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A REVIEW OF *YEATS ON THEATRE* BY CHRISTOPHER MORASH

Christopher Morash, *Yeats on Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 250, ISBN: 9781316515389.

Reviewed by John Haidar

Building on his critically acclaimed *A History of Irish Theatre: 1601–2000* (2002) and *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre* (2016),¹ coedited with Nicholas Grene, in *Yeats on Theatre*, Christopher Morash advocates for W. B. Yeats's achievement not only “in” theatre but—as his title suggests—“on” it as central to an understanding of his oeuvre. Morash carefully considers Yeats as writer, producer, manager, and critic and—contrary to Louis MacNeice's belief that he “does not seem [...] to have been properly a dramatist”²—consequently subverts the prevailing critical discourse, arguing that “theatre in performance is his paradigmatic form” (167).

Morash profiles the company that Yeats keeps in the development of the Irish Literary Revival, carving out a physical space in the form of the Abbey and an ideological one in his endorsement of a new dramatic movement. While George Bernard Shaw and John Millington Synge feature prominently, Yeats's status as a “playwright who wrote poetry” (167) is emphasised in terms of a literary osmosis of international theatrical influences and his philosophical framework that seeks a “language for something that goes beyond the purely physical” (22). Morash even evokes Antonin Artaud as a figure who parallels Yeats's radical dramaturgy, which—for both writers—results in the creation and production of plays with a chequered performance history. Additionally, one of the book's great strengths is its inclusion of Yeats's criticism, signposting his preoccupation with dramatic form; though, historically, this material has been dispersed, here it is collated into a single volume. Indeed, Morash's assertion that Yeats wrote “forty-eight separate pieces” (52) of theatre criticism between 1899 and 1909 reveals a disproportionate level of scholarship afforded to this material, especially compared with other aspects of his writing.

Unlike previous studies—including Katharine Worth's *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (1978)³—one of Morash's innovations is to propose an alternative timeline for Yeats's theatrical breakthrough. Usually believed to be in 1899, with the inaugural production of the Irish Literary Theatre—premiering Yeats's play, *The Countess Cathleen*—in fact, Morash suggests, we should focus on the premiere of Yeats's earlier work, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, in 1894. Crucially, this was first produced in London, rather

than Dublin, indicating a cosmopolitan influence at “the point at which the theatre becomes a central preoccupation” for him, indebted to Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *Axël*, which Yeats had seen—and reviewed in *The Bookman*—in Paris earlier that year (15).

As well as focusing on the collision of comedy and tragedy in contemporary plays that catalyse Yeats’s writings, whether creative or critical—perhaps most notably his remarks on Synge’s 1905 drama, *The Well of the Saints* (88)⁴—Morash also analyses Yeats’s concept of total theatre via an interrelation of speech and movement. In fact, Morash speaks directly to the tide of academic opinion that dismisses Yeats’s plays when he conjects that “[p]erformed speech on its own may not be sufficient to constitute drama” (17). This sensibility inspires Yeats to write plays such as *At the Hawk’s Well* (1916) or *The Cat and the Moon* (1917), which seize on the “vital notion,” as Worth posits, of a “musical structure such as the Symbolists had dreamed of,” filtered through the Japanese Noh plays but “with Wagnerian force.”⁵ From this point, Yeats develops a style of choreography that is no longer an accessory to dramatic narrative but rather an integral part of it; pivotal moments are not necessarily created by an act of speech but, instead, by the body in motion. Morash’s proposition, then, is that Yeats explicitly questions the value of words when juxtaposed with a physical form of expression. This is true, for instance, in *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919) when “the play does not so much end as dissolve in a dance” (33) or in *The Cat and the Moon* when the Saint asks the Lame Man, “[w]hat do you want words for?”⁶

In Morash’s research on theatrical objects, Yeats emerges as a writer who spent his life trying to decipher, describe, and cultivate spaces of betweenness, with masks or props as mediators. These gaps, middles, nowheres in drama and poetry are excavated as sites of the play or the poem, as interstitial and infinitesimal regions of possibility. However magisterial Morash’s argument can get, though, it is not bombastic, articulating instead a kind of diligent curiosity, mirroring Yeats’s own, particularly in his emphasis on “revision” that, “for Yeats, was thinking” (26). Such “revision,” Morash indicates, becomes synonymous with dislocation from language, relying on movement but also on colour, light, and silhouette. This painterly approach is demonstrated as early as 1902 when Yeats formulates definite principles for the use of colour in his “decorative staging” (130). Morash quotes Heather C. Martin on the formidable task of dramatising “eternity which is a formless darkness, undifferentiated, unknowable, and indescribable”⁷ before he makes an incisive comparison with the monolithic artworks of the abstract expressionists, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, who evoke their “spiritual states with solid fields of colour, beyond both representation and geometry” (131). Indeed, this comparison, anachronistic though it may be, attempts to restore Yeats as a key—though

often overlooked—figure in a decidedly modernist artistic movement with another central proponent with whom he collaborated, Edward Gordon Craig. Morash claims that “Craig provided Yeats with both a theory and a practice for a distinctive visual language of the theatre” (135) through which Yeats redefines the power of objects and, especially, masks. In view of this, he is right to document Yeats’s production note to *The Hour-Glass* (1914) where he writes that the Fool wears “a mask [...] by Mr. Gordon Craig which makes him seem less a human being than a principle of the mind.”⁸ Morash also quotes Gregory N. Eaves—“the wearing of the mask opens up a theatrical space in between opposing worlds, as their hinge”⁹—to suggest that this idiosyncratic theatrical endeavour derives from, or is situated in, the gaps it exhibits between mask and face, character and actor, word and meaning.

In his final chapter, Morash expertly draws attention to Yeats’s understanding of his audience, categorised as “real,” “imagined,” or “magical.” Within his theatre, Morash writes, Yeats conceives of the “real, flesh-and-blood assembly of women and men gathered to see a play, and another, imaginary [or ideal] audience, whose image might be the sea, a wild horse, a lone fisherman, or ‘a people;’ beyond which lies another audience, a “magical” one (186). While it may appear to be an obfuscating conclusion to draw, it speaks to Yeats’s belief in magic as a coherent mode of thought, through which he reimagines the underlying principles of drama and its reception. Breaking away from mimesis and the logic of realism, as Julian Breandán Dean demonstrates, Yeats’s appropriation of Tarot archetypes—including the Emperor, the Fool, and the Magician—“connect[s] to an enchanted ideal, and by projecting them on an affective rather than cognitive level, he attempts to subsume the audience in an esoteric transnationalism that would be a new religious centre for Ireland.”¹⁰ Through its occult potentiality, then, Yeats’s theatre seeks to remake the world in its image. As Morash makes clear, the “magical” audience is Yeats’s most complex intervention “in” and “on” theatre but also “its most radical dimension” and “the closest he comes to a firm conceptual ground in all of his aesthetics; and it is in this sense that his thought can be considered fundamentally theatrical” (191). As with so much of his thinking—poetic or otherwise—Yeats’s exploration is not only “on” theatre, it is through it.

Morash locates the “site” of Yeats’s plays through the “eye of the mind” of an audience of “active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs,” quoting Jacques Rancière.¹¹ In pursuit of this, Yeats demands that his audience learn from—rather than be seduced by—onstage images. Ultimately, this has led some critics to the conclusion that the plays are dramatically ineffective, that metaphysical theatre is an elegant theoretical model but one a “real” audience resists when it comes to performance, “a symbolic system so idiosyncratic and ultimately so personal” to be self-defeating (199). Morash, though, makes the case that Yeats’s

theatre might be saved from abstraction by taking his metaphysics seriously but not literally, by considering his theatre not only as metaphysical but as a mode of thinking itself; it is a notion of drama that, Fintan O'Toole argues, may be "even more urgent in our digital and secular culture,"¹² especially in plays—such as *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), coauthored with Lady Gregory¹³—where Yeats is conscious to locate the art of the instant, moments of spontaneity that produce, in his words, "intense life."¹⁴

In 1903, Yeats wrote, "[i]f we cannot arrange much complicated action into a single action, our work will not hold the attention."¹⁵ Though some of his playwrighting does not appear to heed his own prophetic warning, his criticism becomes a crucible for ideas that define drama—especially, tragic drama—in the infancy of Ireland's national theatre. It must be said that, at times, Morash is so enthusiastic to celebrate Yeats's achievement that he is too forgiving of the plays' dramaturgical shortcomings—though he rightly praises effective "moments of intensity" (201) in *The Hour-Glass*, *At The Hawk's Well*, and *The Resurrection*. Despite this, *Yeats on Theatre* remains a fulfilling account of the blurred lines between the philosophical, personal, and poetic sensibilities characterising his work. While I disagree that the "discouragement" and "defeat" Yeats identifies retrospectively in "A People's Theatre" (1919) should not be deemed to be an artistic failure,¹⁶ Morash's central thesis that Yeats found in theatre an embodied form of thought that can only be realised through the plays' materiality—its light, colour, bodies, objects, and spaces, as well as words—should now be considered a cornerstone of his compositional method.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre: 1601–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash, *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 2 Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941), 187.
- 3 Katharine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London: Athlone Press, 1978).
- 4 John Millington Synge, "The Well of the Saints," in *The Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), 131–71.
- 5 Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett*, 60.
- 6 W. B. Yeats, "The Cat and the Moon," in *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Russell K. Alspach and Catherine C. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 803.
- 7 Heather C. Martin, *W.B. Yeats: Metaphysician as Dramatist* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986), 33.
- 8 Yeats, "Notes to 'The Hour-Glass,'" in *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, 645.
- 9 Gregory N. Eaves, "The Anti-Theatre and Its Double," *Yeats Annual* 13 (1998), 34–61.
- 10 See Julian Breandán Dean, "The 'Supernatural Artist' and the Tarot Fool: Transnational Esotericism in W.B. Yeats's On Baile's Strand," *Modern Drama* 63:1 (Spring 2020), 1–20.

- 11 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 4.
- 12 Fintan O'Toole, "No Yeats, No Beckett? Why the Poet's Plays Still Matter," in *The Irish Times* (June 10, 2015), 19.
- 13 Yeats (and Lady Gregory, uncredited), "Cathleen ni Houlihan," in *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, 214–35.
- 14 W. B. Yeats, "First Principles," in *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: Volume VIII: The Irish Dramatic Movement*, eds. Mary Fitzgerald and Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 2003), 52–67.
- 15 Yeats, "The Reform of the Theatre," in *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: Volume VIII: The Irish Dramatic Movement*, 26–28.
- 16 W. B. Yeats, "Pages from a Diary in 1930," in *Explorations: Selected by Mrs. W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1956), 313.