Dance here tells what cannot be said in words, what is beyond speech or song.[3]

In Noh, revelation often occurs at the climax of the dance, death at the denouement. In Yeats's plays, dance is also introduced in a moment of great dramatic intensity and emotion. It allows one to reach "some deeper life":

> we must from time to time substitute for the movements that the eye sees, the nobler movements that the heart sees, the rhythmical movements that seem to flow up into the imagination from some deeper life than that of the individual soul. (*Explorations*, 109)

Yeats wishes to reveal "the intimacies, ecstasies and anguish of the soul-life." Dance is a moment of revelation, of intense life, an epiphany, sometimes a mystical experience, as happens in *The Resurrection* which sets side by side the death and resurrection of Christ and Dionysus, and dramatises the end of a civilisation and the beginning of a new cycle: "The followers of Dionysus are parading the streets with rattles and drums," "dancing all the while some kind of elaborate step," and "the dance grows quicker and quicker" (*Explorations*, 903, 926, 928). Then the dancers become "silent" and "motionless," they are in a trance: they have the vision of Christ.

In *The Herne's Egg*, too, dance brings revelation. The stage directions require the actors to "move rhythmically as if in a dance" (*Var. Plays*, 1012) and Attracta is said to be "Like a dancer, like a hare," or "Travelling fast asleep / In long loops like a dancer" (*Var. Plays*, 1021). She dances to escape this world and unites with the divine represented by the Great Herne: "There is no reality but the Great Herne" (*Var. Plays*, 1016).

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3. There are many interpretations of the Queen completing her being when she unites with her opposite. They combine the mythic, the human and the aesthetic approaches. I prefer now to return to a simpler symbolism in keeping with Yeats's quest for Unity of Being and with a spectator's immediate reaction.

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Yet this quest for immortality may be a failure, as happens in *At the Hawk's Well*, which records two stages in the life of man. Cuchulain, the young hero, is frustrated since, when the water flows, he is attracted by the charm of the Guardian's dance. Meanwhile the Old Man is deceived by the "accursed dancers"; they "have deluded me my whole life […] you have stolen my life" (*EI*, 411), he says; each character is unable to retrieve the water from the well of immortality. For both, the quest for the sacred water is a failure.

In the Japanese theatre, movements follow a minute choreography. Each play has its own written stage directions to show an actor precisely what to do. Gestures are stylized with long pauses which give them more importance. Yeats explains:

> I have lately studied certain of these dancers with Japanese players, and I notice that their ideal of beauty, unlike that of Greece and like that of pictures from Japan and China, makes them pause at moments of muscular tension. (*EI*, 231)

The text may inspire a series of mimetic movements, "a swift or a slow movement and a long or a short stillness, and then another movement" (*EI*, 230-231). Ito, who was pleased with Dulac's design for the hawk's costume, composed the music and worked out the dance movements for *At the Hawk's Well*; those of the arms recalled Egyptian representations of the hawk with spread-out wings and suggested a wheeling movement. The cry, like that of a hawk, marks the beginning of the Guardian's transformation into a bird so that her body should react. This happens twice before she "throws off her cloak and rises; her dress under the cloak suggests a hawk." Then she begins to dance, "moving like a hawk" (*EI*, 406, 408, 409). The dance occurs at the climax of the play and makes the narrative progress. As it goes on, Cuchulain "staggers to his feet": "The madness has laid hold upon him now" (*Var. Plays*, 410). His fascination for the hawk takes his attention away from the well of eternal life. Finally the Young Man follows the Guardian to the world of the Sidhe.

In Noh plays "[t]he players […] found their movements upon those of puppets" (*EI*, 230). Those of the Old Man in *At The Hawk's Well* "suggest a marionette" (*Var. Plays*, 401). In his essay *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, Yeats explains that the movements are sometimes so slow that it is difficult to know when a dance begins and ends: "The interest is not in the human form but in the rhythm to which it moves" (*EI*, 231); "Rhythm implies a living body, a breast to rise and fall, or limbs that dance, while the abstract is incompatible with life" (*Letters*, 608). The upper part of the body remains motionless whereas the lower part is moving. Action seems to come from the dialectics of motion and stillness. Each attitude is associated with a particular thought. The dancer must flex his/her muscles and contract them in moments of tension. Movement is the language of dancing and the dancer makes an image of art out of the motions of his/her body. He/she is at once artificial because of the mask and natural in the movements of the body. The

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rhythm of verse, music and dance creates the dramatic atmosphere. Yeats acknowledged his dependence on Ito for composition and performance of dance and music, as well as for poetic inspiration. In performance, Ito's face was immobile but his expression was in harmony with his body and expressed the idea of the dance. For him, "dancing was good for both body and mind and creates a balance between them" (Binyon 272). Great attention was given to movement, gesture, rhythm. The beauty of the dancer's body, expressing his own emotions and creating ours, established the aesthetic distance necessary to reveal the depths of the soul.

Dance was sometimes arranged in a circle, an essential image to solve the contradictions of life and death, unite body and spirit, and be a moment of ecstatic fulfilment, harmony, perfection, eternity, Unity of Being. Ito's dances resolved contraries on the stage: life and death, creation and destruction, good and evil. In *The Dreaming of the Bones*, different characters move in a circle after their performances (*Var. Plays*, 766-768), a circular march which recurs four times in the play, an image of the inescapable fatality which overwhelms them; everybody is caught inside this tight circle as a consequence of the transgression of the lovers, tortured by the consciousness of their tragic guilt, their responsibility in the Normans' invasion of Ireland in the twelfth century.

Such preoccupations required a drama rejecting all the naturalistic conventions and an aristocracy of cultured spectators. As Yeats put it, it was a new form of drama, "distinguished, indirect and symbolic [...] an aristocratic form" (*EI*, 221) and he admired Ito's "minute intensity of movement in the dance of the hawk, which so well suited our small room and private art" (*Var. Plays*, 417). In his preface to *Four Plays for Dancers*, he wrote:

> the dancing will give me most trouble, for I know but vaguely what I want. I do not want any existing form of stage dancing but something with a smaller gamut of expression, something more reserved, more self-controlled, as befits performers within arm's reach of their audience. (Yeats 1923, 331-332)

He paid great attention to the symbolic and dramatic meaning of the dance, generally at the climax of the play. *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* gives a minute description of dancing: "No naturalistic effect is sought [...] There are few swaying movements of arms or body such as make the beauty of our dancing" (*EI*, 230-231). The beauty of a woman in motion becomes a work of art; her movements are carefully studied. Within the dance all becomes a ritual though reality is ever present.

Yeats's own creation: dance as the expression of Unity on stage

Yeats's Noh plays are not a mere adaptation of the characteristics of Japanese plays. Their originality comes mainly from the symbolic meaning of dance as a quest for Unity of Being. From a perfect state of disembodied intensity, through ritual or trance, dance becomes a symbol

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of Unity integrating opposites. The term was used as "Dante used it when he compared beauty in the *Convito* to a perfectly proportioned human body […] [My father] preferred a comparison to a musical instrument so strung that if we touch a string all the strings murmur faintly" (*Aut.*, 190). The comparison with a musical instrument sets Unity of Being not only on a psychological but also on an aesthetic level. This applies to any literary genre. Yeats gives heroic poetry as an example: "[It] is a phantom finger swept over all the strings, arousing from man's whole nature a song of answering harmony" (*Uncollected Prose*, 84). The contrary forces of the gyres create Unity of Being. Through Italy, this concept comes from classical Greece with its ideal of beauty which implies measure and proportion; the image of the human body with perfect proportions is found in Plato's *Symposium*. Through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, correspondences are established between microcosm and macrocosm, before being shaped by theosophy, Boehme, Swedenborg and Blake.

In *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, Fand, the woman of the Sidhe, performs a symbolic erotic dance so that the Ghost of Cuchulain should join her in a kiss, creating one single being, Unity. Another example occurs in *The Cat and the Moon*. When the cat is asked: "Do you dance, Minnaloushe, do you dance?" the rhythm of the song is punctuated by a dance leading to revelation:

> When two close kindred meet
> What better than call a dance?
> Maybe the moon may learn,
> Tired of that courtly fashion,
> A new dance turn. (*Var. Plays*, 794)

When the lame beggar, who wishes to be blessed, achieves his own Unity of Being by carrying his opposite on his back, a miracle happens and he dances. Dance is very clearly here again a symbol of Unity. In *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1917) the identity of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla is revealed to the young man by the passionate dance of the two ghosts, an expression of their love and their agony, combining sweetness and suffering. Though they belong to the supernatural world, they have human feelings and ask for the young man's forgiveness; yet they know he cannot forgive them; they cannot consummate their love and "they are swept away" (*Var. Plays*, 775).

Several passages written at different moments of Yeats's life show the importance of Unity for him. The first reveals that he thought of it very early on in his life: "One day when I was twenty-three or twenty-four, this sentence seemed to form in my head, without my willing it, much as sentences form when we are half-asleep: 'Hammer your thoughts into unity'" (*Explorations* II, 263). He wrote this sentence in 1888, at the age of twenty-three, as he began his literary career. The second is included in "The Tragic Generation," 1926: "Somewhere about 1450, though later in some parts of Europe by a hundred years or so, and in some earlier, men attained to personality in great numbers, 'Unity of

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Being', and became like 'a perfectly proportioned human body'" (*Aut.*, vol. III, 291). *A Vision* also gives a clear explanation: "My instructors identify consciousness with conflict. […], a struggle towards harmony, towards Unity of Being" (Book II: "The Completed symbol," 214). The last passage was written later in the poet's life:

> My Christ, a legitimate deduction from the creed of Saint Patrick […] is the Unity of Being Upanishads have named "self" […]. Subconscious preoccupation with this theme.
> Dance brought me *A Vision*. (*Later Essays*, 210)

Throughout his life and works, Unity of Being was Yeats's aim, and dance a means to reach it. It represents the movement that every man and every civilization make towards completeness, resolving all the opposites, natural and supernatural: "Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed" (*Var. Poems*, 554).

Since "dance belongs to a period before the self and the world were divided, writes Frank Kermode, [it] achieves naturally that 'original unity'" (Kermode 1961, 51). Unity of Being in Yeats's works may be symbolized either by the rose, the sphere, the dancer or his dance—dancer and dance being as inseparable as body and soul. To reach his aim, the playwright looked for dancers who should be different from those represented in modern art: "I spit upon the dancers painted by Degas" says the Old Man in The Death of Cuchulain (*Var. Plays*, 1052). Like Yeats, he knows the difficulty of finding an adequate dancer: "I could have got such a dancer once, but she had gone; the tragi-comedian dancer, the tragic dancer, upon the same neck love and loathing, life and death" (*Var. Plays*, 1052). Again here there is a fusion of contraries. Dance is probably the most original of all his symbols insofar as it is the concrete and visible expression of this Unity and the dancer with his/her "perfectly proportioned body" is the agent of an artistic and spiritual achievement. As Ito remarked: "Art gives a spiritual interpretation to the visible, and material signification to the invisible; the artist must make these two relations manifest" (quoted by Caldwell 27).

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