

“Separating Strangeness” and “Intimacy” in W. B. Yeats's Drama

Natalie Crohn Schmitt

One realised anew, at every separating strangeness, that the measure of all arts' greatness can be but in their intimacy.
—W. B. Yeats¹

Recently, Marvin Carlson has argued that the quest for ecstatic experience has been “a goal of all theatre, East and West, and that in fact the deepest and most intense moments of the theatre experience are those when such an experience occurs, when the god descends.”² I believe he is correct. But in the West, such religious experience—of the union of all things and of oneself with them—has seldom been an explicit goal of theatre. As Marianna Torgovnick has established, desires for ecstatic experience here have been regularly repressed.³

In this essay, I demonstrate Yeats's use of his theatrical techniques of separating strangeness and intimacy and show their importance to his explicit radical and systematic theatrical experiments in trying to allow his audience that experience of ecstasy.⁴ “All our art,” Yeats said in a letter to his father, “is but the putting of our faith and the evidence of our faith into words or forms and our faith is in ecstasy.”⁵

This experience was particularly repressed, Yeats thought, where institutionalized Christianity, science, and the middle class, with its business interests, were dominant or coming to be so. In Western culture, as Marianna Torgovnick points out, ecstatic experience has also been repressed because it is embarrassingly feminine: it is contrary to the desire to maintain the individual impenetrable male self.⁶ Yeats was working against a repression as enforced now as it was in his time.⁷ The means for doing so were far from obvious.

Because of the primacy of language in Yeats's plays and his outspoken insistence upon that, even to the point of saying that he wanted to rehearse his actors in barrels, critics long regarded the plays as no more than esoteric poems. Yeats's efforts to effect ecstasy by dramatic and theatrical means were overlooked. In fact, the first book-length study of Yeats's plays, F. A. C. Wilson's *W. B. Yeats*

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and Tradition, did not appear until 1958, nineteen years after Yeats's death and long after he had come to be regarded as the greatest poet of his time.⁸ And Wilson's book is focused on the plays' sources and symbolism. As late as 1978, Andrew Parkin observed that although Peter Ure, 1963, had called on readers to recognize Yeats's plays as dramatic, most subsequent work on them was apologetic in tone and limited to literary, primarily thematic, analyses.⁹

Only since the 1980s have there been critics who have focused on the radical theatricality of Yeats's plays—his innovative use of masks, dance, music, and set.¹⁰ Katherine Worth has established that the plays of Beckett, with their restricted dramatic action, movement, and stage decor and Beckett's overall control of their performance are profoundly influenced by Yeats's plays.¹¹ Recognition of this influence can guide us to further appreciate in Yeats's plays, as we have in Beckett's, the conjunction between their language and structure, his intended staging and dramatic effect. I examine these in *Calvary*, 1920, a very beautiful play from Yeats's maturity as a playwright, to show how through them taken together Yeats deploys his techniques of separating strangeness and intimacy to try to effect ecstatic experience.

Ecstatic experience was not an everyday event, not one the existence of which most playgoers would even acknowledge. Therefore Yeats wanted his plays to provide separating strangeness, "the distance from life which can make credible strange events, elaborate words."¹² Yeats saw the prevailing drama of realism as preoccupied with the trivial activity and language of contemporary daily life, with surface restlessness. After 1915, he set most of his dramas out-of-doors removed from ordinary and particularly urban life to spaces and situations where vast experience seems more available. He admired Greek and Renaissance drama, not Ibsenian realism, preoccupied, he thought, with psychologically diminished people in confining rooms and domestic situations.

All drama, insofar as it is distinguishable from life, provides what Yeats called "separating strangeness." It is set apart, often on a stage raised and removed from us by distance and lighting. Even in realistic drama the costuming, setting, and language are highly selected and thus distinct from life. The action in drama is compressed in duration and frequently occurs at a special time of day or year. Its protagonists are frequently special people, kings, for instance, quite separate from us and the actors who play them. The drama represents an extraordinary, often once in a life time, life-changing, life-threatening, or life-ending event: Oedipus, for example, learns that he killed his father, married his mother, and brought a plague upon Greece. Consequently, he blinds himself and leaves his homeland forever.

Calvary relies on the techniques of separating strangeness found in much drama. It is compressed—indeed, to a mere nine pages. It is set at a special time, Good Friday, with a full moon. The protagonist, Christ, is far from ordinary; he is

supernatural. Moreover, he is greatly distanced from us in time. He is involved in an extraordinary, highly dramatic, once in a lifetime, violent event, his passion and death. And, in Yeats's version of the passion, Christ is already dead, reliving his experience as if in a recurring dream: "Good Friday's come, /The day whereon Christ dreams His passion through."¹³ While we can readily understand that Christ is in the kind of state we know from our own nightmarish relivings of past fears and griefs, a dead Christ reliving his passion is a figure apart. The language of the play is also distanced from daily life. It is verse.

To these means of separating strangeness in the body of the play, conventional and not, Yeats added theatrical means. A chorus of musicians mediates the action, thus setting the play off explicitly as play—as it is set off as a dream. From *Noh*, Yeats borrowed not only the idea of the ghost play but also music and masks (or, for the minor characters, faces made up to resemble masks), dance, formalized movement, and rhythmic speaking. In place of the front curtain of a proscenium stage, he added a cloth folded and unfolded by the chorus along with their opening and closing songs, additionally framing the play as play.

Yeats shows Christ on his final journey formally sequenced like a medieval morality play. On the way to his death, Christ meets a series of those who have no use for him or deny him his all-embracing love and power, and Martha and the three Mary's, "that live but in His love" (*VPI* 782) and who are thus too insubstantial to meet his need for the experience of union with all things, even, and most importantly, with his opposite. This formal structure of repetition within Christ's recurring dream, itself a kind of repetition, effects separating strangeness.

Christ first endures, as the three musicians explain, but we are not shown, a crowd of mockers. The musicians sing about their fear of the mockers. What we see is Christ wholly isolated, bearing the cross that "shortens His breath and wears away His strength" (*VPI* 781). The crowd, the musicians tell us, shrinks away upon the actual entrance of the figure of the "death-stricken and death-hungry" Lazarus. After protesting to Christ his resurrection, the disaffected Lazarus flees, seeking to avoid, through death, Christ's all-encompassing love. Then the musicians describe, but again we are not shown, Martha and the three Marys trying to comfort Christ. What we see is Christ alone. Then, Martha and the three Marys, as the chorus describes them in song, frail as "a drowned heron's feather/Tossed hither and thither/Upon the bitter spray/And the moon at the full," flee in terror at the actual entrance of the figure of Judas (*VPI* 784). In betraying Christ, Judas, as he now explains to Christ, sought to deny him his all-encompassing power. Christ bids him be gone. This time, there is no song between the departure of one figure and the entrance of the next; the tempo of the play speeds up and heightens the drama as Christ's death more nearly approaches.

Three Roman soldiers enter. They are, as a group, the third of the figures we actually see interacting with Christ. They order Judas to hold up the cross on

which they will crucify Christ. The soldiers, oblivious to both Christ's love and power, seek nothing from him but his cloak. Ironically, they assume that they comfort him by telling him that they have no need of him except his cloak and that they will keep away anyone who might want something from him. Subsequently, while Christ dies on the cross, the soldiers, knowing that he cannot live much longer, hurry so that he can appreciate their dance, that is to say, their disinterest and self-involvement. During the dance, as they explain to him, they quarrel for a while about which of them is to get the cloak. They settle the quarrel, as they subsequently demonstrate, by casting lots "and after that, being friends," and knowing that "one day one loses and the next day wins", they "join hand to hand and wheel about the cross" (*VPI* 786-787). Again, we see Christ, on the cross, isolated, a separated stranger in the midst of those who should acknowledge and love him.

Visually the play is restrained, condensed, and focused. The single action is stripped of all extraneous action, context, character, and movement. Christ is mostly still. At the climax, and only then, does he express his agony, "My Father, why has Thou forsaken Me?" He does not cry out further.

The musicians, in their songs that frame Christ's passion, sing first about a self-absorbed heron transfixed by his own moonlit reflection in a stream. Like the humans, the heron has no need of Christ. He is solitary, but unlike the isolated Christ he needs no one: "God has not died for the white heron" is the song's thrice-repeated refrain (*VPI* 780-81). In the song before the entrance of Lazarus, in the song before the entrance of Judas, and then in the closing song, the heron in its progressive dissolution moves, as Richard Londraville observes, "from bird, to bone, to feather, to oblivion."¹⁴ In the closing song's also thrice-repeated refrain, reinforcing the structure of threes, "God has not appeared to the birds" (*VPI* 787). No mention is made of the heron; birds of other species soar above an empty lake. The death of the solitary but self-sufficient heron, Christ's anti-self, prefigures and hence reiterates the lonely death of Christ. Again, the ritual repetition in the structure of the musician's songs and in the story of the heron effects separating strangeness.

The experience of ecstasy, Yeats thought, is and is precipitated by a kind of violence to the psyche represented in tragedy, in this case by Christ's final journey during which he is mocked by onlookers, rejected by Lazarus and Judas, and finally crucified by Roman soldiers. Yeats came to refer to the experience he sought to evoke as "tragic ecstasy."¹⁵ The union of all things includes that of both tragedy and ecstasy.

The action of *Calvary* does not finally show Christ having the ecstatic experience however. While Yeats often used dance to represent sexual union, itself representing the union of all things, as the high point of his drama, here the soldiers' dance around the dying Christ is the antithesis of such ecstatic union. Christ's increasingly intense isolation culminates in and is powerfully visualized

in dance. "The god descends," as Marvin Carlson would have it, but he is rebuffed. There is no union of Christ and mortal man.

While the characters' model the ecstatic experience in many of his plays, Yeats wrote a number of plays in which the characters seek but fail to achieve that experience: *Calvary*, *The Dreaming of the Bones*, *The Words Upon the Window Pane*, and *Purgatory*. These plays are nonetheless or, rather, all-the-more to effect ecstatic experience in the audience. Helen Vendler notes that in his poetry Yeats developed "the art of subtraction."¹⁶ In poems with strongly marked stanzaic structures he sometimes omitted the last line to foreground a similar lack of resolution in the content. The technique Yeats employed in the dramas in which the union the protagonists so intensely desire is withheld is closely related to the art of subtraction. The characters' very failure to achieve this union is set in contradistinction to the plays' unifying dramatic structure, rhythm and rhyme, repetition of images, and interweaving of contrasting images repeated in various configurations. Everything in the plays calls out for the protagonists' and our own mystical union. We are to be engaged in supplying it.

Yeats's experiments in achieving what he termed "intimacy," "the measure of all arts' greatness," predate many of the experiments to this same effect in drama of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yeats set his performances in a room against a wall and did away with the techniques of separating strangeness provided by the theatrical conventions of his time: a stage separate and distant from the audience, stage lighting, elaborate settings, a formal curtain, and declamatory speech. Sometimes, but not in *Calvary*, Yeats specified that the characters were to enter through the audience. He made his drama, which relied almost altogether on the actor, human in scale. In addition to the actors, *Calvary* employs only a cross carried by Christ, the preset musical instruments played by the musicians—drum, zither, and flute—the cloth they fold and unfold, and perhaps, the Roman soldiers' dice, although Yeats probably intended for these to be mimed. Musicians describe the setting and provide the exposition directly to the limited audience: "The road to Calvary, and I beside it/Upon an ancient stone. Good Friday's Come, /The day wherein Christ dreams his passion through" (*VPI* 781). And, like a Greek chorus, Yeats's chorus expresses directly the emotion we are to share, "O, but the mockers' cry/Makes my heart afraid . . ." (*VPI* 781). Yeats's desire was to make "everyone who hears" the play, in effect, "a player."¹⁷

On the other hand, Yeats never sought, as did the experimenters of the late 1960s and early 1970s, to do away with separating strangeness. Actors were to be masked or made up as if masked, their movements formal. Yeats would have objected to any physical interaction between actors and audience because, finally, the intimacy he sought for his audience was with "the nobler movements that the heart sees, the rhythmical movements that seem to flow up into the imagination from some deeper life. . . ."¹⁸ And he did not suppose, as did the experimenters of

the late 1960s and early 1970s, that the presence of the actor absent any theatrical artifice would provide this. For Yeats, in his later plays, including *Calvary*, the sense of all opposites, including intimacy and separating strangeness bound together, was the essential manifestation and representation of ecstatic experience.

Many of the techniques employed in *Calvary*, the use of mask, dance, music, rhythm, and verbal and structural repetition, at one and the same time, clearly separate the play from daily life and make it more intimate. Yeats sought means for his drama to sidestep intellect to go directly to "a deep of the mind"¹⁹ as he thought these ritualistic elements did.

Yeats used Christian mythology in *Calvary* because that mythology was intimately familiar to and evocative for many Westerners. He was interested in religious myths, including Christianity, because he believed them to be repositories of a common ecstatic experience which, however much it had been repressed, might once again be called forth through their appropriate representation. "You must have a myth," he said, "because through myth man can bridge the gulf, which separates the one and the many, or, if you like, God and man."²⁰ In his plays the myths were primarily ancient Irish ones but also Christian, Greek, Japanese, and of his own making. That there were similarities in myths across cultures affirmed Yeats's belief that all religions are essentially one. The totalizing experience that he thought people had once sought through myth he aimed to provide again through drama.

The structural repetitions in the framing choral verses, in the dreaming back, and in the sequence of Christ's encounters on the road to Calvary effect not only separating strangeness but, at the same time, the intimacy of ritual repetition. Repetition also occurs in the language of the play. The speeches in *Calvary*, except those of the rough-hewn Roman soldiers, are in iambic pentameter, and rhythm is, of course, a kind of repetition. The songs are end-rhymed. And a number of words and images in the play are repeated many times. Thus verse too provides not only separating strangeness, distance from the ordinary, but, at the same time, intimacy: the ritual repetitions in structure, rhythm, rhyme, and imagery approach a deep of the mind.

In the section of the play in which the chorus of musicians describes the mocking of Christ on the road to Calvary, the mockery described is reiterated to frightening effect: Christ on his way to Calvary

stands amid a mocking crowd,

.....
 Those that are behind
 Climb on the shoulders of the men in front
 To shout their mockery: . . .

.....

Words, images, sounds, and sentence structure are pared down and repeated. Moreover, the many contrasting images—of birds and animals, water and desert, moonlight and daylight are interwoven in their repetition and so unified. The transmigration of imagery also effects unity: “Call on your father now before your bones/Have been picked bare by the great desert birds” (VPI 781); “As though a flute of bone/Taken from a heron's thigh. . . .” (VPI 781-82); and the gambler's dice are carved out of an old sheep's thigh.

Everything comes together not only in the repetition and transmigration of images and sounds but also in the interplay of opposites. The interweaving of contrasting imagery makes everything seem closer to, more intimate with, everything else: light as a heron's feather and heavy as the cross, the light of the open desert and the dark of a cave, here on Calvary and there in the stream, god and man, god and animal, god and bird. Images of comfort and contentment contrast with and are interwoven with those of terror, pain, and isolation; those of power and freedom with those of powerlessness. Similarly, stillness and movement, life and death, the present time of the narrating chorus and Christ's past, narrated and enacted, actor and play, reality and dream, image and experience, the still visual and the rich verbal come together as one. While as Londrville shows, the changes in the primary unifying dramatic image of the heron from bird to bone to feather to oblivion reinforce the developing action of the play, Christ's progression toward his death,²¹ the interweaving of imagery makes for an all-at-onceness, all time coming together in a moment.

Yeats's view of intimacy necessarily entailed not only immediacy but also specificity because “the concrete alone is loved” (Notes to *The Cat and the Moon*, VPI 806). Chastising himself for the vague soft imagery of his earlier pre-Raphaelite plays—pale lights and fairies, and the supernatural beyond this world—Yeats, particularly after 1915, sought to make his imagery as precise, vivid, and grounded as possible.²² The imagery is very specific: “Our dice were carved/Out of an old sheep's thigh at Ephesus” (VPI 786); “The cross that but exists because He dreams it/Shortens His breath and wears away His strength./And now He stands amid a mocking crowd,/Heavily breathing” (VPI 781). Christ is here on earth experiencing very human pain and isolation.

In *Calvary* Yeats does not explicitly state the importance of the experience of ecstasy as he does in his prose writings and as he does in so many of his early plays, plays in which he felt he had not succeeded with his subject matter. In these plays he resorted to vague mystical stage directions, “The darkness is broken by a visionary light” (*The Countess Cathleen*, VPI 167) or to didacticism, “We perish into God and sink away/Into reality—the rest's a dream” (*The Hour Glass*, VPI 635). In Yeats's view, every play that finally resorted, as did these early plays, to vagueness and didacticism was to that extent a failure.²³ The ecstatic experience, he thought, did not lend itself to literal description; it could be evoked by vivid

fable ritualistically presented: "The idea should be inherent in the fable."²⁴

Yeats sought to create a drama that led "not to reflection [as did didacticism,] but to unity with the source of . . . being" (Notes to *The Cat and the Moon*, VPI 806). Among the theatrical devices he turned to that end were the indissolubly paired separating strangeness and intimacy. Together, they are to represent and serve to effect in the audience the experience of the union of all things.

Notes

1. W. B. Yeats, Introduction to *Certain Noble Plays of Japan: From the Manuscripts of Ernest Fenollosa, Chosen and Finished by Ezra Pound with an Introduction by William Butler Yeats* (Churchtown, Dundrum, Ireland, 1916) v.

2. Marvin Carlson, "The Eternal Instant: Some Thoughts on Theatre and Religion," *Assaph: Studies in the Theatre* 12 (1996): 42.

3. Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997) 8.

4. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux writes, "Yeats's Noh-inspired drama gathers its effect from the tension between intimacy created by physical proximity, and 'separating strangeness' created by the explicit use of dramatic convention." Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, "'Separating Strangeness': From Painting to Sculpture in Yeats's Theatre," *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies*, 1 (1983): 82. Loizeaux's excellent article traces Yeats's development over time of scenic techniques of separating strangeness. She does not examine Yeats's techniques of intimacy, a concept, I argue, more complex than mere "physical proximity."

5. Letter to his father, J. B. Yeats, a painter, 1913 in *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (New York: Macmillan, 1955) 583.

6. Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions* 41. For recent championings of Yeats for his feminine side see Katherine Worth, "The Words Upon the Window-pane: A Female Tragedy," *Yeats Annual* 10 (1993): 135-58; Deirdre Toomey, *Yeats and Women*, ed. Dierdre Toomey (New York: St. Martins Press, 1997); Janis Tedesco Haswell, *Pressed Against Divinity: W.B. Yeats's Feminine Masks* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1997).

7. R. P. Blackmur has explained the usual response to Yeats's interest in supernatural experience, "The supernatural is simply not part of our mental furniture, and when we meet it in our reading we say: Here is debris to be swept away." R. P. Blackmur in *The Permanence of Yeats*, ed. James Hall and Martin Steinman (New York: Macmillan, 1950) 43. See also W. H. Auden in *The Permanence of Yeats* 345. Arguing that Yeats's poetry is essentially that debris, Yvor Winters dismisses Yeats as a poet altogether. See Yvor Winters, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (Denver: Swallow Pamphlets, 1960) No. 10.

8. F. A. C. Wilson, *W. B. Yeats and Tradition* (London: Gollancz, 1958).

9. Andrew Parkin, *The Dramatic Imagination of W. B. Yeats* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978) 54. He excerpts Reg Skene, *The Cuchulain Plays of W. B. Yeats: A Study* (London: Macmillan, 1974), which is limited to five of Yeats's plays.

10. See, for instance, Sylvia C. Ellis, *The Plays of W. B. Yeats: Yeats and the Dancer* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995); Karen Dorn, *Players and Painted Stage* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1984).
11. Katherine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978) 241-65. Worth also finds Yeatsian influences on Beckett's characters, plots, locales, and language. See also Katherine Worth, "Yeats, Beckett and the Force of Change," *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies* 10 (1992): 140-53; "Yeats and Beckett," *Gaeliana* 6 (1984): 203-213; and "Scenic Imagery in the Plays of Yeats and Beckett" in *Irish Writers and the Theatre*, ed. Masaru Sekine (Gerrards Cross, Eng: Smythe, 1986) 218-232.
12. W. B. Yeats, Introduction, *Certain Noble Plays of Japan I*.
13. *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1969) 781. All quotations from the plays and from notes to the plays are from this edition, hereafter cited as *VPI*.
14. Richard Londrville, "The Unifying Dramatic Image in the Plays of W. B. Yeats," *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies* 10 (1992): 131.
15. W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Collier, 1968) 239: "Tragic ecstasy which is the best that art—perhaps that life—can give."
16. Helen Vendler, "Technique in the Earlier Poems," *Yeats Annual* 8 (1989) 7-9.
17. W. B. Yeats, *Plays and Controversies* (New York: Macmillan, 1924) 72.
18. W. B. Yeats, in "The Reform of the Theatre," 1903, *Explorations*, selected by Mrs. W. B. Yeats (New York: Collier, 1962) 109.
19. W. B. Yeats, *Certain Noble Plays of Japan V*.
20. In a conversation with John Sparrow recorded in William Rothenstein, *Since Fifty: Men and Memories, 1922-1938* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1940) vol. 3: 242.
21. Richard Londrville, "The Unifying Dramatic Image in the Plays of W. B. Yeats" 129-31.
22. Ezra Pound is at least in part responsible for the marked stylistic change at this time. Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory on January 3, 1913, "He . . . helps me to get back to the definite and the concrete. . . ." Letter to Lady Gregory, Jan 3, 1913, quoted by Richard Ellmann, *Eminent Domain* (Oxford UP, 1967) 66.
23. "I began to pray that my imagination might somehow be rescued from abstraction," in "The Trembling of the Veil," 1922, W. B. Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1969) 127. "We should not as a rule have to say things for their own sake in a play. . . ." Letter to Brinsley MacNamara, 1919, in *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade 657.
24. Letter to Brinsley MacNamara, 1919, in *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade 657.

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