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## Living with Ghosts: Re-inventing the Easter Rising in *The Dreaming of the Bones* and *Calvary*

Alexandra Poulain

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**Abstract:** This article looks at two plays written after “Easter, 1916”; I argue that these plays revise the earlier poem’s claim that “all [is] changed” and dramatise instead the persistence of past wounds and blemishes in the post-revolutionary present. In *The Dreaming of the Bones*, a young rebel who has just been fighting in the Rising is hiding from the police on the West coast of Ireland, where he encounters the ghosts of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, whose betrayal, he says, “brought the Norman in” and thus started the colonisation of Ireland. *Calvary* (written in 1920, but never performed in Yeats’s lifetime) is an unorthodox Passion play, dramatising Christ’s “dreaming back” of his own Passion on Good Friday, as he is confronted by the ghosts of Lazarus, Judas and the three Roman soldiers who nailed him to the Cross. Although it is ostensibly unrelated to the Easter Rising, it reads as an ironic yet compassionate comment on the Passion play that the Easter Rising, at one level, replayed.

**Key words:** Ghosts, the Easter Rising, the Dreaming of the Bones, Calvary, Yeats

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**제목:** 유명과 살아가기: 『꿈꾸는 해골』과 『캘버리』에서의 부활절 봉기 다시 만들기  
**우리말 요약:** 이 논문은 1916년의 부활절 봉기 이후에 쓰인 극작품 2편을 읽는다. 이 두 희곡은 그의 시에서 “모든 게 변했네”라는 주장을 수정하고 대신 혁명 후의 현재의 상흔의 끈질김을 극화한다. 『꿈꾸는 해골』에서는 한 젊은이가 부활절봉기에 가담했다가 아일랜드서해안에서 경찰에 쫓기면서 디아뮤드와 데보길라의 혼을 마주하고, 그들의 반역으로 로마의 침공을 받고 아일랜드가 식민지화 되었다고 말한다. 『캘버리』(1920년에 쓰였지만 그의 생전에 공연되지 않았다)는 비정통적인 그리스도 수난극으로 예수가 성금요일에 자신의 수난을 다시 꿈꾸는 것을 극화한 것이다. 여기서 예수는 자신을 십자가에 못 박은 로마 군인 세 명, 유다, 나사로와 마주친다. 비록 부활절봉기위와 직접적 관련이 없어 보이지만, 이 극은 어떤 의미에서 부활절이 재연한 수난에

대한 강한 반어적인 비난으로 읽힌다.

**주제어:** 유령, 부활절봉기, 꿈꾸는 해골, 캘버리, 에이즈

**저자:** 알렉산드라 폴랭은 파리 제3대학(신 소르본느)의 영문학교수이다.

Yeats's initial response to the Easter Rising, the poem "Easter 1916," which he started to "meditate" (Foster 58) in the immediate aftermath of the events and had completed by September of the same year, repeatedly asserts his conviction that, in the poem's memorable phrasing, "all [is] changed, changed utterly." The Easter Rising is recalled as a foundational event, rupturing the dreary comedy of "meaningless" modern life and releasing "a terrible beauty" into the world (*Poems* 228). The line itself ponderously ruptures the rhythm of the poem, so far based on trimeters, with a fourth stress (All changed, // changed utterly) and a strong caesura in the middle of the line, separating the two parts of the chiasmus which repeat exactly the same, hyperbolic content of meaning, and thus mobilises extraordinary rhetorical energy to assert the idea of radical change. The poem, and this memorable line in particular, have become emblematic of Yeats's view of the Rising as a turning-point of Irish history; yet I would suggest that the line's resonant redundancy, its way of repeatedly proclaiming irreversible change, might in fact betray an anxiety, or at least a degree of uncertainty, which needs be put to rest by the deployment of such rhetorical assertiveness.<sup>1)</sup> "What if"—to borrow an eminently Yeatsian phrase, which occurs later in the poem<sup>2)</sup>—the Rising had not in fact brought about "utter" change? "What if" the ghosts of the past had not been dispelled, but continued to haunt the present and to disturb our tendency to cast tumultuous events into sleek, univocal historical narratives?

This article looks at two plays written after "Easter, 1916"; I argue that these plays revise the earlier poem's claim that "all [is] changed" and

dramatise instead the persistence of past wounds and blemishes in the post-revolutionary present. In *The Dreaming of the Bones* (first published in January 1919, but first performed by the Abbey in 1931), a young rebel who has just been fighting in the Rising is hiding from the police on the West coast of Ireland, where he encounters the ghosts of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, whose betrayal, he says, “brought the Norman in” (*Plays*, 314) and thus started the colonisation of Ireland. *Calvary* (written in 1920, but never performed in Yeats’s lifetime) is an unorthodox Passion play, dramatising Christ’s “dreaming back” of his own Passion on Good Friday, as he is confronted by the ghosts of Lazarus, Judas and the three Roman soldiers who nailed him to the Cross. Although it is ostensibly unrelated to the Easter Rising, it reads, as I have argued elsewhere, as an ironic yet compassionate comment on the Passion play that the Easter Rising, at one level, replayed<sup>3</sup>). My main concern here is with the earlier play, but I will also briefly attempt to show how the latter revisits some of its concerns and motifs.

While they differ superficially in theme and tone, both plays feature an act of betrayal which fails to be redeemed: in *The Dreaming of the Bones*, the Young Man rejects the ghosts’ plea for forgiveness, while in *Calvary*, Judas proudly denies Christ the power to redeem his act of betrayal: “I did it, / I, Judas, and no other man, and now / You cannot even save me.” (*Plays*, 334) The traitorous ghosts, then, are not to be dispelled: Diarmuid and Dervorgilla disappear at sunrise after their dance of frustrated love, but will return again the next night, while Judas, refusing to leave the stage, comes to stand behind the Cross, claiming full responsibility in the drama of the Passion. The two plays thus perform a radical re-reading of historical and mythical narratives, whereby the act of betrayal, rather than the sacrifice which attempts to undo it, is foundational. Both plays are also, crucially, linked by their dramaturgy which borrows both from the great tradition of Western drama (respectively, Shakespeare’s tragedies and the medieval genre

of the Passion play) and from Japanese Noh theatre. Yeats's use of the conventions of Noh, which he adapts freely to his own purposes, allows him to complicate the received narratives of the Easter Rising and the Passion of Christ with a complex pattern of ironies. In both plays, the protagonist, the actor on the great stage of history or myth (the rebel, the martyr) is cast into as the *waki*, the passive recipient of a vision, and further disempowered as he fails to offer, or even impose, redemption, to dissolve the stigma of betrayal and dispel the ghosts of the past. Against this dark reading of the plays, however, I want to offer a more positive interpretation, and suggest that the plays, rather than deplore the persistence of ghosts, invite us to live with them, and to benefit from their power of disturbance.<sup>4</sup>

By the time Yeats published *The Dreaming of the Bones* in *The Little Review* in January 1919, public perception of the Easter Rising had swayed dramatically from initial hostility to the heartfelt embrace which won Sinn Féin their landslide victory in the general election of December 1918, leading to the constitution of the first, unilaterally declared Dáil Éireann on 21 January 1919. While the dead leaders of the insurrection, Pearse foremost among them, were fast becoming the objects of a hero-worshipping cult, Yeats's protagonist is more of an antihero. "I was in the Post Office," he claims, "and if taken / I shall be put against a wall and shot." (309) As John Rees Moore observes, we learn nothing more about what he actually did in the Rising (Moore 226); rather, we discover him on the run<sup>5</sup>, hiding in County Clare, disguised as an Aran fisherman, and waiting for a coracle to take him to safety in the Aran islands. Not only is the Rising itself not represented on the stage, but it is placed at a distance and derealised in various ways—spatially, since the play is firmly anchored in the topography of County Clare, at the other end of the island; temporally, as the ghosts of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla tell stories that take us back to the distant past,

evoking first Donough O'Brien's treacherous alliance with the Scots in the early fourteenth century, then their own act of betrayal, by which they "brought the Norman in" in the twelfth century; and above all dramaturgically, as the strange ritual devised by Yeats in his version of Noh creates a dreamscape in which the distant echoes of insurrection and repression are dissolved into unreality. The Young Man himself is all but divested of his identity as an active participant in the nation's foundational event. He remains anonymous throughout the play, an archetypal Young Man, as if his social identity, in spite of his commitment to current events, were completely irrelevant in the framework of the drama's extended temporality. Most strikingly, he is confined to the passive role of the *waki*, while the active parts of the *shite* and *tsure*, the hero and his companion who appear to the *waki*, relate their story and perform the climactic dance in traditional Noh, are conferred onto the masked couple of ghosts, the Stranger and Young Girl. The conventions of Noh theatre are thus deployed to ironic effect, deflecting the potentially heroic status of the rebel, and bestowing on him the unglamorous, yet arduous, role of mediator and interpreter of the ghosts' story and dance.

In accordance with the structure of Noh theatre, the actual action of the play took place long ago in the past, and is related retrospectively, and partly re-enacted, by the ghosts in front of the Young Man, in the hope of obtaining his forgiveness. As in *Nishikigi*, the Noh play on which the plot and structure of *The Dreaming of the Bones* is closely based, the ghosts seek forgiveness for their past sins, so that the penance which keeps them eternally apart, unable to kiss or touch, be lifted, allowing them to be finally reunited in death. The incipit of the play immediately asks us to forego any expectations we might have about realistic stage conventions. As in Yeats's other "Plays for Dancers," this one opens with a lyric performed ritualistically by three Musicians, which sets an eerie atmosphere. It is made of four rhyming

quatrains in trimeters (recalling the structure and prosody of “Easter 1916”), the first two of which comprise five questions that remain unanswered:

Why does my heart beat so?  
 Did not a shadow pass?  
 It passed but a moment ago.  
 Who can have trod in the grass?  
 What rogue is night-wandering?  
 Have not old writers said  
 That dizzy dreams can spring  
 From the dry bones of the dead? (*Plays* 307-308)

Traditional exposition, understood as the conveying of basic contextual information, is replaced by the diffusion of complete uncertainty. The first line, “Why does my heart beat so?,” further disturbs our assumptions by questioning the traditional Western conception of the theatrical character as implying, minimally, the coincidence of the role and the actor who performs it. The First Musician who sings the lyric is a completely impersonal entity, a narrator who is external to the drama, is not even gendered specifically, and performs a function rather than a part; yet s/he speaks in the first person and expresses an emotion and a physiological reaction which, we realise later, likely express not his/hers, but the Young Man’s inner turmoil when he first appears—those feelings of dread and dismay which he must experience but may be unconscious of, or reluctant to voice. This disjunction of voice and character is not a feature of Noh theatre, but it is characteristic of Yeats’s theatrical idiom in his Noh-inspired plays, and it contributes to creating a sense of bafflement in the audience, whose assumptions about the basic coordinates of theatre are undermined from the outset. The second half of the lyric, and the First Musician’s ensuing spoken cue, conjure up a vivid picture of West Clare and the “little narrow trodden way” that runs to the Abbey of

Corcomroe at night, so that the landscape is created verbally in great detail, in contrast to the “bare place in a room close to the wall” which constitutes the acting area. The play’s unconventional treatment of space and characters, as well as the poetic diction and alternation between song and speech, combine with the structural elements specifically borrowed from the Noh tradition to construct Yeats’s very personal brand of Noh-inspired, non-naturalistic theatre. However, the play is also firmly anchored in the Western theatrical tradition.

The first interactions between the Young Man and the ghosts, who enter toward the end of the First Musician’s speech, constitute a key sequence whereby the play self-consciously defines its own dramaturgical practice as both specifically Western and resolutely non-naturalistic:

YOUNG MAN (*raising his lantern*).

Who is there? I cannot see what you are like.

Come to the light.

STRANGER.

But what have you to fear?

YOUNG MAN.

And why have you come creeping through the dark?

(*The Girl blows out lantern.*)

The wind has blown my lantern out. Where are you?

I saw a pair of heads against the sky

And lost them after, but you are in the right

I should not be afraid in County Clare;

And should be or should not be have no choice,

I have to put myself into your hands,

Now that my candle’s out. (*Plays*, 308)

The Young Man’s first cue, “Who is there?,” is fairly banal and prosaic, yet it echoes the opening line of, arguably, the most famous play in the Western canon, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Barnardo, who has come to relieve Francisco’s



watch outside the royal castle in the thick of the night, nervously challenges his friend (“Who’s there?”), betraying his anxiousness to ascertain that he is in the presence of a fellow human being—since a fearful ghost has been seen walking repeatedly in the past few nights. Yet when Horatio joins him and asks, “What, has this thing appeared again tonight?,” a relieved Barnardo replies, “I have seen nothing”—only to witness the ghost’s apparition a few moments later (Shakespeare 1998, 143-44). The similitude might be completely incidental, and yet it is striking that the end of the sequence echoes another familiar passage in Shakespeare, Macbeth’s much-anthologized soliloquy in Act V:

. . . Out, out, brief candle!  
 Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing. (Shakespeare 1984, 153-54)

Macbeth too has been seeing ghosts: earlier in the play he was visited by the horrific apparition of the dead, bloodied Banquo, the “friend” he murdered in his gory quest for the crown, who appeared to him in the middle of the banquet scene, but remained invisible to his wife and guests. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, as well as in the quoted sequence of *The Dreaming of the Bones*, questions of sight, visibility, of what one can and cannot see, are central, and centrally linked to the apparition of ghosts. In *Hamlet*, the intrusion of the ghost into the order of the visible creates such a disturbance that a professional soldier is reduced to a bundle of nerves; yet the whole purpose of the “watch” is to ascertain the existence and true nature of the unnameable “thing” which appears, yet again, before the soldiers’ uncomprehending eyes. Macbeth’s “candle” is metaphorical of course, a pitiful signifier of

ephemerality; but what makes the image so effective is that, as so often in Shakespeare, the metaphor also operates at a literal level. Indeed the speech is Macbeth's moment of clear-sightedness when, seeing beyond the lure of earthly power, he envisions the tragic meaninglessness of life, allegorised as a ghost or "walking shadow". In both plays, it is in darkness, when the "candle's out," that true vision occurs, and the ghosts that are usually confined to invisibility appear, testifying to another order of reality beyond the reach of the senses.<sup>6</sup> As Edward Gordon Craig perceptively observed in his essay "The Ghosts in the Tragedies of Shakespeare," first published in *The Mask* in 1910, Shakespeare's ghosts materialise the invisible forces which bear on human actions: "they are the visualized symbols of the supernatural world which enfolds the natural, exerting in the action something of that influence which in 'the science of sound' is exerted by those 'partial tones, which are unheard, but which blend with the tones which are heard . . . Side by side with the human crowd is a crowd of unseen forms . . . These are unseen but not unfelt.'" (Craig 264-65<sup>7</sup>). To stage these ghosts and avoid ridicule, Craig argues (dwelling at length on the difficulty of staging Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth*), it is the director's task to make those invisible presences manifest throughout the play, so that the apparition of the ghost may not be experienced as an aberration, but recognised as their visual expression. What is at stake in Craig's essay, then, is no less than the definition of an alternative paradigm of theatre. Theatre, of course, is intricately bound with sight and vision in the Western tradition (etymologically, theatre is the place where one sees, from the Greek *thea*, the act of seeing); but as modern Western theatre evolved towards naturalism, the act of seeing in the theatre tended to be increasingly restricted to that part of reality which is material, visible by the light of an ordinary candle. Instead, Craig proposes that Shakespeare's theatre makes visible those occult, invisible forces that exist at all times alongside the visible world and exert their

influence on it—a proposition which Peter Brook later picked up with his concept of “the Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible.” (Brook 42)

Craig’s reading of Shakespeare is strikingly congruent with Yeats’s dramaturgical practice in the “Plays for Dancers.” To return to our passage at the beginning of *The Dreaming of the Bones*: the Young Man’s first lines betray his anxiety about impaired visibility: “I cannot see,” “come to the light.” Like a spectator of the modern, naturalistic plays which were increasingly becoming the hallmark of the Abbey theatre, he is dependent on eyesight for a reading of the world around him and feels threatened by the darkness. Yet this of course is not going to be such a play: when the Young Girl blows out his lantern, this signals, at one level, the beginning of a show within the show: just as in the theatre, the lights are extinguished before the curtain is raised. While Yeats mentions specifically that the play is not meant to be performed in a conventional theatre space, he reintroduces a trace of the ritual of institutional theatre within the play, the better to challenge the current practices of institutional theatre and to define his own alternative theatrical aesthetics, much influenced by his encounter and collaborations with Craig. Indeed by blowing out the Young Man’s lantern, the Young Girl denies him the possibility of relying on eyesight, and invites him into another form of theatrical experience, one that depends instead on vision. Cast as *waki* and forced to endure the dark, the Young Man learns to see the invisible. In accordance with the logic of Noh theatre, he is both our mediator and our mirror-image, the spectator of a theatre which asks that we look beyond the visible and acknowledge the invisible presences around us. His strenuous hike uphill, flanked by the two ghosts, doubles as an epistemological journey as he progressively identifies the protagonists of the ghosts’ tale (“You speak of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla / Who brought the Norman in?”) Whether or not he eventually realises that the ghosts *are* Diarmuid and Dervorgilla remains an open question. There is no climactic

moment of formal recognition, no tragic *anagnorisis*, perhaps because the Young Man's progression uphill, signifying his progress towards occult knowledge, is paradoxically counterbalanced by a contrary movement which restores sight and dispels vision. The walk uphill naturally yields a progressively larger view of the landscape, which becomes more and more visible as dawn approaches: "But now the night is gone," the First Musician concludes; "I have heard from far below / The strong March-birds a-crow." (*Plays*, 316) The ghosts disappear at sunrise, unforgiven, light succeeds darkness, the Young Man awakens from his dreamy state and Yeats's theatre of vision is brought to an abrupt end.

What, then, is briefly manifested in darkness? What occult knowledge is revealed to the Young Man when his candle is out? The young rebel has seen violent action and presumably witnessed the ferocity with which the Rising was suppressed, but what really disturbs him is the thought that not all Irishmen were fighting on the same side:

In the late Rising

I think there was no man of us but hated  
To fire at soldiers who but did their duty  
And were not of our race, but when a man  
Is born in Ireland and of Irish stock,  
When he takes part against us— (*Plays*, 309)

Anticolonial struggle is construed as a regrettable tussle between perfectly honourable adversaries. What troubles the Young Man to the point of disrupting the metrical pattern of his lines (which almost always overflow into the next one) and even dislocating his syntax (see the three occurrences of "but," the reprise of the temporal clause and the final aposiopesis), is the thought of intestine strife, the possibility of Irish traitors to the cause of independence. The speech resonates with a fantasy of racial purity ("race,"

“stock,” “born in Ireland”) adulterated by the blemish of betrayal. The figure of the traitor, whom Kristeva mentions as one of the archetypal figures of abjection (Kristeva 4), is inassimilable within the national narrative; he “disturbs identity” (*ibid.*) and produces an aporia (the incomprehensible positioning of “he” against “us”) which derails the epic story of the Rising and reduces the Young Man to silence. A little later, as the Stranger warns him of the presence of the dreaming dead all around them, the Young Man retorts:

I have no dread.

They cannot put me into jail or shoot me;

And seeing that their blood has returned to fields

That have grown red from drinking blood like mine,

They would not if they could betray. (*Plays*, 310)

As James Moran points out, Yeats here anticipates O’Casey’s pastiche of Pearse’s rhetoric in *The Plough and the Stars*, “plagiaris[ing] exactly the same gory exhortation to battle that O’Casey doctored from Pearse’s 1915 article ‘Peace and the Gael’: ‘Heroism has come back to the earth. [...] The old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields.’” (Moran 54) Although the lines seem to repeat faithfully Pearse’s celebration of heroic blood sacrifice, recycling his metaphor of blood-as-wine and the troubling image of the iconic green fields of Ireland turned red with blood, the repetition is in fact imperfect and fraught with ironies. While Pearse called for patriots to shed their blood, promising that their sacrifice would redeem Ireland, the Young Man has no intention of laying down his life in sacrifice: on the contrary, he has run from the thick of battle in less-than-heroic fashion and is now hiding, and fearing for his life. His invocation of the vampiric, blood-drinking fields aims not to exalt sacrifice, but to place him in a reassuring community of lineage with the dead: they cannot possibly betray him because they are of the same blood. This, of

course, is in direct contradiction with the Young Man's actual experience during the Rising, which he evoked in such restless lines in the previously quoted passage. Having failed to accommodate the abject reality of Irish-born traitors within his narrative, he now simply denies its possibility, dismissing it with a fantasy of racial integrity.

What he discovers, of course, after shifting from sight to vision, is that this fantasy is just that—a fantasy, an ideological construct, disconnected from the reality of Irish history. As he and the ghosts tread uphill, he progressively takes in the devastated landscape of an island exhausted by centuries of foreign rule; yet he simultaneously progresses towards the recognition that the penitent ghosts in the Young Girl's tale are Diarmuid and Devorgilla, the Irish traitors whose betrayal created such devastation, and produced the need for rebellion which resulted in the Easter Rising. By estranging the stage of the Rising both spatially and temporally, as we have seen, the play thus revises Yeats's earlier conception of the Rising as a historical turning-point, when "all changed, changed utterly," and constructs the earlier betrayal, rather than the sacrifice that aims to redeem it, as foundational. It thus also undermines the Young Man's notion of a pure lineage, free of the blemish of betrayal. As Peter Ure eloquently puts it, the ghosts "address their hopeless appeal to the traveller whom, as revolutionary and fugitive, they fathered" (Ure 95)—precisely because they need "one of their race" (*Plays*, 314) to forgive them. The Young Man's attempt to invoke a community of blood free from the smear of traitorous abjection is futile because he, just as the dead warriors of the past, is the offspring of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla's betrayal. Although Yeats was fascinated with the heroism of the Easter Rising, and especially with the idea that it emanated not from the masses, but from a small elite who had no popular mandate (Moran 60), he was also, from the start, aware that the Catholic, Gaelic Ireland dreamed by Pearse, which became less of a dream and more of a possible future after Sinn

Fein's victory in 1918, might not easily accommodate the Protestant aristocracy with whom he identified. Recreating the history of the "race" in terms which invalidate the notion of purity—both moral, since it all starts with abject betrayal, and racial, as the original act of betrayal results in invasion and inevitable hybridity—, the play makes a case for a version of Irishness which cannot be stabilised into a fixed, univocal paradigm.

The ghosts, then, bring uncomfortable knowledge; yet they ask for redemption. The young rebel may be ironically cast as *waki*, he nevertheless retains agency (as indeed the *waki* in *Nishikigi*), and the play's outcome depends on his choice. His inner conflict is not verbalised, but reflected in the agony expressed by the ghosts' dance which, at one level, is a dance of seduction, aiming to arouse his compassion. Only after he has reiterated his verdict ("never, never / Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven") does he allow himself to express, retrospectively, how close a call it was:

I had almost yielded and forgiven all—  
Terrible the temptation and the place! (*Plays*, 315)

This is his final cue, which suggests a positive, if slightly flat, reading of the ending: having successfully resisted "temptation" the Young Man emerges triumphant, like the hero of a Morality Play. As John Rees Moore puts it, "he has 'done the right thing,' the only possible thing" (Moore 229), and adopted the virtuous stance of the uncompromising patriot. Yet the Young Man's self-satisfaction jars oddly with the Musicians' final lyric which, as has often been noted, reflects ambiguously on his decision. The tone is melancholic and the emphasis is on what has been lost, not gained—the phrase "Music of a lost kingdom" occurs twice, and the Young Man's ordeal is captured and somehow frozen in the impersonal phrase "a man is lost of a sudden," surrounded as it is by two occurrences of the word "snare"—as if

there was indeed no getting out of the snare of history. In denying the ghosts forgiveness, the Young Man has remained faithful to the idealism of the Rising, but he has turned his back on the possibility of redemption (for the ghosts, but also for the adulterated lineage they symbolically fathered) and national reconciliation.<sup>8</sup> In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt comments on forgiveness as a deeply political act, because it suspends the cycle of offence and revenge and inaugurates the possibility of a new beginning: “Forgiving . . . is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.” (Arendt 241) Although Jesus of Nazareth, she argues, was the “discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs” (238), the implications of forgiveness should nevertheless be taken seriously even in a secular context. In his unchristian refusal of forgiveness, the Young Man forfeits the possibility of making a fresh start, and thus ironically undermines the revolutionary promise of the Rising. Although *The Dreaming of the Bones* ends at daybreak, the final lyric suggests not a bright new morning (the traditional connotation of dawn), but a dark future of continued material and spiritual desolation, suggested first in the image of the wasted crops and the monotonous alliterative sequence in which it is cast:

Our luck is withered away,  
And wheat in the wheat-ear withered,  
And the wind blows it away. (*Plays* 316)

The final verse, composed of two quatrains with an irregular pattern of imperfect rhymes, opposes the chimeras of night (“the eddying cat-headed bird”) to the more worldly “strong March birds” which are heard at sunrise; yet the promise of dawn (“But now the night is gone”) is one of continued,



increasing violence, as suggested, indeed, by the recurrent image of the “cock of March” (the month of Mars, the God of war) and the all but cacophonic final couplet, with its plodding accumulation of stressed syllables and aggressively plosive consonants:

Stretch neck and clap the wing,  
Red cocks, and crow! (*Plays* 316)

Having rejected the appeal of the ghosts, the Young Man discards his vision and returns to eyesight, and to the “sound and fury” of worldly agitation. In the glaring light of the sun, he is now himself “a walking shadow” who will have made no difference in the course of history, and will be “heard no more.” Instead of the glorious new era he might have inaugurated (“All changed, changed utterly”), his inability to redeem the ghosts merely condones a new cycle of violence.

And yet there is, perhaps, another, more optimistic way of reading the resolution of the play. While it follows the plot of *Nishikigi* quite closely, Yeats’s play departs from its Noh predecessor in the denouement, in which redemption is *not* granted. In the earlier play, the priest prays for the ghosts whose penance is thus brought to an end. The final chorus warns that when the *waki* awakes, all the shadows who visited him in his dream will be dispelled:

Ari-aki,  
 The dawn!  
 Come, we are out of place;  
 Let us go ere the light comes.  
 (to the *Waki*)  
 We ask you, do not awake,  
 We all will wither away,  
 The wands and this cloth of a dream.  
 Now you will come out of sleep,

You tread the border and nothing  
Awaits you: no, all this will wither away.  
There is nothing here but this cave in the field's midst.  
To-day's wind moves in the pines;  
A wild place, unlit, and unfilled. (Fenollosa and Pound 16)

As in the theatre, the reappearance of light signals the end of the show, and the return to the more mundane reality of everyday life. The emphasis is on definite change (“nothing / Awaits you,” “all this will wither away,” “there is nothing here”), materialised by the “border” between dream and reality, world and otherworld, which the *waki* will cross as he awakens. In Yeats’s play, the Young Man also awakens as if from a dream—but he has not granted the ghosts redemption, and they will be back again night after night to dance their sad dance, in the unlikely hope that one day, “somebody of their race” might finally forgive them. Crucially, then, in *The Dreaming of the Bones* the ghosts linger on, and haunt the present: the memory of their betrayal is not to be dispelled like an unpleasant dream, but continues to trouble the sleek narrative which the play implicitly critiques, that of a pure race which will finally realise its Catholic, Gaelic identity in post-revolutionary times. In *Spectres of Marx* (1993), Jacques Derrida famously questioned the legitimacy of our ghost-busting instinct, inciting us instead “to learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. And *with* them.” (Derrida xviii) Ghosts, Derrida suggests, are the trace of an absence, and may thus figure suppressed alternatives to dominant discourses. As Jeffrey Weinstock puts it, glossing Derrida in the “Introduction” to his *Spectral America*, the ghost’s haunting “indicates that beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events.” (Weinstock 5)

For years before the Easter Rising, Yeats's work as a cultural nationalist had been geared towards the creation of an Irish literature in English, and of a national narrative which might accommodate the role of the Anglo-Irish, Protestant minority who felt increasingly marginalised—a project vigorously opposed both by the sectarian brand of nationalism of D. P. Moran's "Irish Ireland" programme, and by the Irish language Revivalists of the Gaelic League. Only a fortnight after the beginning of the Rising, on 11 May 1916, Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory: "At this moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics." (Qtd. Jeffares and Knowland 226) The letter expresses the same anxiety which he was later to rephrase in "Easter 1916," that the insurrection might signify radical change ("all . . . overturned . . . all . . . all") and the erasure of a lifetime of patient effort to construct an inclusive, non-sectarian national narrative. *The Dreaming of the Bones*, I suggest, offer an alternative to this scenario of catastrophic change: in refusing to forgive the ghosts the Young Man ensures that they will remain, hovering in the background, harbouring the possibility of "another narrative, an untold story" to challenge the dominant narrative of the Rising as the harbinger of a Gaelic, Catholic free nation. But what are we to make of the fact that this alternative narrative is about betrayal? If ghosts are, as Craig suggests, the manifestation of "invisible forces," what invisible forces are revealed as occult influences by the ghosts of traitors? The play, I propose, offers a counter-narrative of the birth of the modern nation as a centuries-old tale of mixed, complicated, contradictory allegiances (to love and lord, to Gael and Norman, to Irish culture and the English language, to Irish nationalism and the Protestant Ascendancy, etc.) As a consequence, the "race" initiated by the original act of betrayal is, inevitably, mixed and multiple, ambiguous, unstable, not the single-blooded community with which the Young Man longs to identify. Thus I would argue that the eugenic trend which

James Moran convincingly identifies in the play (Moran 56 sq) is really the Young Man's fantasy, which the play disowns rather than condones, inviting the emergent modern nation to live with its ghosts.

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest briefly that *Calvary*, the play which follows *The Dreaming of the Bones* in the 1921 volume *Four Play for Dancers*, reads as a sort of ironic sequel to *The Dreaming of the Bones*, and as one more—oblique—reinvention of the Easter Rising. On the surface, of course, *Calvary* has nothing to do with the Rising; it is an unorthodox Passion play in which Christ, nailed on the Cross, “dreams His passion through” (*Plays*, 330) and is confronted by those He could not redeem, because they have no interest in redemption: Lazarus, Judas and the three Roman soldiers, all metaphorically evoked by the indifferent, self-absorbed birds in the Musicians' opening and closing lyrics: “God has not died for the white heron” (*Plays*, 329-30), “God has not appeared to the birds.” (*Plays*, 335-36) Written not long after the *Dreaming of the Bones*, *Calvary* was originally conceived as a play “where a Sinn Féiner will have a conversation with Judas in the streets of Dublin.”<sup>9)</sup> The final version of the play, however, has no explicit link with Irish politics, but is based on a story by Oscar Wilde, “The Doer of Good,” which Yeats adapted to his own purposes, staging it as an instance of “dreaming back”—the process by which the Spirit, in the afterlife, “is compelled to live over and over again the events that had most moved it.” (*A Vision*, 164) A ghost visited by other ghosts, Christ is forced to contemplate the failure of His sacrifice to encompass and redeem all men. From a dramaturgical point of view, the play is radically different from the traditional dramaturgy of community-based Passion plays derived from medieval theatre, in which large casts of non-professional actors join in the making of the spectacle and the Passion is re-enacted ritually, usually at Easter. While such plays invite the community of actors and spectators to gather around the

sacrificial body and recreate itself by reasserting its participation in the Christian narrative and values, Yeats's play, on the contrary, experiments with a highly codified dramaturgy which induces distance and irony rather than communion with the protagonist. Although the play makes no reference to 1916, it is possible to read it as a commentary on the Easter Rising which, as has often been noted (sometimes with the intention of discrediting it, which is by no means what I intend to do here), was itself conceived and carried out as an eminently theatrical venture, a Passion play whose culminating act was to be the insurgents' sacrifice, and the subsequent rebirth of Ireland as the Catholic, Gaelic nation Pearse had imagined. *Calvary* thus not only revisits the theatrical tradition of the Passion play, but also the staging of the Rising as a Passion play. In denying Christ the power to redeem all humanity, *Calvary*, I suggest, indirectly critiques the totalising, teleological narrative of the Rising and gives a voice to those who resist absorption within this tale of universal redemption—the likes of Yeats himself, the Protestant minority who are aptly figured as ghosts, and insist on returning. Christ's most disturbing antagonist in *Calvary* is Judas, the arch traitor, who insists that he chose to betray Christ precisely in order to escape the violence of Christ's all-encompassing love, reinterpreted as a form of tyranny:

I could not bear to think that you had but to whistle  
 And I must do; but after that I thought,  
 "Whatever man betrays Him will be free";  
 And life grew bearable again. (*Plays* 333)

After his agonistic dialogue with Christ, a stage direction indicates that "*Judas holds up the cross while Christ stands with His arms stretched out upon it.*" (*Plays*, 334) Holding up the instrument of the Passion until the end of the play, Judas both stands outside the scope of the Christian narrative of universal redemption and takes responsibility for it, relocating its foundational

moment in his own act of betrayal, of which Christ's sacrifice is merely the outcome. Again, the ambiguous traitor is disturbingly recognised as having fathered, through his act of betrayal, both the sacrificial figure and the community which is reborn out of His sacrifice. While the ghosts in *The Dreaming of the Bones* beg for forgiveness, Judas refuses redemption; both remain ghostly reminders that there can be no myth of origins without original betrayals—and demand to be lived with.

## Notes

- 1) The final stanza of the poem, of course, is all but assertive in tone, but rather conveys Yeats's hesitation as to how he wants to read the "terrible beauty" of this violent convulsion of history; however it does not explicitly question the idea of radical change.
- 2) For a brilliant reading of this phrase see Lloyd 474-75.
- 3) See my chapter on *Calvary* and Gregory's *The Story Brought by Brigit* in *Irish Drama, Modernity and the Passion Play*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming.
- 4) Similar concerns about these two plays are tackled in Charles I. Armstrong's fascinating essay "Ghost Memories: Yeats on Individual and Collective."
- 5) As James Moran points out, in showing a rebel on the run after fighting in the Easter Rising, Yeats follows his predecessor Maurice Dalton whose play *Sable and Gold* had been performed at the Abbey in September 1918 (Moran 54).
- 6) Jacqueline Genet (Genet 285) identifies another reminiscence of *Macbeth* later in the play. When the Young Man asks the ghosts "Who are you? What are you? You are not natural" (*Plays*, 315), this echoes Macbeth's puzzlement when faced with the weird sisters in Act I, scene 3: "What are these, . . . / That look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth / And yet are on't?" (Shakespeare 1984, 15)
- 7) The inset quotations are from J. H. Shorthouse's 1888 novel *The Countess Eve*.
- 8) A reading also suggested, for instance, by Helen Vendler (192) and Harold Bloom (308).
- 9) Letter to Lady Gregory of 14 January 1918, quoted in Sekine and Murray, 15.

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