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W. B. Yeats’s “Extended Moment”

By NATALIE CROHN SCHMITT

Claiming that Yeats’s play The Resurrection, 1931, is a “Yeatsian thought-experiment,” Barton R. Friedman analyzes the play as the argument that “natural and supernatural are knit.” Analysis of the play as an argument seems justified because unlike other of Yeats’s later plays, except for the Words Upon the Window-Pane, this one is in prose rather than verse and its protagonists are not representatives of natural and supernatural who knit together at the play’s conclusion, as they frequently are in Yeats’s later plays. Rather, having denied the possibility of that union, the protagonists, like the audience, experience it at one remove, as witnesses to its manifestation in Christ resurrected.

That “natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed” is the argument that lies behind all of Yeats’s plays written after 1913. But Yeats had long been convinced that in the end no argument could persuade people of the union of natural and supernatural. The audience had to be “carried beyond time and persons ... as though [it] too had touched and felt and seen a disembodied thing.” Terry Eagleton describes Yeats’s poetry as “typically performative rather than constative.” It does not so much state what is the case as effect its truth. This is no less true of Yeats’s drama, including The Resurrection. Yeats wanted his audience to have a communal experience of natural and supernatural knit and of themselves as part of that union.

Early in his career, Yeats had set out to write plays that evoked religious experience. The means by which he might do so were not self-evident, and Yeats persisted in boldly exploring various means throughout his life. I want to look not at the argument of The Resurrection but rather at the means Yeats employed in it for providing the experience of mystical union for his audience.

3. W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions (New York: Collier, 1968), 239. “God guard me from those thoughts men think/ In the mind alone/ He that sings a lasting song/ Thinks in a marrow-bone. “A Prayer for Old Age,” VP, 553. “Literature differs from explanatory and scientific writing in being wrought about a mood.... Everything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over, is to the imaginative artist nothing more than a means, for he belongs to the invisible life, and delivers its ever new and ever ancient revelation.” W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, 195.
4. Eagleton adds that “there is no doubt a trace here of an Irish tradition of the poet as magician, social functionary and political activist.” Terry Eagleton, Crazy John and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture (Cork, Ireland: Cork UP, 1998), 284.
most especially for extending the moment in which we are to experience that 
union. In this, the play constitutes a remarkable, if not altogether successful, 
experiment.

Drama by its very nature allowed Yeats to represent at one and the same 
time, life and art, reality and image, past and present, natural and supernatual 
as one. With a play about the resurrection of Christ, Yeats could show the 
dead Christ live in the form of an actor “as though God’s death were but a 
play” (The Resurrection VPl, 902).5 On the stage, he could show the resur­ 
rection, as actual and as myth, one of those beliefs people feel compelled to 
hold “though there cannot be sufficient evidence” for it (The Resurrection, 
notes, VPl, 932).6

A number of the means Yeats employed in The Resurrection to the end of 
enabling his audience to experience mystical union are more or less familiar 
from earlier plays. Almost all Yeats’s later plays are set out-of-doors, tradi­ 
tionally the location for ecstatic mystical experiences.7 Here, however, as in 
Mark 14: 12, the setting is interior. But Yeats specified, as became his custom, 
an essentially bare stage or performance space that thus allowed the concep­ 
tual possibility of the presence of both natural and supernatual. In the play, 
the resurrection takes place three days after a full moon in March. For Yeats 
the moon and the month are both significant; they suggest transformation and 
rebirth. Christ, when he appears at the very end, is played by a masked and 
silent but actual actor, thus suggesting that he is at once both supernatual and 
natural. The simple action is essentially the resistance of both Greek and 
Hebrew to the idea of Christ as both man and god, followed by Christ’s resur­ 
rection revealing him to be both, and the characters, principally Greek and 
Hebrew but also others, being overcome by the ecstatic experience of that res­ 
urrection. This action is framed as a play by musicians, who sing as they first 
fold and finally unfold a cloth that serves as a highly ceremonal curtain. The 
continuous presence of the musicians, their movement, and sung verses give 
the whole a sense of ritual.

In order to include the audience in the religious experience shared by the 
characters, not only do the musicians direct their songs out to the audience, 
but also Yeats’s stage directions specify that if the play is played on a proscen­ 
ium stage the musicians are to sit on the steps that separate the stage from the 
audience, thus mediating between the two. If the play is played in a room the 
musicians are to be located toward the right of the audience. Performance in a 
room, which Yeats came to prefer to performance on a stage, better integrates

5. All references to plays and to Yeats’s notes for them are from The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. 

6. By myth one can represent “the gulf, which separates ... God and man.” W. B. Yeats in conversation 
with John Sparrow recorded in William Rothenstein, Since Fifty: Men and Memories, 1922-1938 (New York, 

7. The only other late play with an interior setting is The Words Upon the Window-Pane, 1934. For tradi­
tional settings for this experience see Maghanita Laski, Ecstasy: In Secular and Religious Experiences (Los 
performer and audience. Calvary is to be visually established as out in the direction of the audience; two of the main characters are to enter from the audience; a third is to go into the audience space, speak from there, and then help one of the characters entering from the audience into the performance space. Outside that space, in the direction of the audience, are said to be revelers celebrating the impending resurrection of Dionysus. Yeats had previously experimented with intermixing audience and enactment space before but not to this extent.

In Yeats’s early plays the central characters die and go to a timeless otherworld, in the title of one early play, The Land of Heart’s Desire, 1894, “where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood./ But joy is wisdom, time an endless song” (VPl, 205). Yeats described the experience he sought to evoke with these early plays as “reverie.” Unfortunately, the protagonists reach the off-stage dreamlike otherworld only after their death and after the play is over.

About 1913, Yeats came to accept the fact that the experience of eternity was only fleeting. In moments in life we may experience the union of all things, and while such experiences may lead us to hope for an eternal otherworld of such experience, all we in fact know is a momentary intimation of it that Yeats came to call the “eternal moment”.

“The poet must ... be content to find his pleasure in all that is for ever passing away that it may come again,” for as Yeats explained elsewhere, “the gateway to Eternity” opens and shuts again “in one beat of the heart.”10 The musicians in The Resurrection express the same idea, “Everything that man esteems /Endures a moment or a day” (VPl, 931). Yeats understood, accordingly, that such experiences ought to be represented as we experience them, as momentary.

At the same time, he came to represent the religious experience as something more intense than reverie, as “exaltation,” “excitement,” or “ecstasy.”11 The pre-Raphaelite images of eternity in the earlier plays, because of their very stillness and fixity, came to seem to him “faint and sickly.”12 The language and images of the later plays, instead of being pretty, were replaced by language that was direct, plain, and vigorous; the action became violent, consistent with Yeats’s belief that “the sense of spiritual reality comes whether to the individual or to crowds from some violent shock and that idea has the support of tradition” (notes to The Resurrection, VPl, 935).

It is likely that Yeats’s increased understanding of the nature of dramatic action contributed to his changed view about the nature of the religious experi-

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8. The otherworld to which the central characters go in Yeats’s early plays is closely based on the otherworld in ancient Irish mythology.
12. W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, 287.
ence. The culminate experience was no longer after the play was over but in the here and now on the stage and in the play. And while the plays in the Collected Plays from before 1913 average twenty pages in length, the later ones average twelve and a half. Speaking for his friends, as well as for himself, Yeats said that “they wished to express life at its intense moments, those moments that are brief because of their intensity, and at those moments alone.”13 The plays reflected the brevity and intensity of the experience. Insofar as possible Yeats restricted the plays to the ecstatic religious experience, a “moment of intense life. An action is taken out of all other actions, ... reduced to its simplest form, or at any rate to as simple a form as it can be brought to without our losing the sense of its place in the world. The characters that are involved in it are freed from everything that is not a part of that action ... [which is] an energy, an eddy of life purified from everything but itself. The dramatist must picture life in action ....”14 The action, while it had a physical correlative, was to be essentially an action of the soul and was designed to elicit that action in his audience. Yeats limited exposition, character, and plot as much as possible, providing only as much as he needed to embody the experience of ecstasy. The exposition was frequently provided directly and efficiently by a chorus. Characters were minimally delineated and accordingly called Old Man, Queen, Swineherd, Lame Beggar or, in The Resurrection, Hebrew, Greek, and Syrian.

Having in various ways reduced his drama insofar as he could to the moment of ecstatic experience, Yeats tried to extend that moment.15 He tried to make his plays spacial in form. Gertrude Stein called her plays, which represented expanded moments, “landscape plays.”16 Some of Yeats’s plays, At the Hawk’s Well, The Cat and the Moon, The Dreaming of the Bones, and Purgatory, can be understood as plays literally about landscapes in which mystical experiences take place.17

Yeats also relied on rhythm and pattern to extend the “moment of excitement, of exaltation, of dreaming.”18 “The purpose of rhythm ...,” Yeats said, “is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols.”19 In the plays from 1913 onwards Yeats fre-

13. Ibid., 494.
18. W. B. Yeats, Mythologies, 341: “A vision, whether we wake or sleep, prolongs its power by rhythm and pattern ....” W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, 242-43.
19. W. B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, 159.
quently employed dance to represent and evoke the ecstatic experience of the union of natural and supernatural and used music to heighten it. In the *Resurrection*, offstage Dionysian dancers are described. They move, we are told, to the rhythm of drum taps and rattles, actually provided by the onstage musicians. The musicians’ sounds of drums and rattles underlie much of the speech of the speaking figures, Syrian, Hebrew, and Greek, within the room. The ecstatic moment of the union of natural and supernatural, when Christ, the dead, living, murdered man, crosses the stage, is marked very dramatically, not by music and dance, Yeats’s usual emotional correlative, but by their sudden cessation, all silent and “suddenly motionless” (*VPl*, 927).²⁰

Yeats also employed pattern in an attempt to extend the moment of ecstatic religious experience. What he called “the emotion of multitude,” “the vastness which converges in the fable to suggest the unity of all being” was such a pattern. Yeats observed that “the Shakespearian drama gets the emotion of multitude out of the subplot that copies the main plot, much as a shadow upon the wall copies one’s body in the firelight.”²¹ Yeats used this pattern in a number of his plays (*On Baile’s Strand*, *Calvary*, *A Full Moon in March*, *The Resurrection*, and *Purgatory*). In *The Resurrection* the story of Christ resurrected is extensively paralleled by that of the resurrected Dionysus occurring simultaneously offstage.

Yeats used the subplot to greater extent here than in any other play, albeit offstage and only described by the onstage characters. The Dionysian revelers, anticipating the annual resurrection of Dionysus, whom the Greek describes as from the uneducated and excitable class of Asiatic Greeks, have torn a goat to pieces and drunk its blood. In a frenzy now they wander through the streets like a pack of wolves. Some men dressed as women carry a bier with an image of their dead god upon it. Thus dressed they imitate a woman’s self-abandonment in worship. Yeats consistently romanticized the uneducated, the poor, women, madmen, fools, and here Asians, as more available to religious experience, less bound by societal constraints. A pair of Dionysian revelers couple in the street. A man appears to be a statue. Others dance and gash themselves with knives, imagining themselves to be “at once the god and the Titans who murdered him” (*VPl*, 915). Thus, in their persons, the Dionysian revelers represent the union of opposites including human and animal, male and female, human and image. In the play, the resurrection of Dionysus exactly coincides in time and place with the onstage appearance of the resurrected Christ. And indeed, as if Christ and Dionysus have become one and the same, the Dionysian revelers are described as stopping silently beneath the window where they turn their unseeing eyes upon the room into which Christ makes his entrance.²² For Yeats unseeing eyes are the eyes of those entranced in ecstatic experience.

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²⁰ The ghost of the father in *Purgatory* is described as a “dead, living, murdered man!” (*VPl*, 1048).
²¹ *Essays and Introductions*, 215.
²² According to Yeats, before St. Patrick came to Ireland “the umbilical cord which united Christianity to the ancient world had not yet been cut, Christ was still the half-brother of Dionysus.” W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 514.
The union of Christ and Dionysus, itself bringing together primitive and civilized, ancient and contemporary, restores to the experience of ecstasy represented by Christ its violence and primitiveness, which is for Yeats, an elemental aspect of it. Yeats thought that contemporary Christianity, insofar as it insisted on the literalness of Christ reincarnate, had wholly lost sight of the religious experience of the union of opposites Christ represented: god and human, living and dead, tragedy and ecstasy, image and reality, natural and supernatural. For the Greeks, Dionysus served the same purpose, and the resurrection of the two at the same time serves to show the identity of their cultural function.

Uniquely, with The Resurrection, Yeats tried to extend the moment of the unity of all things temporally by having a series of figures experience it sequentially. The Greek and Hebrew are in an anteroom protecting the apostles within. Without having told the Hebrew, the Greek has sent the Syrian, who was also to have been present as protection, to verify that, indeed, as the Greek believes, there is no body in Christ’s tomb, that Christ is pure spirit. The Syrian, no intellectual, and in Yeats’s view therefore less resistant to the idea of the supernatural than the Greek or the Hebrew, breathlessly returns from Christ’s grave with the report of the excited Galilean women gathered there that Christ had been in the tomb but has arisen. The Syrian appears ill or drunk and then begins to laugh, overcome by the recognition that however irrational it may seem Christ is both natural and supernatural. Yeats elsewhere uses both drunkenness, “drunken with dizzy light,” and laughter as expression of the ecstatic experience of the union of opposites.23

The Syrian cannot distinguish his own laughter from the drums and rattles of the Dionysians; for him subjective and objective are fused. Shortly thereafter the Greek reports that the Dionysians, who have hidden their image of the dead god, have begun their “lunatic” cry, spoken by the musicians: “‘God has arisen! God has arisen!’” For Yeats, unlike the unbelieving Greek whose use of the word “lunatic” is pejorative, the word signals both the moon and ecstatic experience. The Greek describes the Dionysians dancing with increasing speed just under the window. Suddenly they stop. In a coup de théâtre to which Yeats has been building for eight pages, by establishing the utter improbability of Christ as mortal in the view of the Greek, and as God in the view of the Hebrew, Christ resurrected, and therefore both mere mortal and pure spirit, crosses the room. The Hebrew backs up in terror and then kneels acknowledging Christ as natural/supernatural. To reassure himself that, as he claims, Christ is merely a spirit, the Greek passes his hand over Christ’s side that was like laughter, “the dreams of women,” VPI, 921. But Yeats describes the ecstatic experience as, among other things, “dreaming.”

23. Forgael in The Shadow Waters claims himself to be so drunk (VPI, 325). See also Paul Ruttledge in Where There Is Nothing: “When we were all dead and in heaven it would be a sort of drunkenness, a sort of ecstasy,” VPI, 1106. In The Unicorn from the Stars, according to Martin, in Paradise “the sword made a sound that was like laughter,” VPI, 688. The Hebrew dismisses the report of the Syrian as “the dreams of women,” VPI, 921. But Yeats describes the ecstatic experience as, among other things, “dreaming.”
The play stands as a worthy isolated experiment. Thomas Parkinson concludes recognitions. Such a sequence simply takes too much explanation to set up. Thus, in sequence, Syrian, Dionysian revelers, Hebrew, and Greek, are overcome, as Yeats wished his audience to be, by the experience of the union of natural and supernatural. In the ten pages of the play, Yeats succeeds in extending the momentary ecstatic experience to four figures or groups in sequence and to two full pages and 20 percent of the play.

Friedman finds The Resurrection to be "essentially cerebral"; "the crucial question" is "not what the proof is but how it is interpreted." And while Yeats wrote drama with the belief that "a writer of drama must observe the form as carefully as if it were a sonnet," Friedman does not attend to Yeats's dramatic means, notably including the play's extended and highly dramatic climax, in which all the participants, coming from different perspectives, experience the same union of natural and supernatural (VPl, 1294). They do not variously interpret a proof. That they come from different perspectives to share the same experience, as Yeats wanted his audience members to do, is further representation of the union of all things.

Unfortunately, the extended coup de théâtre requires the too-extended establishment of its context, the parallelism of Dionysus and Christ and the protagonists' denial of the possibility of the union of natural and supernatural, both of which dramatically heighten and make clear the significance of the resurrection. That this context, even reduced as it is "to its simplest form, or at any rate to as simple a form as it can be brought to without our losing the sense of its place in the world," induces Friedman to focus on it, to the exclusion of everything else, suggests the problem. For Yeats had long understood that while he wanted to incorporate his "'private philosophy' . . . [,] there must be no sign of it; all must be like an old faery tale." And perhaps for this reason Yeats never again tried extending the moment by providing a sequence of recognitions. Such a sequence simply takes too much explanation to set up. The play stands as a worthy isolated experiment. Thomas Parkinson concludes his book, W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry, with the observation that Yeats was a very brave poet. He was not less a brave playwright.

25. In the same way, but more efficiently in The Words upon the Window-Pane, written three years after The Resurrection, Yeats uses a character's denial of the possibility of the supernatural just before its representation to heighten its dramatic effect: John Corbet the skeptic at the seance says, "I prefer to think that you created it all, that you are an accomplished actress and scholar." Then shortly thereafter when all have departed and there can be no further monetary reward for her, the medium nonetheless continues to speak in the voice of the dead...