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The Inner Drama of Yeats's Four Plays for Dancers

by HERBERT J. LEVINE

We can reasonably say of Yeats what Keats said of Shakespeare: that he "led a life of Allegory" and his dramatic works are comments upon it. Though Yeats's poems are almost always read biographically, his plays have not sustained a similar tradition of criticism, even though the mystery of his life is there in every one of the plays. Four Plays for Dancers (1921) is an extremely rich source for encountering the presence of Yeats, the man, in the process of transforming himself into a great visionary poet and playwright. Throughout the bizarre world of masked figures and visionary encounters in At the Hawk's Well, The Dreaming of the Bones, The Only Jealousy of Emer, and Calvary, we can see reflected the spiritual history of the author, a history Yeats recorded in the midst of these plays' composition in Per Amica Silentina Lunae (1917), an alphabet for spelling out the ruling obsessions of his life.1

In Per Amica, Yeats writes bitterly about the sterility of his imagination during five fruitless years of work on The Player Queen (1907-12). In the five years since 1910, he had written no new plays, and had only taken up old projects, revisions of four of his early plays.2 When Yeats began studying with Pound the Noh drama of Japan in the winter of 1913-14, he was prepared for a new birth to come out of its wedding of natural and supernatural, man and ghost, in a concentrated expression at once aesthetic and religious. I doubt very much if he was prepared for what did happen to him. Between 1915 and 1920, he wrote five new plays in the Noh form, finished The Player Queen, composed in Per Amica his most eloquent and moving prose work, and compiled two great volumes of lyrics, The Wild Swans at Coole (1917, 1919) and Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921), his best collections in twenty years. The social and biographical background of the period is no less astounding. In 1914, all his life seemed to him, Yeats wrote, "a preparation for something that never happens."3 All the hopes of which he had long since despaired suddenly came to life. Ireland woke up in the

1. I am indebted to Leonard Nathan, The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats: Figures in a Dance (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 161-65, who laid the important groundwork for reading these plays in terms of the ideology, if not the psychology, of Per Amica.
Easter Rising of 1916, alerting Yeats to the reality of heroic action in the modern world. In that rebellion Maud Gonne’s husband died, giving Yeats the chance to court her once again, and if not Maud, then at least her charming twenty-one year old daughter, Iseult. Refused on both counts, the confirmed bachelor poet married an old occultist flame, Georgie Hydes-Lee, but rather than making him succumb to pastoral temptation, marriage actually put Yeats in touch with uncanny forces dictating through the subconscious of his wife’s mind. As they dreamed together of monstrous new births for the modern world, they conceived and gave birth to Anne Yeats, a daughter for whom Yeats now had to plan and dream.

This is the remarkable biographical background against which the evolution of *Four Plays for Dancers* (1921) must be seen, a development which cannot be separated from the great poetry of the period. Each of the plays is associated with the central dilemmas Yeats was living through in the years of their composition and each of them helps Yeats work through private turmoil and transmute it into art.

Many critics have noted the autobiographical genesis of one or another of these plays in passing, but have seemed almost embarrassed to dwell on the wealth of biographical riches that Yeats’s plays offer us. Helen Vendler’s uneasy noting of an autobiographical reference is typical: “. . . there is nothing to do but admit it freely, and pass on. Nobody transformed experience more than Yeats . . . and to find the historical ‘real’ beneath the fiction is a task almost hopeless, it seems to me, in the plays.” Vendler’s criticism presupposes that biographical inquiry must lose sight of the art work as it searches for hidden evidence of the life. My attempt is not to undermine the fictive in favor of the supposedly ‘real,’ but rather to show how the completed fictions reveal and become part of the pattern of the author’s life. These plays are as much a part of Yeats’s biography as anything else he did or said during these years, and they are perhaps a better source than most for understanding the creative life of the man because they cannot resort to the evasions of the controlling “I.” By concentrating on the personal dilemmas in which Yeats found himself and the resolutions that writing these plays offered him, I hope to suggest how to see these plays as Yeats himself probably saw and felt them during their creation.

Curtis Bradford reminds us that “the impulse toward autobiography was always powerfully present in Yeats, perhaps most powerfully in 1914–17” (p. 308). His work on the manuscripts of Yeats’s poetry, prose, and drama shows convincingly that Yeats was an autobiographer in all his literary modes, and that in his revisions he excised only the accidental qualities of personal experience in order to emphasize what was permanent in his sense of himself and his world. Even in the dance

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plays, Yeats's most impersonal form, his early drafts show direct autobiographical references: in *At the Hawk's Well*, a concluding sentence lifted from his autobiography; in *Calvary*, a reference to Coole Lake in its closing song.  

Yeats took advantage of both the freedom of the autobiographer and the restraint of the dramatist, initially projecting himself everywhere into his creations, but finally distancing himself to achieve an embodied "idea, something intended, complete."  

Throughout this period of intensely autobiographical writing, one of Yeats's central concerns was explaining the Daimon, the supernatural alter ego or guiding genius whom he believed controlled his destiny and made it somehow extraordinary. Yeats attempted this explanation in many forms. First, in August 1915, there was the exchange of letters with "Leo Africanus," the spirit voice who claimed to be Yeats's Daimon and encouraged him to take up automatic writing so that Yeats could speak with Leo's daimonic voice. Yeats undertook but was unsatisfied with this experiment, doubting whether any of Leo's words had come from beyond his own mind. Next, in "Ego Dominus Tuus," completed in December 1915, Yeats attempted another colloquy with an alter ego: Hie, the voice of the realist, debating with Ille, the voice of Yeats's otherworldly aspirations. Ille hesitantly announces the imminent revelation of his anti-self, but in the poem no such visionary being appears to him, and as the poem ends we may well question Yeats's ability to project convincingly the visionary reality in which he claims to believe.  

Within a few months, however, Yeats had written the first of his dance plays, *At the Hawk's Well* (Winter 1915–16), and found the form he needed to give life to the bond between man and Daimon, now envisaged dynamically as a tragic conflict. Borrowing from the stylized manner of the Noh drama, he created a theatre of reverie where everything is presented by the chorus as an image in "the mind's eye." Any ordinary space is transformed into a "deep of the mind," when masked characters, speaking and moving like automatons, enact a phantasmagoric ritual that climaxes in an eerie dance by the Daimon, or ghostly figure in the play. In this drama, both mortals and immortals seem equally visionary, so there is no conventional standard by which we can dismiss Yeats's portrayal of the spirit world. Yeats could have found no...
better emblem for his conviction that the Daimon controls human life than the wordless dance of the possessed hawk-woman, which entrances the mortal Cuchulain and leads him onto his life’s accursed road of heroism and inevitable defeat.

Yeats’s search for dramatic form did not entirely fulfill his autobiographical need to project a daimonic self-image. In *Per Amica* he explains his belief in the Daimon as a religious synthesis of his life and work. On the one hand, he had to believe that his negative experiences, disappointments in love, in politics, and in his quest for occult wisdom, were willed by some “hand not ours in the events of life” (*M*, p. 336), and on the other, that his very capacity for visionary experience was divinely inspired. One thus singled out by the Daimon was himself a daimonic character possessing an extraordinary inner force, and had no choice but to renounce the happiness of sentimentalists and practical men in favor of the ecstatic “revelation of reality” (*M*, p. 331). The reality revealed to Yeats’s imagination by the Daimon was inevitably tragic, and in the dance plays, remarkably like his own inner reality. The central characters of these plays suffer from loneliness, frustrated love, and unappreciated sacrifice. Each is thrust amidst his ignorance or bitterness into a visionary revelation where he encounters his taskmaster Daimon and is forced to test—and if possible transcend—the limits of selfhood. In the dance plays, then, Yeats continues to explore the daimonic identity articulated in *Per Amica*. He becomes a virtual Daimon himself in designing the lot of mortals and immortals, vicariously living their lives and dying their deaths. Through their tragic masks and potential epiphanies, Yeats comes to know better both the suffering and the ecstasy he felt comprised his own daimonic lot. To readers with a biographical interest in Yeats, the plays can be seen to function as patternings, sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious, of Yeats’s tragic sense of his own life history.

**The Fact** that Yeats patterned *At the Hawk’s Well* after “the permanent sorrows” of his own life has been noted by almost every commentator to write on the play. A recent critic has summed up the extent of Yeats’s biographical projection into his characters: “Cuchulain in his temerity... images what the artist, the man of contemplation most lacks and the Old Man in his timidity and atrophy what he most dreads.”


against impotent old age, nor nostalgically longing for an unattainable exuberant youth. Cuchulain and the Old Man are centrally opposed to one another because of the way each pursues his quest for the waters of immortality. Immortality is not a common dream that can be attained simply by waiting patiently for fifty years beside a magical well. The Daimon who grants that gift is a hard taskmaster, who demands that the quester recast the lineaments of his own image through some transforming mask. Both characters are masked in the play, but whereas the Old Man’s mask simply embodies his natural self, Cuchulain’s mask can transform him from a plucky youngster to a dedicated hero. Terrified of the aura of the place where he waits, the Old Man will simply wheedle and whine till the end of his days. Cuchulain, however, shows that he is destined for the immortality of the hero by his willingness to encounter mysterious forces beyond his own control. He abandons the water that plashes in the well to pursue instead the sexually alluring image of the hawk-woman. He is drawn magnetically into the orbit of the being that has possessed her, the genius loci who is his Daimon. Gazing into her eyes invokes a curse, but he willingly takes it on to pursue his destiny as a hero, whatever the bitter cost.

Yeats understood that the choice of a mask in life or in literature was made in partnership with the Daimon. He needed to believe that his Daimon had not destined him for the passive mask of the Old Man, but that like Cuchulain, he could choose and be chosen as a hero in his own imaginative world if he was willing to undertake the risks and suffering of the heroic lot. One thing his Daimon demanded was subjecting the imagination to pain before it could be rewarded by a vision of beauty (M, p. 332). Yeats needed to imagine himself in his play as an utterly desiccated scarecrow of a man, in order to set off the antithetical splendor of Cuchulain and the frenzy of the hawk-woman, an important aesthetic choice he repeated in his later career in such poems as “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes,” “Among School Children,” and “Sailing to Byzantium.” Yeats’s chief aesthetic goal in this middle period of his life was to transcend the frustrations of middle age and recreate himself as a hero. To do so, he had to subject himself to the muse of adversity, embodied in the unfriendly feminine Daimon of At the Hawk’s Well.

The most problematic issue in this play about making a commitment to the Daimon is the role of the distinctly non-daimonic chorus, and the relation it bears to Yeats’s own views. John Rees Moore has warned against identifying Yeats with the chorus, advising us to look ironically at their innocent affirmative vision of natural sexuality and plenitude: 12

Yeats printed these lines as part of a lyric in *Responsibilities and Other Poems* (1916), alerting us to the fact that he was willing to appropriate this praise of normalcy as one of his own lyric personae. The imaginative parable of *At the Hawk's Well* was deeply threatening to Yeats for it reminded him of the inevitable frustration of the heroic and visionary callings: "Wisdom must live a bitter life" (*CP1*, p. 144), sings the chorus, but how to escape the horrifying possibility of ending life as "a withered tree?" Yeats's only hope lay in self-knowledge. He needed to recognize that the chorus's temptation was as real for him as Cuchulain's pursuit of a visionary image. Why else would he echo the same temptation among the confessions of *Per Amica* and again, late in life, in "An Acre of Grass?" Having acknowledged his temptation to abjure the daimonic struggle, he could see himself as one even more firmly committed to a heroic life in pursuit of antithetical images, whatever the personal cost.

Yeats was soon reminded of how great the cost of commitment to a heroic image could be by the martyrdom of the sixteen dead men in the Easter Rising. The crisis that gave rise to Yeats's next play, *The Dreaming of the Bones* (Spring–Summer 1917) was Yeats's guilt in the aftermath of the Easter Rising. "I keep going over the past in my mind and wondering if I could have done anything to turn those young men in some other direction." Yeats had spent the previous years far from the causes of Irish nationalism, and instead had delved heavily into spiritism and ghost lore, another aspect of the Irish experience to be sure, but one that the sixteen dead men could hardly associate with Ireland's future. The play sets the political and ghostly worlds in conflict, and past critics, depending upon their critical biases, have emphasized either one or the other. But when we put the play in a biographical context and realize that Maud Gonne is both the ghost that Yeats is trying to exorcise, and the political force he hopes to assuage (she had not approved of "Easter 1916"), we no longer have to decide between Yeats as ghost-lover or Irish patriot. Although the ghosts have "mummy truths" to tell, the young rebel has historical facts about the consequences of their legendary betrayal, which led to seven hundred years of English subju-


gation of Ireland. Yeats does not ask us to accept the truth of the one and deny that of the other. Both ghosts and man leave the lonely scene with the bitter knowledge that the sorrows of ghostly love are eternal and that the tragic past of Ireland can never be undone.

Behind the irreconcilability of the play's protagonists lies Yeats's sense that his own world view, as embodied in a hieratic art like that of the dance plays, was utterly irreconcilable with the revolutionary energies of Ireland in the aftermath of the Easter Rising. The loneliness that pervades The Dreaming of the Bones is Yeats's own loneliness as he contemplates the world of possibilities swept away by the murder of the rebels-become-martyrs. Cuchulain gave himself up to an heroic destiny because for him there was no other choice. But for those shot after the Rising, there might well have been some other political choice. Like the Young Man of this play, they might have left the scene of fighting to go into hiding, contributing to Ireland's future with their lives rather than with their deaths. Though Yeats gave them credit for having been "transformed utterly," he sincerely wished that their form of "terrible beauty" had never been born.

Yeats's sympathies are more fully engaged by the pair of ghostly lovers, whose suffering is partly modeled on his own. In the woman's agonized recitation of a burning desire that cannot be consummated throughout eternity, we are at the deepest point of feeling in the play, where Yeats's own painful experience with Maud Gonne in a long, unfulfilled love merges most fully with his subject matter:

These have no thought but love; nor any joy
But that upon the instant when their penance
Draws to its height, and when two hearts are wrung
Nearest to breaking, if hearts of shadows break,
His eyes can mix with hers; nor any pang
That is so bitter as that double glance,
Being accursed.

Though eyes can meet, their lips can never meet. (CP1, p. 281)

As Yeats confessed in Per Amica, when the lineaments of the artist's mask "express also the poverty or exasperation that sets its maker to the work, we call it tragic art" (M, p. 329).

There were many exasperated double glances, no doubt, during the summer of 1917 when Yeats was courting Iseult Gonne and finishing his play at Colleville-sur-Mer, with mother and daughter looking on approvingly. "Here they say it is my best play," wrote Yeats (L, p. 629), probably because the Gonnes applauded the Young Man's strong rejection of the traitorous pair. Still the tireless revolutionary even in middle age, "joyless and self-forgetting" in her political hatred (L, p. 631), Maud Gonne must have approved especially of the Young Man's politicizing rhetoric (ll. 56–58, 247–58). Coming straight from the battle lines
at the G.P.O., he is so full of ideological hatred that he interprets everything in light of it.

Though the Young Man is clearly not Yeats's spokesman in the play, he is far more than just a rhetorical stalking horse to set off the sufferings of the ghosts. Susceptible to the supernatural from the start, he becomes increasingly fascinated as the strangers undertake to educate him about ghosts, and when the woman begins obliquely to describe her own awful sufferings, he sympathetically tries to envision a crime so monstrous that it could demand such enduring penance. Only when he finally realizes that the lovers are Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, and that their guilt is not personal but political, does he pull back. At this point the ghosts, realizing that they have exhausted verbal persuasion, dance the sweet but strange dance of frustrated longing that virtually ensnares their amazed observer: "I had almost yielded and forgiven it all— / Terrible the temptation and the place!" (CP1, p. 284).

I think we can see in the ghosts' strategy to lure the Young Man something of the entire history of Yeats's relationship with Maud Gonne. Yeats always tried to fascinate Maud with the supernatural world, while she urged the exigencies of politics upon him, but neither could ever fully accept the role that had been selected by the other. Despite this incompatibility, similar to that of the ghosts and rebel in the play, Yeats continually tried to manipulate Maud Gonne spiritually. In an extremely revealing passage of autobiography, virtually contemporary with the play, Yeats writes: "I, who could not influence her actions, could dominate her inner being. I could therefore use her clairvoyance to produce forms that would arise from both minds, though mainly seen by one. . . . There would be, as it were, a spiritual birth from the soul of a man and a woman." 15 A shared visionary life, then, could compensate for the poet's immense sexual frustration. We find something akin to this shared visionary life in the sexually sublimated dance of the ghostly lovers, who can neither end their penance nor reconstitute their love unless they can attract the potent Young Man as a surrogate partner. He participates in the vision they create up to a point, but withdraws at the crucial moment when he might have assured the lovers a new spiritual birth. Yeats knew the temper of Maud and of Ireland too well in the summer of 1917 to allow his fantasy of forgiveness and union to complete itself. Ireland could not throw off its burden of guilt and hatred, nor Yeats, his lonely remorse:

Dry bones that dream are bitter,
They dream and darken our sun. (CP1, p. 284)

Yeats had the remarkable opportunity to cast off remorse and virtually begin life again when he married in October 1917. After so many

years of obsessive love for another woman, it was only natural that he wondered whether he could start and maintain a marriage at the age of fifty-four that would not be overwhelmed by the dark shadows of the past. *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, conceived in 1916 but mostly written in 1918, is exactly contemporary with the poems that helped Yeats cope with the crises of his new marriage, mostly collected in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. Like Solomon and Sheba in the poems, Cuchulain and Emer are legendary masks for the newly married pair, embodying in their own drama some of the conflicts of Yeats’s marriage.

Yeats gives Emer the possibility of being jealous over two women resembling Iseult and Maud, the lovely young mistress Eithne Inguba, introduced in the play with imagery of “white shell, white wing” (*CP1*, p. 185), and Fand, the glittering moon goddess, “more an idol than a human being” (*CP1*, p. 191), who comes to tempt Cuchulain with the unremembering pleasures of immortality. A malicious male Daimon forces Emer to renounce Cuchulain’s love forever in order to save him from being seduced by his brazen female Daimon. Cuchulain meanwhile values the memories of his love for Emer so highly that he willingly rejects the proffered charms of his gorgeous Daimon, the erstwhile hawk-woman of his first heroic quest. As he explains to Fand,

How could you know
That man is held to those whom he has loved
By pain they gave, or pain that he has given,
Intricacies of pain. 16

These lines were excised from the final version of the play, perhaps because they revealed too clearly how deeply *The Only Jealousy* is concerned with the pain of Yeats’s relationships with the women he has loved, both the “pain they gave” and the “pain that he has given.” Through Emer’s and Cuchulain’s sacrifice of both earthly and otherworldly fulfillment, Yeats acted out his own need to put Maud Gonne and the paradisal visions of his dreamy youth behind him and accept together with his wife the mature pains of memory and remorse.

Many previous commentators have noted that the play presents a farewell to Maud, 17 but new biographical information sheds light on the difficulty Yeats had, even after marriage, in taking that stand once and for all. It should be remembered that in a poem written just three days after his marriage, Yeats felt the need to apologize to his wife for the determined drift of his mind to the past: “O but her heart would break to learn my thoughts are far away.” 18 Two months later while *The Only Jealousy* was gestating, Yeats was preoccupied with his wife’s automatic

17. See for example Wilson, p. 122, Vendler, p. 218, and Bloom, p. 301.
script, in which the supposedly daimonic communicators informed him that his “own sin exactly correspond[s] to those of C[uchulain],” presumably meaning the hero’s continued attraction to Fand. The automatic script goes on to record that Yeats asked the Control, “‘Who will C love?’ The Control replied, ‘I cannot tell you till you know yourself and you do know I think but perhaps unconsciously.’ When he asked if it were Emer the Control did not reply.”

Though Mrs. Yeats’s unconscious must have been serving her own best interests in helping with the play, she could hardly take the liberty of resolving her husband’s wavering marital commitment for him. The poet would have to make up his own mind.

This biographical imperative helps explain why in the first version of the play Yeats gave Cuchulain such a large role in determining his own future. By the time that Yeats printed the revised version in *The Collected Plays* (1934), his decision to fully commit himself to his wife was far behind him and he could afford to mute both Cuchulain’s and Fand’s role considerably in favor of the greater renunciation of Emer, whose choice alone now determines what happens to her husband. In the earlier version printed in *Four Plays for Dancers*, husband and wife each has to choose his or her own pain. Ironically, as Emer renounces her love, Cuchulain affirms his:

> What a wise silence has fallen in this dark!
> I know you now in all your ignorance
> Of all whereby a lover’s quiet is rent.
> What dread so great as that he should forget
> The least chance sight or sound, or scratch or mark
> On an old door, or frail bird heard and seen
> In the incredible clear light love cast
> All round about her some forlorn lost day?
> That face, though fine enough, is a fool’s face
> And there’s a folly in the deathless Sidhe
> Beyond man’s reach. (*FPD*, p. 45)

Cuchulain is literally bent over on stage under the weight of his memories, yet he will not put them off to attain the easy transcendence which Fand offers him in a kiss. He claims to love only what passes away, not out of sentimentality, but out of the remembered knowledge that human love is nurtured by remorse for things it has lost or might soon lose. Although most of the ironies in the final version of the play are directed against Emer, Cuchulain also comes in for his share after speaking these loving words. He does not realize that the greatest remorse of all is yet to come when he awakens from his temporary death. There has been “some whispering in the dark between Daimon and sweetheart” (*M*, p. 336), and by a trick of fate he is deprived of the woman for whom he

bargained away immortality. He awakes to the pain of mortality, diminished in strength, in courage, and most tragically, in love.

Cuchulain and Emer are masks for the married Yeatses, but not proxies. They have their own pasts, their own futures, and clearly, the final turn of the plot with Cuchulain falling into the arms of Eithne Inguba does not offer a parallel to Yeats's biography. Yet I contend that buried in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, as the seed from which the drama has grown, is a hidden image of Yeats's marriage, its strengths and its compromises. We can say that Yeats gave Emer her prominent tragic role because he felt that he had asked his wife to sacrifice some of her potential for love in marrying a man burdened by an obsessive romance in his past. Yeats may also have felt that her part in the automatic writing behind *A Vision* constituted more of a sacrifice than she had bargained for, when she designed a project to captivate his wandering attention. To compensate for these sacrifices, Yeats stresses in the early version Cuchulain's intense loyalty to Emer and to their shared memories of pain. Cuchulain's role is an emblem of his own marital devotion, a large enough commitment, he hoped, to mitigate the sway of his other past. The speeches Cuchulain delivered after Emer's renunciation were perhaps too private in their tenderness and insistence on inner pain to remain in the public domain, for they seem almost like love letters to Yeats's wife. In excising them, along with other private references to *A Vision*, Yeats freed the play for its proper heroic impact, and it is proud Emer, not Yeats, who lingers longest in our memory.

The first three *Plays for Dancers* are all deeply autobiographical in the way that Yeats uses their fictional settings and characters to work through problems in his own life. *Calvary* (1920) is not autobiographical in the same way, and in fact, has not elicited any comments placing it in the context of Yeats's biography. Critics have preferred to explain the play as an illustration of the historical concepts Yeats was developing in the drafts of *A Vision*. While the play bears out this position, such a reading begs the question of why Yeats felt the need of dramatizing the story of Christ's loneliness and why he presented it along with these other biographically-oriented plays. Probably because he had received such startling daimonic communications through his wife's unconscious, Yeats increasingly saw himself as a prophet to his civilization, who had to alert his world to the imminent death of subjectivity. He felt compelled to present nightmare images of the present to make his audience believe in the horrifying visionary images sent by his own Daimon, that "rough beast" slouching "towards Bethlehem to be born" (*CP*, p. 185). Christ had been the Daimon of his people (*M*, p. 362), but they had chosen to ignore him. Would the modern audience pay any more attention to the prophetic message of Yeats's Daimon? In *Calvary*, Yeats reaches out to Christ as a fellow martyr to the widening gyre of civilization.
The central tragedy of Calvary is that Christ is powerless to change his historical circumstances. He offers the people of his time something better than self-interest, but they are just coming into their own right as individuals, and prefer to reject Christ's teachings rather than to deny themselves. Yeats felt himself in an analogous situation as a privileged critic of society, whose just criticisms would inevitably be ignored because the drift of his civilization was counter to the subjectivity that he constantly affirmed. The most important difference between the two figures is that when Yeats feels rejected, he can still wear his aloof mask, whether as legendary Irish hero, suffering ghost, or hierophant in a moonlit tower. When Christ is rejected by those whom he has come to save, there is no other mask for him to wear; his very divinity is called into question. Like the Magi of Yeats's poem, who are "by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied" (CP, p. 124), Christ returns in his mind to assess the meaning of these fated events and to reenact the painful moment of his rejection.

Christ came to offer eternal salvation in order to save people from themselves. Yeats's play dramatizes how people simply cannot give up being themselves. Lazarus is miserable in being the one singled out to be raised from the dead. He wanted to die as normal people do, and now cannot accept the notion that Christ has conquered death for all time. Judas cannot bear the thought that even his betrayal of Christ was preordained, for he needs to believe in his unique effect on history. Even the Roman gamblers, who are not interested in individuality, cannot allow themselves to be absorbed in Christ, who is not "the God of dice," but a God of determinism. At the end of the play, Christ stands at center-stage, his cross supported by his betrayer, his circle formed by the pagan dancers who ironically try to comfort him with the notion that he has nothing that they need. "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold" (CP, p. 184).

The final tableau of the play quite literally realizes the dramatic possibilities of the situation described in the first stanza of "The Second Coming." Christ can be considered a type of the falconer, while the self-sufficient Romans are like those ominous falcons whirling away out of his control. Similarly, the solitary birds that dominate the opening and closing songs are crucial to the play as emblems of an autonomy that Christ fears, for they deny any need for the salvation he brings:

The ger-eagle has chosen his part
In blue deep of the upper air
Where one-eyed day can meet his stare;
He is content with his savage heart. (CPI, p. 293)

Imagine for a moment this savage bird's perspective on the play. What does he need with a man-God? Let things fall apart. Let the anarchic Roman soldiers gamble all values away. Let the cowardly Judas and the
selfish Lazarus puff themselves up with passionate intensity. Let Christ
lacerate his breast over his failures. After all, “What can a swan need
but a swan” (CPI, p. 294)?

The proud birds of the closing song offer a critique of the whole pitiful
world of Calvary. Not subject to human criticism, their aloof poses
call to mind the eagle’s-eye position Yeats occupies in “The Second
Coming” in his dual role as social critic of the present and vatic prophet
of the new dispensation. Yeats did not always speak to his civilization
from such a towering height. Like Christ, he often felt victimized by
those in Ireland whom he and his friends had come to save. It was one
thing to rail at the ruffians from the proscenium of the Abbey Stage,
another thing entirely to have them beating down one’s door during the
long nightmare of “the Troubles.” In Calvary, the only comfort that
Christ can take from his troubles is to live for a moment in the love of
“Martha and those three Marys” (CPI, p. 291), women who could put
love of God before self-love. Yeats has to forge a similar comfort in the
poem that responds to the bleak vision of “The Second Coming,” his
“Prayer for My Daughter.” He proposes a set of values by which his
civilization can live if only the soul

... learns at last that it is self-delighting,
Self-appeasing, self-affronting,
And that its own sweet will is Heaven’s will. (CP, p. 187)

In the best of all possible worlds, the soul might learn this lesson. In the
fallen world of Calvary and “The Second Coming,” such lessons are
not easily learned. If they were, Yeats might long since have thrown
away his quarrelsome poetry and drama, and been content to live.

Yeats could never, of course, have thrown his words away. He needed
them to create “a marvellous drama” out of his own life (L, p. 583).
Yeats succeeded in fulfilling this aspiration as never before with these
plays so charged with personal emotion, yet so utterly unsentimental. It
is surprising that these plays have never developed a tradition of reading
which integrates them all into the pattern of Yeats’s development as
man and poet. It is indeed ironic that one of the earliest critics of these
plays was also the most perceptive about their relation to Yeats’s inner
drama. In 1922, the American poet, John Peale Bishop, commented
that each play was written

out of an emotion kindled by solitary thought. They have had their beginning in the poet’s
convictions on the inadequacy of his life and his passionate realization of the loneliness of
the subjective mind. . . . If these figures move in a half-light and have but a pale existence, they represent, as far as may be in objective presentation, the moods from which they have sprung. . . . There is no conflict except the battle of the lonely and the proud
with themselves. 20

Bishop may have been referring to the proud and lonely heroes of these plays, but there is none more lonely nor more proud than Yeats himself: lonely in his solitary masked battle with self and world, proud in his creation of masked selves to carry those battle cries into the deeps of the mind.

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