

April 2021

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Recommended Citation

Bigot, Inés (2021) "The “endless Dance of Contrapuntal Energy”: Conflict and Disunity in *Fighting the Waves*," *International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol5/iss1/4>

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THE “ENDLESS DANCE OF CONTRAPUNTAL ENERGY”: CONFLICT AND DISUNITY IN *FIGHTING THE WAVES*

Inés Bigot

Fighting the Waves,¹ the prose rewriting of *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (first published in 1919), stands as the perfect example of Yeats’s achievements in the field of total theater, harmoniously blending orchestral music with dance, song, and spoken dialogue. Shortly after its first production, Yeats wrote enthusiastically to Olivia Shakespear with the news: “My *Fighting the Waves* has been my greatest success on the stage since *Kathleen-ni-Houlihan*.” He declared the performance “a great event here, the politician[s] and the governor general and the American minister present,” and he described key elements of the production—the masks designed “by the Dutchman [Hildo Van] Krop” and Georges Antheil’s musical score—as “magnificent.” By his own estimation, Yeats had finally realized his life-long search for a non-naturalistic kind of drama rooted in a subtle interaction among the multiple component media of the theatrical experience: “Everyone here is as convinced as I am that I have discovered a new form by this combination of dance, speech, and music” (L 768). Over the years, Yeats scholars have tended to agree.² Although *Fighting the Waves* is more often mentioned than analyzed in detail, the play is generally regarded as marking a departure from the minimalistic dramaturgy of the *Four Plays for Dancers*³ in favor of a new, totalizing vision where music, voice, movement, and spectacle work together. As Pierre Longuenesse explains *Fighting the Waves* was conceived as an ambitious lyrical, choreographic, and orchestral performance that included six dancers and a solo dancer (Ninette de Valois), three lyrical singers and ten musicians, as well as Van Krop’s masks and Dorothy Travers Smith’s costumes, which added to the spectacular dimension.⁴ Crucially, the play relies at its core on what Longuenesse calls “l’expressivité [...] de la danse [the expressive role of dance].”⁵

It is precisely the nature of the “expressive” role dance plays in this revised version of *The Only Jealousy of Emer* that is of primary interest here. Whereas the earlier version contained only one dance, *Fighting the Waves* frames that central dance with two others, thus creating a tripart structure that reflects Yeats’s dramaturgical reinvestment in the expressive power of dancing bodies. The prologue takes the form of a choreographed battle meant to visually represent the Fool’s speech at the close of *On Baile’s Strand* and Emer’s speech near the opening of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, both of which describe Cuchulainn’s fight against the “deathless sea” (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 457) after discovering that the young man he has killed was his own son. The epilogue of *Fighting*

the Waves is dedicated to Fand's own bitter dance and stands in sharp contrast to the preceding one, in which she uses her otherworldly charm in an effort to seduce the Ghost of Cuchulain.⁶ Like the replacement of spoken accounts with spectacle at the outset, Yeats's decision to delete the verbal exchange between Fand and the Ghost of Cuchulain (which takes place during her dance in the original version), so that Ninette de Valois could play the now silent part, emphasizes his dedication to the dancer and, more generally, his renewed confidence in choreography. Far from being used as a simple adjunct to words, dance is a language of its own in *Fighting the Waves*. As Yeats himself suggested in the introduction to the play published in *Wheels and Butterflies*, dance, along with music and songs, is invested with a specific communicative potential: "I rewrote the play not only to fit it for such a stage [public stage] but to free it from abstraction and confusion. I have retold the story in prose which I have tried to make very simple, and left imaginative suggestion to dancers, singers, musicians."⁷ Located (with)in the sphere of "imaginative suggestion," which probably points to the dancing body's ability to efficiently evoke intense experiences and truths that verbal language would only inappropriately grasp, dance is seen as being part and parcel of the playwright's attempt to clarify the plot and make it more accessible.

Indeed, in this play which hinges on a "resurrection ritual"⁸ led by two women "struggling with the sea" (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 459)—Emer (Cuchulain's wife) and Eithne (Cuchulain's mistress)—the three dance episodes bring one of the main themes to the foreground, namely the conflictual relationship between the material and the supernatural worlds, the latter being embodied by Fand, the Woman of the Sidhe. The danced prologue which shows Cuchulain fighting the waves and being overpowered by them can of course be interpreted as a proof of his madness, as he mistakes the waves for his enemy, Conchubar. However, the battle also symbolically points to the dual relation humans have with the supernatural world—here, the country-under-wave which Emer and Eithne themselves are fighting as they try to save Cuchulain from the hold of Fand. The whole play bears witness to this relationship based on simultaneous attraction and rejection, an antagonistic interrelation that cannot give way to pure fusion, as Fand's two dances exemplify by registering her failure to unite with Cuchulain. All of this suggests that dance, in *Fighting the Waves*, is far removed from the image of "Unity of Being"⁹ with which it tends to be associated in some of Yeats's poems and plays¹⁰ and in much of the scholarship on these works.¹¹ Stemming from anger, unfulfilled desire, or bitterness, the dances record the impossibility of a true and lasting reconciliation between opposites, the unreachability of unity and uniformity.

In this article, I engage with the paradoxical emphasis on the themes of conflict, discord, and dis-unity in a play which is nonetheless often regarded as an example of total theater, a form which implies the alliance and coexistence, albeit not always the complete fusion, of the different media involved. I view the three dances as comments on these notions which lie at the core of *Fighting the Waves*, embodied by the disabled spirit of the Sidhe, Bricriu—Fand's enemy and self-proclaimed "maker of discord" who has possessed Cuchulain's body since his fight with the waves. Far from representing some kind of idealized mode of being or symbolizing a model for collective harmony, the dances confront us with lonely individuals who experience, through their moving bodies, a new-found, self-reliant identity. In this reading, the function of dancing bodies is analogous to that of masks in the 1937 version of *A Vision*, in the sense that "Yeats's last Masks," as Margaret Mills Harper usefully notes, "are multiple rather than one side of a duality (of self and anti-self)" and are not meant to "stress [...] unity though they recognize that yearning for [unity] drives life."¹² I contend that the emphasis on defeat or dis-unity in the dances, and more generally speaking in the whole play,¹³ is not to be taken as a negative, pessimistic comment on the imperfection of human beings and bodies. Rather, this late play evidences Yeats's more open conception of identity, one that is metamorphic, fluid, embodied, and constructed through the confrontation, interaction, and negotiation with alterity—what Harper describes as the "endless dance of contrapuntal energy."¹⁴

I begin with an analysis of the silent but eloquent discourse delivered by the dances in order to enhance their "imaginative suggestion" of the play's pivotal theme: the ambiguous relationship between the human and the supernatural realms. I then reflect on Bricriu's two-fold role in the action as the "maker of discord," following Ken Monteith's insightful reevaluation of the disabled character.¹⁵ I argue that Bricriu's intervention—"helping" Emer to save the Ghost of Cuchulain from the hold of Fand on the condition that she renounce her husband's love—marks the start of a process of emancipation for Emer and Fand. This feminist reading of *Fighting the Waves* is grounded in the specific context of a play which features an unusually weakened, passive, unheroic Cuchulain whose life depends on Emer's decision.¹⁶ It also ties in with Yeats's subtle exploration of the themes of feminine liberation and "self-reliance" in his drama where the "manful energy" (VP 849) he was seeking is often faced with a dissident womanly strength, from *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894) to the rewritings of the Salomé biblical episode *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934) and *A Full Moon in March* (1935).¹⁷

Fighting the Waves was Yeats and de Valois's first collaborative project. After meeting in Cambridge in 1927, Yeats asked de Valois to help him create the Abbey School of Ballet¹⁸ (1927–1933) and to work on revivals of several

dance plays, including *At the Hawk's Well* (staged in 1933) and *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934). As de Valois explains in *Come Dance with Me*, by collaborating with her, Yeats was hoping to bring back to life “the poetic drama of Ireland.”¹⁹ Born Edris Stannus in Ireland (County Wicklow) and considered to be the founder of British ballet, de Valois was the ideal dancer for Yeats, considering her rich and eclectic background. Her experience in the Ballets Russes, founded by the Russian art critic and arts patron Serge Diaghilev, had taught her to think of dance as an integrated art form within a larger theatrical frame that combined design, movement, and music: “the main effect of Diaghilev on my dormant mind,” she wrote, “was to arouse an intense interest in the ballet in relation to the theatre. I further sensed its own singular position in the theatre.”²⁰ Her work as choreographic director at the Festival Theatre in Cambridge led by her cousin, Terence Gray, strengthened her knowledge of non-naturalistic total theater staging techniques, since Gray advocated symbolic and expressionist productions reliant on masks and stylized gesture.²¹ Consequently, the dancer seemed perfectly capable of helping Yeats to create through symbolic dances what Richard Allen Cave terms “embodied poetry.”²² De Valois herself describes her dances in Yeats’s plays as “modern” and “stylized”:

That is, modern in the way that classical dancers can move in any style they want. I used movement that was highly stylized. The dances were very abstract—masked you couldn’t be anything else, anything would have been out of place. One really did use the simplest gestures possible, rather symbolic movements, really, one avoided the more full-blooded realistic theater.²³

The fact that de Valois’s dances were abstract and symbolic doesn’t mean that they were disembodied. We will see later on that Fand’s first dance is erotic as well as ethereal.

As noted earlier, the dance of seduction in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* features a verbal exchange between Fand and the Ghost of Cuchulain that Yeats omits in the new prose version. This was partly because de Valois refused to speak on stage; but the silence of the dancer also corresponds to a specific state of being, one of remoteness and aloofness that suited the mysterious roles she played in works such as *At the Hawk's Well* and *The King of the Great Clock Tower*. As Cave notes, “It would seem that her chosen technique for performing these roles endorsed this somewhat remote quality of being; to have joined with the other actors in the pieces through the medium of speech would have robbed her of this distinctive separateness.”²⁴ What stands out from these comments is the “separateness” of the dancer who does not use the same expressive medium as the other actors.

However, Yeats's plays do not dramatize the dancing body as a mere nonsensical oddity; instead they invest it with meaningful power. In *Fighting the Waves*, the dancing bodies are "speaking bodies," to quote an expression Frank Kermode uses in *Romantic Image* when discussing the figure of the dancer in a Yeatsian poetic context.²⁵ In this play, as in other late plays such as *A Full Moon in March* (1935) and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), dance is presented as a language in its own right, acquiring a distinctive, potent role in the narrative of the fable and the expression of the characters' inner feelings. Yeats resorts to dance several times in *Fighting the Waves* as a significant "discursive silence,"²⁶ a bodily language combining "showing" with "telling."

Before looking closely at the dances, let us explain briefly what we mean by using the expression "discursive silence," which is borrowed from Arnaud Ryner.²⁷ As Sylvia Ellis shows in *The Plays of W. B. Yeats: Yeats and the Dancer*, the question of the relationship between language and dance has been explored at length by philosophers and theoreticians. Although one can draw a parallel between language and dance, to the extent that both constitute "symbolic systems," the latter does not share all the characteristics of language, among which Ellis mentions synonymity and translatability.²⁸ My purpose therefore is not to prove that dance is an exact equivalent to verbal language but to stress Yeats's acute awareness of the unique power of bodily expression on stage. Far from being limited to an undecipherable primitive action, dance is invested with complex symbolic meaning in *Fighting the Waves*.²⁹ Hence, the detailed, even eloquent stage directions accompanying each dance:

These dances form in themselves a tryptic, a significant "text" that can be "read" when analyzed in the context of a play that focuses on Emer and Eithne Inguba's attempt to bring back to life the inanimate hero Cuchulain. The two women's fight against the supernatural world of the country-under-wave is foreshadowed by the choreographed prologue (first dance): "A man wearing the Cuchulain mask enters from one side with sword and shield. He dances a dance which represents a man fighting the waves." (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 455). Choosing to embody on the stage what was only reported through Emer's words in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* allows the audience to more intimately access the event as they are able to witness Cuchulain's fight and subsequent defeat directly.³⁰ His mesmerizing and mesmerized "*cataleptic stare upon some distant imaginary object*" at the end of the dance anticipates his encounter with Fand and already captures the impossible union between the material world and the distant supernatural country-under-wave. Here, Cuchulain's personal experience acquires a universal value; it points out, in language from *A Vision*, that if "life is an endeavor made vain by the four sails of its mill" then "all the gains of man come from conflict with the opposite of his true being" (AVB 70, 11).

In the second dance, Yeats once again entirely confides in the strength of the dancer's ability to embody feelings and human experiences that lie beyond the reach of verbal language. Fand's seductive dance, which is meant to be self-explanatory, is not accompanied by any verbal account for her behavior, as was the case in the preceding play, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, where she clearly stated the stakes of the dance: "Because I long I am not complete" (CW2 325); "Time shall seem to stay its course; / When your mouth and my mouth meet / All my round shall be complete / Imagining all its circles run; / And there shall be oblivion / Even to quench Cuchulain's drouth, / Even to still that heart" (326). Fand, who is described by the Ghost of Cuchulain as "shedding such light from limb and hair / As when the moon, complete at last / With every laboring crescent past, / And lonely with extreme delight, / Flings out upon the fifteenth night?" (325), is nonetheless incomplete since she still needs to coexist with her opposite, Cuchulain, in order to reach that state of Unity of Being represented by the full moon. Her search for such unity takes the form of a dance which she uses to coax Cuchulain into following her to the country-under-wave. The dance contains the very duality mentioned previously when discussing the ambiguous relationship between the mortal and the supernatural worlds, as Fand is simultaneously alluring—"Fand, moves round the crouching Ghost of Cuchulain [...]. At moments, she may drop her hair upon his head"—and distant—"but she does not kiss him" (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 461). The last stage direction describing her dance prepares us for Fand and Cuchulain's failure to reach Unity of Being: "*The object of the dance is that having awakened Cuchulain he will follow Fand out; probably he will seek a kiss and the kiss will be withheld*" (461). Fand's dance thus puts forward the idea that the building up of individual identity implies interaction and confrontation with alterity, no matter how the strife ends.

On the night of the first performance of *Fighting the Waves* at the Abbey Theatre, George Antheil's provocative music added to the discordant dimension of a dance which does not lead to union. The American composer chose to "eschew all melodic or harmonic interest" in favor of a musical accompaniment which illustrated the "overwhelming turbulence"³¹ of the duel between the mortal world and the supernatural one through the use of variations in pitch. Theater critic Joseph Holloway was unimpressed, acerbically declaring that "the steam whistle organ or a merry-go-round discourses heavenly music by comparison with the music shook out of a bag of notes anyhow by the American concoctor of this riot of discords."³² Yet it is precisely this element of discord that made Antheil's score so appropriate for a play in which dissonance and dis-unity prevail.

In his reading of *Fighting the Waves*, Cave mentions the existence of a holograph manuscript containing the following stage direction at the point

in the action where Fand's first dance occurs: "*They dance.*" He argues that the plural "they" leads us to reconsider the nature of the relationship between Cuchulain and Fand. Whereas Cuchulain is supposed to remain in a crouching posture during this scene in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, this particular holograph manuscript of *Fighting the Waves* suggests that "Cuchulain's Ghost is responsive to the lure of the dance and physically commits himself to Fand's medium of expression through the body."³³ The emotional and bodily impact of Fand on Cuchulain is thus heightened and the "potential for union"³⁴ is stressed:

Where in the first version the stage picture intimated Fand's defeat from the moment of her appearance, what is evoked in this revised version simply by the addition of that plural pronoun, "they," is the possibility of Cuchulain's succumbing to Fand's power and her magnetism as expressed through the dance.³⁵

Since the final published version of *Fighting the Waves* does not contain this stage direction and only mentions Fand's dance, one is tempted to conclude that Yeats ultimately chose to insist on the predicted difficulty of a fusion between Fand and Cuchulain. However, although Cuchulain's immobility is mentioned at the beginning, there is no written element in the text that suggests he remains in a crouching position; on the contrary, the following stage direction indicates that he has gotten up: "*Fand and Cuchulain go out*" (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 463). Let us not forget that the Ghost of Cuchulain was played by a dancer, Hedley Briggs, in the 1929 production at the Abbey Theatre.³⁶ A staging of the play which would present the dance as a duet would then be relevant considering the stakes of the scene. The staging could either choose to stress the "potential for union" between the two characters mentioned by Cave or, more convincingly, present the duet as a duel, which is what Melinda Szüts did in her own production of *The Only Jealousy of Emer* at the O'Donoghue Theatre in Galway in May 2018.³⁷ Here, Fand's hypnotic dance quickly turns into an adversarial *pas de deux* between a stumbling Cuchulain, erotically attracted to Fand, and the dancer, who alternates between movements suggestive of seduction and a readiness to flee. The choreography brings to the foreground the unreachable quality of Fand, whom Cuchulain follows without being able to stop, as well as Fand's final defeat as Cuchulain resists the temptation of kissing her after Emer's sacrificial decision.

Fand's "bitterness" (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 463) is fully expressed in her last dance, eloquently called, "Fand mourns among the waves" (463) and echoing the First Musician's song in which the "bitter reward / Of many a tragic tomb!" is already mentioned. Her "final pose of despair" (463) reminds us of Cuchulain's own motionless stance at the end of the prologue, apparently enhancing her overthrow and loneliness. Once again, on the opening night at

the Abbey Theatre in 1929, Antheil's music illustrated Fand's failure to reach fusion with her opposite by offsetting "a high-pitched melody with a low, tremulous accompaniment."³⁸ The sudden "surges of urgent rhythmic chord-effects"³⁹ which interrupted the accompaniment contributed to stress Fand's unappeased desire. However, the "statue of solitude" (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 462) to which the First Musician alludes not only mirrors Fand's situation but also Emer's who has renounced Cuchulain's love and the possibility of sitting by the fire with him again.⁴⁰

Disunity, separation, and sadness thus seem to prevail after Bricriu's intervention, relegating both women to the margins of Cuchulain's life. The spirit of the Sidhe indeed explains his intention to divide and rule right from the start in response to Emer's question "Come for what purpose?" when he asserts that he "shows [his] face and everything he [Cuchulain] loves must fly" (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 460). Later in the play, he adds, "I am Fand's enemy. I come to tell you how to thwart her" (462). Despite the blurriness of his true purpose, the character's stance as a "maker of discord" (460) is striking. The real question revolves around the consequences of such a will to counter harmony and wreak havoc on the various characters' well-thought-out plans. I would argue, following Monteith's lead, that whatever dark feelings might account for Bricriu's antagonistic attitude, the consequence of his intervention is not to be interpreted in exclusively negative terms. As Monteith suggests, Emer's act of renunciation and sacrifice invests her with heroic stature paving the way for a life of self-reliance and wisdom.⁴¹ She is more active than her own supposedly masculine husband Cuchulain, who is nothing but the object of the three women's desire and love in this play.⁴²

As for the character of Fand, her defeat and disappointment are offset by the hypnotic quality of her dance, which steals the show at the end of *Fighting the Waves*—her "pose of despair" possibly evoking a certain degree of pride and awareness of the power of her body. Alone on the stage⁴³ since the "wave curtain" has been drawn by the Musicians "until it masks the bed, Cuchulain, Eithne Inguba, and Emer" (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 462), she definitely has the "last word" even though she is now "trapped within the smaller confines of the forestage formed by the painted drop curtain and by the formation of the 'waves,'" and her movements no longer share "the expansiveness of her earlier dance, which darted into all the available space offered by the full stage."⁴⁴ Bearing in mind the reversal of traditional gender roles mentioned earlier, one could qualify Cave's take on the last dance which leads him to see Fand's decreased "vitality"⁴⁵ as proof of the "loss of her self-possession, control of space, her joy in the body."⁴⁶ Locating Fand's dance within Yeats's exploration of the theme of feminine "self-reliance" in this play implies reading it as a step forward in the character's difficult process of emancipation. What's more,

Fand's captivating first dance cannot be forgotten so quickly. It lingers in the readers and the spectators' mind, as Moore's remarks on the play demonstrate:

I saw your *Fighting with the Waves* at Hammersmith⁴⁷ and greatly enjoyed it. The masks though needlessly grotesque were full of imagination and very effective. [...] But the great moment was the entrance and dance of Fand and her mask; even her costume though funny, was far the best (*TSMC* 161).

Considering the fact that de Valois played the role in what Cave describes as a bold, sensual, courageous manner, Fand's dances acquire a whole new dimension as they point to female liberation through the body. Cave's comments on Fand's first dance are particularly helpful when it comes to identifying the erotically charged quality of de Valois's transgressive choreography, which suggests the dancer's "*difference*, as one who lives in and through the body:"

For its time in Ireland this was a courageous, politically subversive stance for a female performer of Irish descent to adopt or, more importantly, to *embody*. Though de Valois's body is fully clothed, it is fearlessly displayed and open, derisive of the gaze and judgement of everyone on stage who is watching her (and by implication of the audience in the theatre too).⁴⁸

Cave bases his argument on a surviving photograph from the Abbey Theatre production, showing de Valois "with arms and head flung back in a derisive challenge as Emer threatens her with a knife."⁴⁹ This shows that Fand's bodily appropriation of stage space during her first dance underlines her power and self-asserting identity *before* she even tries to reach Unity of Being. The openness of Valois's body and her "forward-thrusting pelvis" lead to a "deployment of her whole body" which strongly contrasts with "Emer's stilted, arrested movement" and the "cowering figure of Cuchulain."⁵⁰ In addition, de Valois's choreography recalls Isadora Duncan's own technique—based on the use of the pelvis and the solar plexus—as described by Elizabeth Anderson:

Duncan's technique situates movement and energy as originating with the breath and in the body's inner core—the pelvis and solar plexus—and flowing outward to radiate from the limbs, pervading the performance space. The dancer's body is extended, open, in process.⁵¹

Taking as a starting point Ann Daly's comments on Duncan's movements which interpret the dance as a "process," as being about "becoming a self (the subject-in-process/on trial) rather than about displaying a body,"⁵² Anderson argues that "Duncan's work is about becoming a self in the very activity of displaying (the moving) body."⁵³ Even though de Valois was a classically trained

dancer, we know that she danced with bare feet in Yeats's plays and in an abstract manner that she herself called "modern."⁵⁴ Bearing in mind the links between Yeats's vision of the dance and early modern dancers' work—and more specifically Duncan's—it is interesting to read Fand's dances in the light of this phenomenon of "becoming a self."⁵⁵

Bricriu's interference keeps Fand from reaching Unity of Being, which means that she will still be driven by that "longing" she mentions in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, a form of desire that proves she is not "complete" yet: "Because I long I am not complete" (CW2 325).⁵⁶ But this imperfection she laments in the last dance is precisely what makes her more human than she seemed to be in her first dance, where she is described as an artefact, a being from an otherworldly dimension: "*Her mask and clothes must suggest gold or bronze or brass and silver, so that she seems more an idol than a human being. This suggestion may be repeated in her movements. Her hair, too, must keep the metallic suggestion*" (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 461). The very impossibility of reaching that state of oblivion and stillness she describes in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* is what makes her "all woman" (CW2, 326). By depicting Fand as a full-blooded supernatural figure, Yeats eschews the stereotypical, idealized vision of women as pure, ethereal goddesses without yielding to the easy temptation of over-sexualizing and demonizing the dancer.

Ironically Bricriu's plan, which could be interpreted as purely evil, results in a process of liberation for both Emer and Fand, who are ultimately confronted by their own selves and bodies after losing the opportunity to possess Cuchulain's own "feminized" body.⁵⁷ Released of their "own jealousy," Emer and Fand are thus implicitly invited to work towards mental and bodily self-possession, however painful and imperfect a perspective this may be. Emer does not dance in this play but she will after her husband's death in *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), which I read as a proof of the incremental process of the character's physical emancipation. Emer's dance is all the more representative of an inner shift since it is her only apparition in *The Death of Cuchulain*: doomed to be separated from her husband after her heroic renunciation, she gives full vent to her deepest feelings in this dance around the severed heads of Cuchulain's enemies, watching over her dead husband's reincarnation as a bird:

In *Fighting the Waves*, as in this last play of the Cuchulain cycle,⁵⁸ the dance mediates a discourse on bodily identity which differs from that conveyed in other late plays such as *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934) or its rewriting, *A Full Moon in March* (1935). In the latter plays, the dance ultimately leads to a form of Unity of Being through the fusion of the opposites that the Queen and the Stroller (*The King and the Great Clock Tower*) and the Queen and the Swineherd (*A Full Moon in March*)

stand for. On the contrary, in *Fighting the Waves*, Yeats explores the failure of communion and unity, confronting us with characters (dancing or not) who experience bodily separation from their counterparts and are faced with the necessary imperfection of the material sphere.

Throughout the play, the spatialization of the characters' bodies points to the impossibility of coexisting in the same place. As Alexandra Poulain shows in her article on *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, the "whole point of the tragedy is in fact linked to Cuchulain's irreducible absence, and to Emer's failure to bring him back into the dramatic space (the space where characters meet, talk together and interact), which is to say in their house where the play is set."⁵⁹ As discussed earlier, Fand and Cuchulain cannot unite either, and the kiss which is supposed to seal their reunion never takes place: "probably he will seek a kiss and the kiss will be withheld" (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 461).

It is particularly significant that "the maker of discord," Bricriu, characterized by his withered hand, should take bodily possession of "heroic" Cuchulain and be invested with the power of thwarting his temptation to live with Fand "in Mananann's house" as "the gods who remember nothing" (CW2, *Fighting the Waves*, 461). As a physical example of deformity and bodily incompleteness, Bricriu, albeit a spirit from the sea, triggers the sequence of events that will lead to Cuchulain's return to the living, material world, far from the ideal, statue-like beauty from which he ultimately turns "his too human breast" (463). Consequently, Cuchulain's recovery of "his own rightful form" (462) at the end must not hide the underlying discourse on identity and the body that runs throughout the play: embracing an open view of physicality, *Fighting the Waves* comes to terms with the inevitably flawed but nonetheless powerful realm of the body, enriching a stream of thought that pervades Yeats's drama.

NOTES

- 1 The play was published in 1934 in W. B. Yeats, *Wheels and Butterflies* (London: Macmillan, 1934). It was presented at the Abbey Theatre on August 13, 1929 by the National Theatre Society, Ltd., with the following cast: Michael J. Dolan (Cuchulain); Meriel Moore (Emer); Shelah Richards (Eithne Inguba); Ninette de Valois (Fand); J. Stephenson (Singer); Hedley Briggs (Ghost of Cuchulain); Chris Sheehan, Mai Kiernan, Cepta Cullen, Doreen Cuthbert, Margaret Horgan, and Thelma Murphy (Waves). It was produced by Lennox Robinson with music by George Antheil and choreography by Ninette de Valois (CW2 899).
- 2 See Pierre Longuenesse, *Yeats et la scène. L'acteur et sa voix à l'Abbey Theatre de Dublin* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2015), 139–50; Longuenesse, "Le 'regard aveugle' dans le théâtre de W. B. Yeats," *Études théâtrales* 2, no. 65 (2016), 79–93; Mary Fleischer, *Embodied Texts: Symbolist Playwright-Dancer Collaborations* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 233–49; and Richard Allen Cave, *Collaborations: Ninette de Valois and William Butler Yeats* (Alton: Dance Books Ltd, 2011), 47–70.

- 3 *At the Hawk's Well* (1917), *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919), *Calvary* (1920).
- 4 Longuenesse, *Yeats et la scène*, 144–47.
- 5 Longuenesse, *Yeats et la scène*, 147.
- 6 In the list of the “Persons in the Play,” the use of three different names to refer to Emer’s husband is striking: Cuchulain, the Ghost of Cuchulain (who interacts with Fand and whom Emer is able to see thanks to Bricriu), and the Figure of Cuchulain (Bricriu).
- 7 Yeats, *Wheels and Butterflies*, 69.
- 8 I borrow this expression from Jacqueline Genet, *Le théâtre de William Butler Yeats* (Villeneuve-d’Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1995), 243.
- 9 As James Flannery explains: “by the term Unity of Being Yeats summed up many of his ideas on the ideal state of the human personality [...]. He equated Unity of Being with ‘the thinking of the body’ and compared it to the art of Dante in subordinating ‘all parts to the whole as in a perfectly proportioned human body.’” Flannery, *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre. The Early Abbey Theatre in Theory and Practice* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 58–59. In *A Vision*, Yeats says that the Unity of Being of Phase Fifteen belongs to a different order of existence where conflicts and strife, which characterize human experience, are absent: “Phase 1 and Phase 15 are not human incarnations because human life is impossible without strife between the *tinctures*” (AVB 59).
- 10 I’m thinking of poems such as “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes” (1919) or “Among School Children” (1928), and of plays such as *The Cat and the Moon* (1917), *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934), or *A Full Moon in March* (1935).
- 11 See, for example, Frank Kermodé, *Romantic Image* [1957] Electronic edition, Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2004), 59–123. See also Genet, “Dance in Yeats’s Plays: A Quest for Unity,” *Études anglaises* 4, vol. 68 (2015): 397–410.
- 12 Margaret Mills Harper, “A *Vision* and Yeats’s Late Masks,” in YA19, eds. Margaret Mills Harper and Warwick Gould (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013), 163.
- 13 Emer, who does not dance, is made to renounce her only hope to share a private space with her husband, Cuchulain; see Alexandra Poulain, “‘Westward Ho!’: *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, From Noh to Tragedy,” in *Writing Modern Ireland*, ed. Catherine E. Paul (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2015), 95–103. Bricriu, whose deformed body reflects his will to sow the seeds of discord among the characters, has come to thwart Fand, who comes from the same world as he.
- 14 This expression was used by Margaret Mills Harper in the conclusion to her paper “*Wheels and Butterflies* as Comedy,” delivered at the International Yeats Society Symposium, December 15–16, 2018, Kyoto, Japan.
- 15 See Ken Monteith’s reading of *The Only Jealousy of Emer* “from a disability studies perspective” in “Enabling Emer, Disabling the Sidhe: W. B. Yeats’s *The Only Jealousy of Emer*,” in *Writing Modern Ireland*, ed. Catherine E. Paul (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2015), 99–110.
- 16 Monteith underlines the “comatose-like state” (101) of “the Irish hero of the Ulster cycle,” renowned for “his great strength and battle rage [which] set him apart from other warriors” (100) in “Enabling Emer, Disabling the Sidhe.” His re-evaluation of Bricriu’s critical role in the play leads him to interpret Emer’s situation in terms of “sacrifice” but also of “self-reliance,” a notion that I bear in mind while analyzing Fand’s dances in *Fighting the Waves*. My reading thus runs counter to the idea that Bricriu’s action is in favor of the status quo, as expressed by Amy Koritz: “a faithful wife silently sacrificing herself for an adulterous husband [...], and a male hero around whose fate revolves all the action—and all the women. Finally, the narrative presents the dominance of a male god over a female

- counterpart.” Amy Koritz, “Women Dancing: The Structure of Gender in Yeats’s Early Plays for Dancers,” *Modern Drama* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1989), 393.
- 17 In these two plays, the Queen’s need to reach Unity of Being through sexual fusion with her opposite (the stroller; the swineherd) would seem to suggest her dependence on a male figure. But the simultaneously erotic and castrating dance with the severed head invests her with self-assertive gestural values that reconfigure the existing balance of power.
 - 18 For more details on Ninette de Valois and the Abbey School of Ballet, see Victoria O’ Brien, *A History of Irish Ballet from 1927 to 1963* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), and Deirdre Mulrooney, *Irish Moves: An Illustrated History of Dance and Physical Theatre in Ireland* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2006).
 - 19 Ninette de Valois, *Come Dance with Me* (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1957), 104.
 - 20 De Valois, *Come Dance with Me*, 88.
 - 21 See Fleischer, *Embodied Texts*, 228–29, and Cave, *Collaborations*.
 - 22 Cave, *Collaborations*, xvi.
 - 23 G. M. Pinciss, “A Dancer for Mr. Yeats,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 21, no. 4 (1969): 389.
 - 24 Cave, *Collaborations*, 47.
 - 25 Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 69.
 - 26 I borrow this expression, “la pantomime comme silence discursif,” from Arnaud Rykner, *Lenvers du théâtre: dramaturgie du silence de l’âge classique à Maeterlinck* (Paris: Corti, 1996), 214.
 - 27 Arnaud Rykner, *Lenvers du théâtre: dramaturgie due silence de l’âge Classique à Maerterlink* (Paris: Corti, 1996), 214.
 - 28 Sylvia Ellis, *The Plays of W. B. Yeats: Yeats and the Dancer* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 248–50. Such comments have already been developed in two articles of mine, “De l’envers des mots au discours muet: danse et langage dans le théâtre de William Butler Yeats et de Wole Soyinka,” *Recherches en danse*, “Focus,” (Jul 2019), and “Dance and Dissidence in Wole Soyinka’s Plays: From Status Quo to Revolution,” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 42, no. 1 (2019).
 - 29 For more details on the relationship between language, literature, and dance in an Irish theatrical context, see Katarzyna Ojrzynska, *‘Dancing as if Language No Longer Existed’: Dance in Contemporary Irish Drama* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), and Bernadette Sweeney, *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). On the more general subject of the relationship between literature and dance in the modernist period, see Susan Jones, *Literature, Modernism, and Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
 - 30 Here, I agree with Longuenesse’s reading of the dance moments in his analysis of the play. See *Yeats et la scène*, 145.
 - 31 Cave, *Collaborations*, 64.
 - 32 Ellis, *The Plays of W. B. Yeats*, 329.
 - 33 Cave, *Collaborations*, 52.
 - 34 Cave, *Collaborations*, 52.
 - 35 Cave, *Collaborations*, 52.
 - 36 Briggs was an accomplished dancer who had collaborated with de Valois at the Cambridge Festival Theatre. Cave, *Collaborations*, 53.
 - 37 The play, directed by Melinda Szüts, was performed by DancePlayers company, “a Galway-based ensemble of professional theater makers and musicians who produce collaborative pieces for physical theatre.” See DancePlayers, “About,” Facebook, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/DancePlayersCompany/about/>
 - 38 Cave, *Collaborations*, 66.
 - 39 Cave, *Collaborations*, 66.

- 40 See Alexandra Poulain, “Westward Ho!,” 98: “Their [the Musicians’] famously enigmatic final song seems to evoke the destiny of Fand, a ‘statue of solitude,’ an ideal of feminine beauty first beheld then forsaken by a fickle-hearted man. Yet the refrain ‘O bitter reward / Of many a tragic tomb’ also points towards Emer, a tragic heroine whose renunciation means a kind of death—a theatrical death at least canceling her out as a character and confining her to a purely choric function.”
- 41 In Monteith’s words, “As a result of her [Emer’s] interaction with Bricriu, Yeats would have his audience believe that the character remains true to the ‘pure flame that burns in her always,’ that Yeats encountered in reading Lady Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (Ex 332). While Yeats may want to celebrate Emer’s noble sacrifice as evidence of her ‘pure flame,’ another outcome of her encounter with Bricriu is that she must become self-reliant.” “Enabling Emer, Disabling the Sidhe,” 105.
- 42 This is why I agree with Alexandra Poulain’s reading of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*: “Cuchulain, the arch-hero, is entirely passive and remote, and is only displayed, paradoxically, as an absent character;” “Westward Ho!,” 91. Poulain notes that biographical readings which underline the parallels between Cuchulain’s “tragic dilemma”—as he is torn between Emer, Eithne, and Fand—and Yeats’s situation while writing *The Only Jealousy of Emer*—torn between George, Iseult Gonne, and Maud Gonne—focus on Cuchulain’s own fate whereas this particular play hinges on Emer’s decision. See “Westward Ho!,” 91.
- 43 She is alone, except from the presence of the anonymous “waves”: “As before there may be other dancers who represent the waves” (CW2 463).
- 44 Cave, *Collaborations*, 66.
- 45 Cave, *Collaborations*, 66.
- 46 Cave, *Collaborations*, 67.
- 47 *Fighting the Waves* was indeed revived by De Valois on March 28, 1930 at the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith with identical cast and designs (see Fleischer, *Embodied Texts*, 245.)
- 48 Cave, *Collaborations*, 59. Emphasis in the original.
- 49 Cave, *Collaborations*, 59.
- 50 Cave, *Collaborations*, 59.
- 51 Elizabeth Anderson, “Dancing Modernism: Ritual, Ecstasy and the Female Body,” *Literature and Theology* 22, no. 3 (2008): 358.
- 52 Ann Daly, “Dance History and Feminist Theory: Reconsidering Isadora Duncan and the Male Gaze,” in *Gender and Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Lawrence Senelick (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), 253.
- 53 Elizabeth Anderson, “Dancing Modernism,” 358.
- 54 See Pinciss, “A Dancer for Mr. Yeats,” 389.
- 55 On the influence of modern dance on Yeats’s approach, see Ellis’s *The Plays of W. B. Yeats*, in which she talks about the playwright’s admiration for Loïe Fuller (160–62) and the connection between his conception of the dance and Isadora Duncan’s (195–96).
- 56 In *A Vision*, Yeats explains that Phase 15, corresponding to Unity of Being, is the only one where “Thought and will are indistinguishable, effort and attainment are indistinguishable [...] where “love knows nothing of desire, for desire implies effort [...]” (AVB 101).
- 57 Ken Monteith, “Enabling Emer, Disabling the Sidhe,” 103.
- 58 *On Baile’s Strand* (1904), *The Green Helmet* (1910), *At the Hawk’s Well* (1917), *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919), *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939).
- 59 Poulain, “Westward Ho!,” 91.