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*"Out of a medium's mouth":
the Writing of
The Words upon the Window-pane*

by MARY FITZGERALD

INSCRIBING James A. Healy's copy of the Cuala Press edition of *The Words upon the Window-pane* (1934), W. B. Yeats noted: "I wrote this play as a help to bring back a part of the Irish mind which we have been thrusting out as it were foreign. Now that our period of violent protest is over we claim the Anglo-Irish eighteenth century as our own."¹ Although this affirmation of the Anglo-Irish protestant ascendancy was a new theme for Yeats's plays, it was already familiar to readers of his poetry and prose. He had given it defiant and memorable formulation on 11 June 1925 in an address to the Irish Senate:

. . . I am proud to consider myself a typical man of that [Anglo-Irish] minority. We . . . are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell. We have created the most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence.²

In poetry, Yeats further expanded this exalted idea of Anglo-Irishness, claiming a glorious past for his ancestors and a continuing legacy of generous civility for his descendants:

. . . I declare
They shall inherit my pride,
The pride of a people that were
Bound neither to Cause nor to State,
Neither to slaves that were spat on,
Nor to the tyrants that spat,
The people of Burke and of Grattan
That gave, though free to refuse—³

The fusion of past and future in these lines suggests that the Anglo-Irish heritage fully inhabits the present, much as the Georgian architecture of

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1. Quoted in Michael B. Yeats, *'Something to Perfection Brought': The Cuala Press* (Stanford, Calif.: The Associates of the Stanford Univ. Press and the Department of Special Collections, 1976), n. pag.

2. *The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Donald R. Pearce (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1960), p. 99.

3. *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 414.

certain Dublin streets assures that the eighteenth century fully inhabits the twentieth. This continuing presence of the past, hinted in the poetry and prose, is actually accomplished onstage in Yeats's *The Words upon the Window-pane*, when the passionate words of Jonathan Swift come tumbling out of a medium's mouth. In that dramatic moment, Yeats quite literally "bring[s] back a part of the Irish mind" into his own Irish present and extends it into his children's children's future.

As Daniel Harris has shown in *Yeats: Coole Park and Ballylee*, Yeats associated Anglo-Irish greatness particularly closely with Lady Gregory and her family,⁴ and so it is not surprising that his first specifically Anglo-Irish play should have been written, like "The Tower," at her Coole Park estate, a setting that had more to do with the shaping of the play than has previously been suspected. More surprising, perhaps, is Yeats's choice of Jonathan Swift as the hero of his Ascendancy play. Given a choice among Berkeley, Burke, Emmet, Grattan, Parnell, and Swift, Yeats settled upon Swift with apparent ease. Possibly he saw Swift's life as the most intrinsically interesting, because of its romantic triangle. A drama about Berkeley, Burke, or Grattan might have demonstrated passionate thought, but it would have made less effective theatre than one about the passionate emotion of Swift. A play about Emmet or Parnell might have provoked nationalist feelings that would have confused the issue and obscured his point. But a play about Swift could allow Yeats to subsume politics under personal character, and besides, like Yeats, Swift was both politician and poet.

The writing of the play ought to have given Yeats at least as much trouble as others of his plays and poems, but it did not. He chose Swift immediately and immediately selected an especially felicitous episode from Swift's life for his central action, the incident concerning a letter Vanessa wrote to Stella asking whether she and Swift were man and wife. This incident allowed Yeats to dramatize the confrontation within the romantic triangle at the peak of its frustrated intensity and to focus attention on Swift's reasons for not marrying—as Yeats saw them—his overriding fear of flaccidity of thought in the coming generations and his personal dread of passing an hereditary madness to his children,⁵ reasons which Yeats validates dramatically in his play by presenting twentieth-century Dubliners as the silly if likable group around the medium's table, obviously no match for Swift's contemporaries. Yeats's use of a séance as a frame device thus permits him to compare the present with the past and to bring the past into the present. Everything fits.

4. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974).

5. Modern Swift scholarship discounts this view, but Yeats held the older belief that Swift lapsed into mental illness in his later years. An account of the Abbey Theatre production of a Swift play by G. Sidney Paternoster, which appeared in the *Irish Times* for 25 January 1913, suggests that it presented madness as Swift's reasons for not marrying Stella. For a modern diagnosis, see Irvin Ehrenpreis, *The Personality of Jonathan Swift* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, [1958]).

Not a word is wasted. *The Words upon the Window-pane* is a tightly constructed masterpiece of Yeats's later period, and it has merited excellent critical analysis.⁶ Two aspects of the play, however, have remained mysterious to scholars: the uncharacteristic ease with which Yeats assembled his characters and developed his plot, and the uncharacteristic speed with which he wrote the play.

Unlike most of Yeats's plays, *The Words upon the Window-pane* seems to have sprung virtually full-grown from the mind of its creator. In Rapallo Notebook "E" (begun at Coole Park), the first draft shows the central dramatic confrontation between Swift and Vanessa almost exactly as it will eventually appear in the published versions of the play. The séance is somewhat more sketchily presented at first, but the text as a whole rapidly achieves its final form—so rapidly, in fact, that Curtis Bradford assumed that intermediate drafts must have existed between the initial scenario, "one of the longest Yeats wrote and one of the most detailed,"⁷ and the final draft. As Bradford noted, Yeats works out the central conflict on the very first attempt. Moreover, close examination of the notebook itself, now in the National Library of Ireland, discovers that Yeats's handwriting shows no hesitation in the writing of the central action involving Swift and Vanessa. It is clearly a first draft, but it is a draft obviously informed by a fairly complete idea of the play.

There is a plausible explanation for all this: Yeats was probably working from his recollection of an earlier play. Among Lady Gregory's papers in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library are copies of a deservedly unknown one-act play called *Swift and Stella*, authored by Charles Edward Lawrence (1870–1940), Lady Gregory's editor at John Murray's, Ltd.⁸ The Berg copies are acting texts sent by Lawrence to Lady Gregory in 1930, but the play itself is of earlier date. It had first appeared in 1926 as one of several one-act dramas based on historical

6. See, for example, Douglas N. Archibald, "The Words upon the Window-pane and Yeats's Encounter with Jonathan Swift," *Yeats and the Theatre*, ed. Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1975), pp. 176–214; Curtis B. Bradford, *Yeats at Work* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 217–36; David R. Clark, *W. B. Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1965), pp. 60–84; Thomas Flanagan, "A Discourse by Swift, a Play by Yeats," *University Review* [Dublin], V (Spring 1968), 9–22; John Rees Moore, *Masks of Love and Death* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 249–67; and Peter Ure, *Yeats the Playwright* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), pp. 84–112. See also the Yeats chapter in *Anglo-Irish Literature: A Review of Research*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1976), pp. 216–314.

7. Bradford, p. 218.

8. C. E. Lawrence, *Swift and Stella: A Play in One Act*, Repertory Plays no. 65 (Boston: Gowans and Gray, 1927).

Lawrence and Lady Gregory were professional friends. In 1903 he sent her a copy of his *The Trial of Man*, and in an unpublished letter on 22 April 1903 he wrote appreciatively of her perceptive comments about it. She preserved letters of his from the front, letters about Irish writers, and letters about her business affairs. From these and from references to him in her journals, it is clear that Lawrence knew Yeats as well. On several occasions he sent her copies of his books, though their friendship apparently cooled in 1924, when he read the manuscript of her memoirs and detected anti-English feeling, as noted in *Lady Gregory's Journals*, Vol. 1, ed. Daniel J. Murphy (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1978), p. 580. In later journal entries, as yet unpublished, she noted that amicability had been restored ([Journals], 6 March 1926) and that he attended the Abbey Theatre on 15 May 1930.

figures, which Lawrence published in *The Cornhill Magazine*, the house journal of Murray's.⁹

Swift and Stella is a terrible play. Although it was not Lawrence's first attempt in the genre, it is easily his worst, sharing and indeed perfecting his general failings as a dramatist. It is virtually devoid of dramatic action. It consists entirely of Swift's reporting to Stella a conversation he has just had with Vanessa, prompting Stella to ask why Swift has never proposed marriage, and Swift to reveal immediately the secret he has kept from her all his life, the fact that they are illegitimate brother and sister. As if this were not bad enough, the characters are poorly drawn and oversentimentalized—Lawrence manages to reduce both Swift and Stella to the level of stock figures—and the dialogue is impossibly melodramatic, as in the following exchange:

SWIFT. Stella, a tragedy has happened since we met. (*Stella remains silent.*) Stella, you do not speak; but I tell you that a tragedy has happened, or will happen. Death is flying on his speediest wings to bring the only comfort to a wounded—a broken—heart, the wounded heart of—a fool.

STELLA. Nay! Jonathan!

SWIFT. Vanessa!

STELLA. Oh, must we speak of it?

Or this, which shows almost no regard for the rhythms of ordinary speech:

STELLA. . . . Why do you further torture that always tortured soul?

SWIFT. It is the result of life, Stella. Life without stress and agony would be impossible to me. Always I have suffered—nay, always I have fought against anguish of heart and body, enduring the patronage and pity of lesser people. Ha! From the beginning, even from the beginning, men, whom with these present powers I could have crushed, ordered me here and there with their insolence, assisted me [sic], insulted me, made me eat the bitter ashes of a base dependence.

STELLA. But that is past—and long past. It was a dream that is dead.

SWIFT. Not dead and no dream; for its wounds—they bleed even in these hours. In my loneliness, as voices from the dead, as the voices of tempters whispering from a poisoned darkness, I hear again the old words. . . .¹⁰

Obviously, *Swift and Stella* would not bear notice, were it not for the fact that it both predates Yeats's Swift play and anticipates it in subject, structure, treatment, and even dialogue.

It is highly probable that Yeats knew Lawrence's play. Circumstances argue that he certainly should have known it; indeed, it would have been very odd if he had *not* known it. When it first appeared in the June 1926 issue of *The Cornhill Magazine*—a year after his Senate speech—Yeats was saturating himself in the writings of eighteenth-century Irishmen. A few days before the publication of *Swift and Stella*, Lady Gregory noted

9. C. E. Lawrence, "Swift and Stella," *The Cornhill Magazine*, XL (June 1926), 672–81. All subsequent references are to this text.

10. Lawrence, pp. 675–76.

in her journal that Yeats was "full of the 17th [sic] Century—Burke, Grattan, Berkeley, Swift—all the Protestant leaders did for Ireland's independence."¹¹ If she received *The Cornhill Magazine* at Coole, and as one of Murray's better known authors she almost certainly did, Yeats might have read the play there, or she might have read it to him, as she often did because of his poor eyesight. Even if she did not regularly receive the magazine, Lawrence might well have sent her a copy, as he was not only her editor and friend, but also an aspiring playwright who sought her advice. Then too, Yeats would almost certainly have seen the magazine at one or another of the clubs which he frequented,¹² and his abiding curiosity about Swift, particularly intense at this time, would have prompted him to read it, as would his awareness of Lawrence's link with Lady Gregory. At the very least, Lady Gregory could have read the play herself and then described its dramatic faults and failings to Yeats. The fact that Yeats's Swift play is a point-for-point improvement of Lawrence's mistakes suggests that Yeats not only knew *Swift and Stella*, but had also analyzed its weaknesses and knew how to remedy them. Both he and Lady Gregory had been "readers" for the Abbey Theatre since its inception; by 1926 dissecting the work of other playwrights was second nature for them both.

It would have been neither unprecedented nor unusual for Yeats to have borrowed an idea from another writer's work for his own use. He began his playwriting career that way with *The Countess Cathleen*, parts of which are a close translation from a French rendition of the folktale. His alleged raid on George Moore's idea for *Where There Is Nothing* was infamous in its day. He appropriated Lady Gregory's recollection of her nurse's account of the 1798 French landing for *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and although Lady Gregory wrote most of the play, Yeats barely acknowledged her share.¹³ He was perhaps genuinely unaware that Cathleen herself derived her dual nature as both old woman and symbolic figure from the character of Peg Inerny in Edward Martyn's *Maeve*, who is also a real woman and a symbolic incarnation of Ireland—a point which Yeats noticed and praised in a rehearsal speech to the actors shortly before he "dreamed" his own Cathleen into existence.¹⁴ For many years he collaborated with Lady Gregory in the writing of his own plays as well as hers, giving as well as taking plots, dialogue, and ideas at will, as he himself acknowledged and as another

11. [Journals], 20 May 1925.

12. I am indebted for this information to the late Dr. Oliver Edwards, whose kindness to young Yeatsians knew no bounds.

13. *Seventy Years: Being the Autobiography of Lady Gregory*, ed. Colin Smythe (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1974), pp. 2–3; and "Modern-Ireland: An Address to American Audiences, 1932–33," ed. Curtis Bradford, in *Irish Renaissance*, ed. Robin Skelton and David R. Clark (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1965), p. 18.

14. [Isabella Augusta Persse,] Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1972), p. 28; and *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 232.

Yeats collaborator, Frank O'Connor, confirms.¹⁵ Moreover, Patrick Diskin has recently demonstrated that even at the end of his life Yeats felt free to borrow and to improve a play he had read: his *Purgatory* is apparently based on James Clarence Mangan's translation of a German drama which Yeats would have read in *The Dublin Magazine*. As he did with *Swift and Stella*, Yeats took the characters, the central incident, and even some of the stage directions from his source and reshaped them for his own purposes.¹⁶

The external evidence, then, strongly suggests that Yeats knew and did not hesitate to rework Lawrence's *Swift and Stella*, and that it is the chief source for *The Words upon the Window-pane*; but the most convincing argument is the internal evidence offered by the plays themselves. Both begin with Swift's rage over the letter which Vanessa writes to Stella. Both center on Swift's explanation of why he has not married. Both contain the line, "I am a woman, Jonathan." Both end with Swift's quoting the same scriptural passage. But there, happily, the resemblance largely ends. Yeats's sense of conversation and of construction had little in common with Lawrence's. Typically, where Lawrence is rhetorical and content to report his action, Yeats is succinct and presents his action directly. For example, Lawrence's major scene, the confrontation between Swift and Vanessa, is already over by the time the curtain rises. His Swift merely describes to Stella his furious (and apparently wordless) reaction to Vanessa's letter:

I carried her letter back to her at Marlay Abbey. In my anger—now I can see it—I rode those miles through the dark and the mire with never the lamp of a single star to brighten my wrath and misery, and saw nothing of the way. I sprang up the stairs, passed [sic] her woman, and into the room. She was there, standing; I can see her face yellow with fear—her eyes—waiting. I flung the letter on to the table. . . . She shrank at the sight of it as though struck in the heart. I thought she would fall. I saw death in her eyes. I went.¹⁷

Though there is more passion in the telling of this offstage event than in anything that happens onstage in *Swift and Stella*, the episode is robbed of greater dramatic impact because the audience overhears it instead of seeing it directly, and it is robbed of suspense because the audience has already learned what the letter was about. In *The Words upon the Window-pane*, by contrast, Yeats does not have his characters describe their conflict; he presents Swift and Vanessa directly onstage—without warning—in the midst of their angry confrontation, and enhances the dramatic potential of the scene by making his audience figure out for itself what is happening between them—and even who they are! Moreover, he works a subtle transformation on Lawrence's "overhearing"

15. Frank O'Connor, *A Short History of Irish Literature: A Backward Look* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1967), pp. 168-69.

16. Patrick Diskin, "Yeats's *Purgatory* and Werner's *Der vierundzwanzigste Februar*," *Notes & Queries*, XXVI (August 1979), 340-42.

17. Lawrence, p. 678.

scene. His audience "overhears" the encounter between Swift and Vanessa in a more sophisticated sense than Lawrence could have foreseen, and in the process he elaborates his theme: by having Swift and his ladies speak through the mouth of a medium, Yeats brings the past to life in the present. His audience experiences the event not only as it once occurred, but also as it occurs in front of them—and as it recurs endlessly. Their initiation in this principle is forceful and direct. In Rapallo Notebook "E," Yeats writes:

Suddenly Swift's voice, speaking through medium: "You have written to her. What if she and I are married. What right have you to ask questions[?]"¹⁸

In the final version, this becomes:

How dare you write to her? How dare you ask if we were married? How dare you question her? . . . You sit crouching there. Did you not hear what I said? How dare you question her?"¹⁹

—a series of questions which heightens the dramatic impact of Swift's introduction to the audience, establishing him immediately as a formidable and angry figure. It is interesting, too, that in "crouching" in reaction to Swift's onslaught, Yeats's Vanessa more closely resembles Lawrence's Vanessa, "shrinking" from the sight of the letter. Other bits of dialogue show similarities in theme and content, if not in style.

Stage business, too, is often similar, and here again, Yeats improves on Lawrence. In Lawrence's play, Swift is denied a dramatic entrance, as he is already in the room, waiting for Stella, when the curtain rises. In Yeats's play, Swift's entrance is unexpected and dramatic *because* he has been in the room all along—indeed, Yeats's point is that Swift is *always* in the room. In both plays, all action takes place in a single sitting room; but whereas in *Swift and Stella* this leads to an unintentional stasis, in *The Words upon the Window-pane*, the stasis is deliberately chosen. Yeats seats his characters around a table, and their arrested motion focuses all attention on the spoken word and makes the simple act of rising from the table (as the medium does when Swift possesses her) tremendously significant. In Lawrence's play, when Stella learns why Swift has never married her, she exits through the door, distraught, leaving Swift to pace aimlessly in the room. In Yeats's play, when the guests have departed, the medium/Swift goes through similar motions. The most striking similarity, however, is that both plays end with Swift alone onstage, uttering the same final cry. As Lawrence has it, Stella leaves, and Swift quotes Job:

(For a moment as the door closes behind her Swift hides his face in his hands. Then he walks to and fro, slowly, and gradually breaks into speech.) SWIFT. Darkness! Darkness! Darkness! . . . *(then with an anger of passion)* Let the day perish wherein I was

18. Bradford, p. 222.

19. *Variorum Plays*, p. 948.

born, and the night in which it was said, there is a man child conceived. Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud dwell upon it, let the blackness of the day terrify. As for that night let darkness seize . . . (*Curtain.*)²⁰

Obviously, the length of this quotation diminishes the dramatic potential of the ending. An actor would have to reduce it to rant or to muttering, either one of which leaves Swift a pathetic character rather than a passionate or powerful one. Yeats's ending is more forceful and more effective. The audience has been raised to a pitch of tension at the climax of the medium's monologue by Swift's complete possession of her body as well as of her voice. He has pounded violently on the door in a futile attempt to escape his purgatory in the room, and has since been quieted by the end of the séance. The fact that the other characters in the play regard the séance as a failure has a further calming effect, as well as a dramatically ironic one, and Yeats deliberately has the characters take their leave one by one to emphasize a gradual return to normalcy. Lulled into thinking that Swift is now "gone," the audience also learns that he has really been present, as Corbet's questioning of the medium makes it clear that she does not know who Swift is and cannot therefore have been "acting." Corbet leaves, and the room is apparently restored to its former order, so much so that the medium, Mrs. Henderson, can now begin that most ordinary of rituals, the making of a pot of tea. The audience is completely unprepared—and in a better sense *perfectly* prepared—for the reappearance of Swift, who establishes himself by slowly counting on his fingers the "five great Ministers" and "ten great Ministers" who were his friends, riveting the audience's attention on the hands of the medium. The audience is once again caught up in the reality of Swift's presence, and Yeats allows the resulting tension to lapse only slightly, as Mrs. Henderson subsides into her own voice long enough to verify that she does not recognize what is happening to her (she still thinks that she is hunting for the tea things). It also allows her to pick up the saucer that once again focuses the audience on her hands, which have become the dramatic symbol of her repossession by Swift only seconds before. As she is overtaken by Swift's presence for the last time, her grasp fails, the crockery slips and shatters, and Swift's voice cries out of her: "Perish the day on which I was born!"²¹ That single, desolate sentence distills the full impact of the play into a powerful final image for the audience to carry away from the theatre, fixing Yeats's portrait of Swift indelibly in the mind as a passionate—even terrifying—tragic figure. It also elicits fear and pity as efficiently as they have ever been elicited on the modern stage.

Every difference between the two plays—and there are many—is a Yeatsian improvement on a Lawrentian mistake. Where Lawrence uses

20. Lawrence, p. 681.

21. *Variorum Plays*, p. 956.

past tense, Yeats uses present. Lawrence's poor dialogue and tangled syntax give way to short, vivid sentences. Where Yeats retains the use of monologue, as he does for Vanessa's long speech, he organizes it around a vivid image, the "ivory dice" she compares herself to. Similarly, in Swift's long speech to Stella there is an anchoring image in Yeats—the words cut into the window pane. As for Swift's reasons for not marrying either woman, Yeats specifically repudiates in his preface the theory upon which Lawrence rests his play (though he does not name Lawrence), namely that Swift and Stella were both the illegitimate offspring of Sir William Temple.²² In its place, he offers the theory of Swift's supposed madness, the theory on which Sidney Paternoster based his four-act Swift play, which the Abbey produced in 1913 (though he does not cite Paternoster either). This theory, which is what Yeats believed that Swift would have believed, is more dramatically satisfying than the incest theory. Although the fear involved in both is the same—the risk of producing mentally damaged children—the "madness" theory locates the flaw in the protagonist, not in the marriage, and it accounts not only for why he will not marry Stella, but also for why he will not marry Vanessa, a problem which Lawrence's play leaves unresolved. Furthermore, it enables Yeats to use Swift's feared hereditary flaw as a symbol for his larger theme: the decline of contemporary society from its past greatness. Swift is elevated beyond merely personal failing and becomes instead a visionary who can foresee the dissolution which will eventually accompany democracy. This makes Yeats's play more universal in its appeal: its point is not the problem of a single man, but rather of all mankind; not in past history, but now.

Another major difference appears in the manner of exposition. Yeats heightens dramatic intensity by minimizing exposition, something he is more able to do than Lawrence, because his is a Dublin audience to whom Swift needs no introduction. Swift is still very much alive in his part of the old city: in the names of streets, in the various landmarks associated with his tenure as Dean of St. Patrick's, in the mental hospital which he funded in his will, and in the living memory of the people. So Yeats is more free than Lawrence to present Swift as an "unknown" visitor, mysterious both to the onstage observers and to the audience. Instead of Lawrence's opening rant against conditions in Ireland and the comic foibles of the servant class, which establishes his Swift as a crotchety old complainer, Yeats's manner of exposition transfers the comic foibles to the bourgeoisie, as objectified in the *séance*-goers, and he avoids any direct commentary on the Dublin scene. Yeats places Swift in his historical context by subtly effective references to the fine old house in which the *séance* is held, a tactic which is dramatically superior not only because it is less obtrusive and more thematically co-

22. *Variorum Plays*, p. 966.

herent, but also because it draws attention early in the play to the room itself, which will become synonymous with Swift's contemporary presence and his continual reenactment of the past.

The most striking difference between the plays is, of course, Yeats's use of a frame plot, but even this can be seen as a modification of Lawrence's idea. It is, in fact, a complete transformation of the chief dramatic defect in *Swift and Stella*, the predominance of offstage action, into the major structural principle of *The Words upon the Window-pane*. Yeats would easily have recognized that Lawrence's play fails because little or no action happens onstage, the most significant action has already occurred offstage, and the whole weight of the drama rests on the dialogue alone. The result is a one-act drawing-room tragedy that defies conventional dramatic wisdom, and loses. But though *The Words upon the Window-pane* contains identical "faults," in Yeats's hands they become daring theatrical innovations in an experiment that works, and works beautifully. Like *Swift and Stella*, Yeats's play has little important "onstage" action: the séance is supposedly a failure. Similarly, it is dominated by an already completed action: Swift and the women have been dead for so long that they are only memories. Yeats also rests the entire weight of the drama on the dialogue: the medium's voice does the work of all three major figures (as well as her own and that of her controlling guide, Lulu). The visual perspective in the central confrontation is supplied through words alone: the audience creates for itself a pensive Stella, a "crouching" Vanessa, a broken and ugly Swift.

The success of Yeats's experiment is rendered possible largely through the device of the medium, who summons the past into the present and allows it to unfold again with all the primal intensity of its first occurrence. The device may have suggested itself to Yeats because he associated mediumship with acting, as he says in his preface to the play, or because he was familiar with séances and could therefore draw them from life.²³ For Yeats, of course, mediumship seemed as plausible as purgatorial atonement seemed to much of his audience. His familiarity with séances may be gauged from Lady Gregory's first reference to the play in her journal for 18 September 1930: "Yeats has been reading me his Swift play. . . . Very wild and terrible behind its simple setting, an *everyday* séance."²⁴ He might have arrived at the idea of the "simple setting," then, through a convenient association of ideas. But he might also have been spurred on by *Swift and Stella*, which he would have recognized as a failed ghost play. The harmony of lovers in the drama is destroyed by the action of an absent figure, who is said to be recently dead or dying. Lawrence, of course, makes nothing of Vanessa's ghostly essence—she haunts the action only figuratively. But Yeats's interest in the traditional Japanese Nōh play would have showed him richer possi-

23. *Variorum Plays*, p. 967.

24. [Journals], 18 September 1930. Emphasis added.

bilities, and, besides, ghosts were very much on his mind when he wrote the play at Coole.

Yeats arrived at Coole Park for one of his many visits to Lady Gregory, who was by then terminally ill with cancer, in late August or early September, 1930. He arrived there from Oliver St. John Gogarty's house at Renvyle, not far away, where he and his wife had once encountered the ghost of a previous Renvyle owner, who appeared in their room while a séance was taking place downstairs.²⁵ Yeats had also seen a rhymed couplet which had been cut into the window pane of Gogarty's Dublin home, apparently in the Georgian era.²⁶ So, although Yeats's visit to Renvyle in 1930 had had nothing especially ghostly about it—he had gone there to sit for Augustus John's portrait of him—Gogarty's houses were rich with spirit associations for him and offered memories of a séance and of Georgian words upon a window pane.

Although Coole had no ghosts of its own, it held literary, historical, and Ascendancy associations for Yeats, and Lady Gregory had often said to him that she thought their spirits would haunt the library after their deaths, as they had written so many of their works together there. Moreover, in the autumn of 1930, Coole was being haunted by Vanessa herself—though from a distance. When Yeats arrived, he learned that Robert Gregory's widow and her husband, Guy Gough, were negotiating the purchase of Celbridge Abbey in County Kildare as their future permanent residence. This pained Lady Gregory, as it meant that her grandchildren would no longer live near her, and that Coole would certainly be empty after her death.²⁷ The Goughs, however, were not troubled about this and were pleased with Celbridge Abbey, which had once been owned by the Vanhomrighs and later by Grattan. They told Yeats of the folk rumor that Vanessa had entertained Swift there and that she was said to haunt the bridge down to the present day.²⁸

When not commiserating with Lady Gregory about the sad future of Coole, Yeats spent his time studying Berkeley, as Lady Gregory was reading Hone's recently completed manuscript of the life.²⁹ He also worked on revisions of his early stories for the projected Coole Edition of his works, stories he had first revised at Coole with Lady Gregory's

25. Oliver St. John Gogarty, *As I Was Going Down Sackville Street* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1937), pp. 190–98; and *William Butler Yeats: A Memoir* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1963), pp. 21–22.

26. *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 891.

27. [Journals], 25 July 1930.

28. [Journals], July–October 1930. See also Mackie Jarrell, "Jack and the Dane: Swift Traditions in Ireland," in *Fair Liberty Was All His Cry: A Tercentenary Tribute to Jonathan Swift*, ed. A. N. Jeffares, p. 335. Jarrell mentions that the estate was bought "by a Major Gough in the 1930s," notes that this is the only ghost story associated with Swift, and gives a description: "Vanessa's ghost (her name is 'Irished' as Vennessa Vanbhombret) is said to have appeared to Jack Macan as he was crossing the rock bridge [near the rustic seat formerly called 'the Dean's chair']. She told him not to go home by that way any more. He persisted, after still another warning, and on the third night she threw him into the river. It is said that if a person walks at twelve o'clock at night by the gate of the Temple Mill road he will see this noted Lady with a dog and fire coming from its mouth." It is not clear from Lady Gregory's journals how much of this legend the Goughs knew, but it is certain that they knew that Celbridge Abbey was haunted by Vanessa.

29. [Journals], 18 September 1930.

assistance.³⁰ In re-reading his *Rosa Alchemica*, he would have come across an echo of his own voice from 1897 in a passage that points to his long-held belief that presences linger in the places they have visited:

. . . as I led the way up the wide staircase, where Swift had passed joking and railing, and Curran telling stories and quoting Greek, in simpler days, before men's minds, subtilised and complicated by the romantic movement in art and literature, began to tremble on the verge of some unimagined revelation. I felt that my hand shook, and saw that the light of the candle wavered more than it need have upon the gods and nymphs set upon the wall by some Italian plasterer of the eighteenth century, making them look like the first beings slowly shaping in the formless darkness.

Further along in this same passage, he sees a censer "with pieces of painted china" fallen from its place and hears a voice saying, "They have come to us . . . all that have ever been in your reverie, all that you have met with in books."³¹

The Words upon the Window-pane appears to incorporate many of these Coole associations—Gogarty's houses, the haunted Celbridge Abbey, the echoes of his past words—in transforming Lawrence's play. Yeats uses Lawrence's Dublin setting, but he moves it from the Deanery of St. Patrick's to Stella's house. He borrows the rhymed inscription from Gogarty's Dublin house and the séance from Renvyle, changing the lines to Stella's and the spirit to Swift's. He moves Vanessa's ghost from Celbridge Abbey to Stella's house in Dublin—where Vanessa in life would not have ventured—by extrapolating from Lawrence's off-stage confrontation as recounted to Stella by Swift. (This explains how Vanessa's ghost can be in the room with Swift and Stella; in Yeats's play Swift mentally relives the encounter with her in telling it to Stella just as he relives the encounter with Stella herself immediately afterwards.) Details from the passage in *Rosa Alchemica* lend themselves to the construction: Swift's former presence in an eighteenth century room, "beings slowly shaping in the formless and void darkness," and even the falling china. So do phrases from *Swift and Stella*: "voices from the dead . . . whispering from a poisoned darkness," and "comings and goings in the moonless dark."

In his preface to the finished piece, Yeats says, "My little play *The Words upon the Window-pane* came to me . . . as a reward, as a moment of excitement."³² It probably did. All the ingredients were present when he reached Coole and the associations coalesced in the Ascendancy atmosphere of that great house, "Where passion and precision have been one, / Time out of mind." It happened very quickly. Lady Gregory records Yeats's presence at Coole on 13 September, writing his poem about Anne Gregory's yellow hair. He had apparently been there

30. The Coole Edition never reached print, although it reached proof stage. Yeats's corrected proofs have apparently been lost.

31. W. B. Yeats, *The Secret Rose* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1897), pp. 228–29.

32. *Variorum Plays*, p. 957.

awhile—Lady Gregory's entries from this period are sporadic—and was already at work upon *The Words upon the Window-pane*, as Anne Gregory's poem appears alongside the draft of the play in Yeats's notebook. Lady Gregory's first record of what she always calls "Swift" or "his Swift play" is the reference on 18 September to the "everyday séance," by which time the play is "nearly ready now." It is "completed" by Sunday, 28 September, and "finished" on 1 October: "Yeats has finished his play. He had been waiting to get from Dublin a copy of Stella's poem for it. But I took down [Samuel] Johnson's snuffy essay on him in his Works from the Library Shelves—and there is the poem and he has used it." On 4 October she records that Yeats "has written the last words of his Swift play."³³

Yeats left Coole on 27 October and two days later wrote to Lady Gregory from Dublin: "*Swift* is in rehearsal—I shall dedicate it to you."³⁴ It is the only one of his plays dedicated to her, although he had long ago given her his two volumes of *Plays for an Irish Theatre*, because "they are in part your own."³⁵ *The Words upon the Window-pane* opened at the Abbey Theatre on 17 November 1930. It is probably not mere coincidence that two days later, after the Irish papers containing notices of the performance had reached London, C. E. Lawrence inscribed a copy of his *Swift and Stella* for Lady Gregory—though it had been issued in paper covers fully three years earlier. If he wrote a letter in sending his play to her, the letter no longer survives.³⁶

It is no wonder, then, that Yeats's Swift play comes so quickly into existence on the pages of Rapallo Notebook "E." He had everything he needed at hand when he sat down to write in the library at Coole, and when *The Words upon the Window-pane* was published, by the Cuala Press in 1934, his simple dedication paid tribute to that fact: "IN MEMORY OF LADY GREGORY IN WHOSE HOUSE IT WAS WRITTEN."³⁷

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33. [Journals], 13 September–2 November 1930.

34. *Letters*, p. 778.

35. *Variorum Plays*, p. 232. Yeats dedicated the first American edition of *Where There Is Nothing* to Lady Gregory, but subsumed that honor into the more general dedication of *Plays for an Irish Theatre* in 1911, by which time he had become dissatisfied with the play and rewritten it with her as *The Unicorn from the Stars*.

36. The three copies of *Swift and Stella* which survive in the Berg Collection are uncut, including the one bearing the inscription "To Lady Gregory from C.E.L. 19 XI 30." Although it is possible that Lawrence had sent them at the time of the publication of the acting text in 1927 and later inscribed one for Lady Gregory, it seems more likely that he sent them in 1930, apparently upon recognizing a similarity between Yeats's handling of Swift and Stella and his own. However it may have happened, the timing of Lawrence's inscription is extraordinary, and even more extraordinary is the uncut state of the books, which suggests that neither Yeats nor Lady Gregory tried to read the play—although Yeats's Swift play had just been produced, and although both of them later read Shane Leslie's Swift play and pronounced it "rubbish" ([Journals], [21 or 22] January 1931). It is possible that one or both of them cut and read a fourth copy which has now been lost, but it seems more likely that they did not read the play because they remembered it from its 1926 appearance in *The Cornhill Magazine* and therefore did not have to read it. Neither of them ever mentions it.

37. W. B. Yeats, *The Words upon the Window Pane* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1934).