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FROM TEXT TO THEATRE: DIEGETIC STRATEGIES IN *THE RESURRECTION* BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Innovations at the level of the dramatic text have had a profound influence on the development of modernist theatre. Critics discuss the relationship between the dramatic text and theatrical performance referring to modernist drama as a form that challenges the conventions of the traditional bourgeois drama, especially the art of deception (cf. Shepherd & Wallis 2004:161). In his comprehensive study of modernist theatre *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama* (2002), Martin Puchner coins the term 'diegetic theatre' to define a form of play that uses verbal techniques to divert the audience's attention from the actors' performance and focus it on the spoken word. He sets Yeats's dramatic work within the tradition of poetic closet drama of Mallarmé, Joyce and Stein and associates it with the further experiments of Brecht and Beckett. The term 'diegetic' stems from anti-theatrical writings of Plato, who put an emphasis on *diegesis* (narrative) rather than *mimesis* (imitation). Puchner (2002:22) employs this term to designate *the descriptive and narrative strategies through which modern drama tries to channel, frame, control, and even interrupt what it perceives to be the unmediated theatricality of the stage and its actors*. According to the critic, the main feature of diegetic theatre is to transpose the closet drama's textual diegesis to various forms of diegetic speech, spoken by narrators, raconteurs, poets and choruses. Diegetic theatre is marked by the closet drama's distrust of the stage, therefore it *continues the closet drama's techniques of dissociating gestures from their actors, of isolating stage props and spaces – in short, of utterly fragmenting the theater by means of diegetic language* (Puchner 2002:120). Puchner argues that modernist anti-theatricalism finds its counterpart in the (pro)theatricalism of the avant-garde of the 1960s as the most fundamental reforms of the theatre, from Yeats through Brecht to Beckett, are derived from the return of anti-theatricality to the stage. He claims that *Yeats's anti-theatricalism does not seek to erase the category of the theater. Rather Yeats turns his resistance to the theater into a productive force that leads*

to a wide-ranging reform of theatrical representation (Puchner 2002:123). The purpose of the following article is to prove the validity of the critic's statement and show the significance of Yeats's experiment for the reform of the modern stage.

Yeats's reform of the theatre reflects his struggle between the roles of a poet and a dramatist. James Flannery (1976:1–2) calls this quality *the struggle between lyric instinct and histrionic temperament*. The critic remarks that it is the *unity that he ultimately created out of the dialectic of opposites* that accounts for Yeats's genius as a dramatist and man of the theatre. Yeats's early theatre reform was grounded in his distrust of the stage and performers. In his essay "The Play, the Player, and the Scene" published in *Samhain* in 1904 he wrote:

[...] *the actors must move, for the most part, slowly and quietly, and not very much, and there should be something in their movements decorative and rhythmical as if they were paintings on a frieze. They must not draw attention to themselves at wrong moments, for poetry and indeed all picturesque writing is perpetually making little pictures which draw the attention away for a second or two from the player.* (Yeats 1962:177)

The essay outlines the poet's desire to transform the theatre into an ideal medium that would combine lyric intensity with dramatic vitality. Yeats seeks such a form of the theatre that would elevate the lyrical speech at the expense of the actor. Further on in this essay Yeats adds: *I have been the advocate of the poetry as against the actor, but I am the advocate of the actor as against the scenery* (ibidem). He thus arranges the modes of stage expression in hierarchy, subordinating the visual setting to the performers who would attract the audience to the beauty of the language instead of spoiling the text with excessive gesticulation. The poet's primary concern was to divert the attention from the mimetic actors and draw it to the beauty of the spoken word. He would therefore seek images: those 'little pictures' that would drive and carry the action forward more successfully than personal actors.

In the following article I am going to present the diegetic strategies Yeats employs in his play *The Resurrection* (1934) in order to divert the audience's attention from actors' performance and focus it on the dramatic value of the text. I will demonstrate how the narrative strategies help to open up the theatrical space for images which stir the audience's imagination and sustain the dramatic tension. My purpose is to prove that Yeats's diegetic techniques do not remove the category of theatre but instead they turn the theatre into a powerful medium of audience transformation.

The source of dramatic tension in *The Resurrection* is the clash between the ancient myth of the twice-born Greek god Dionysus and the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. The play was inspired by Yeats's theory of historical cycles presented in *A Vision*, as well as Nietzsche's philosophy,

Greek tragedy and the Japanese Noh. The philosophy of the play, as presented in *A Vision*¹, is concerned with the transition between subjective and objective historical cycles: *between the dying subjectivity of the Greek civilization and the pristine objectivity of its Christian counterpart* (Nathan 1965:205). This struggle reflects Nietzsche's conflict between the contrary impulses, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, out of which true art is born, which he presents in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). According to the German philosopher, these two conditions, which he compares to intoxication and dream, coexist in the mind of a human artist and account for the distinction between a poet and a dramatist: while the poet sees a play, the dramatist *feels the drive to transform oneself and to speak out of other bodies and souls* (Nietzsche 2000:49). Thus Yeats's drama can be interpreted as a dramatic expression of the inner conflict in the artist's consciousness between the contrary impulses to destroy and renew. It also reveals Yeats's constant struggle between the poet and the dramatist in search for unity in all the spheres of artistic experience.

The play opens with a song chanted by the chorus of three musicians, who are folding and unfolding the curtain as they are singing. The idea of the chorus that would mediate between the textual diegesis and the stage mimesis was adopted from the Greek theatre and the Japanese Noh. As Karen Dorn (1984:63) remarks, Yeats was interested in two aspects of the Greek theatre – the relation between stage performance and audience as well as the nature of the poetic and dramatic image. The idea of the chorus that was a connection between the spectators and performers comes from classical Greek drama. The function of the musicians in Yeats's play is to introduce the play and the players, add explanatory notes and provide commentary on the action in the manner of the Noh chorus.² However, in addition to reflecting on the action of the play, they take over the function of setting the stage. The diegetic space is thus created which does not exist somewhere offstage but is instead projected right on top of the mimetic scene (cf. Puchner 2002:130). The concept of time and space was rearranged many times in the process of writing consecutive versions of the play, which Yeats reports in his introduction to the 1934 version:

I had begun it with an ordinary stage scene in the mind's eye, curtained walls, a window and door at back, a curtained door at left. I now changed the stage directions and wrote songs for the unfolding and folding of the curtain that it might be played in a

¹ Yeats provides the philosophical background for his play in "Introduction to *The Resurrection*" (Yeats 1962:392–399).

² Yeats explains his interest in the Noh in his essay "Certain Noble Plays of Japan" (1916), which he wrote as an introduction for Pound's edition of Fenollosa's translation of the Noh plays. For further examination of the technique, see Yeats (1961:221–237).

studio or a drawing-room like my dance plays, or at the Peacock Theatre before a specially chosen audience. (Yeats 1976:364)³

The initial idea of the space arrangement was to mark a definite border between the curtained stage and the audience who were plunged in the dark. The curtain has the function of a projection screen: it separates the two modes, mimesis and diegesis and the two sets of characters: diegetic narrators and mimetic actors. If the curtain is folded up, the border disappears and the space opens up ‘in the mind’s eye’. The ceremony of folding and unfolding the curtain to the accompaniment of the choric songs points to the transience of all material existence and shows that everything fades away to be reborn in ritual. The play begins on the day of Christ’s resurrection, which is also the day when the Greeks celebrate the death and rebirth of their god Dionysus. Both events occur on March 21st, the day of the vernal equinox, the turning point of the year when winter turns to spring. This parallel points to the cyclical movement in history with its constant process of birth, destruction and renewal, and is illustrated by the clash of the two civilizations – Hellenic and Christian. This central antinomy gives rise to further transformations and generates a multitude of tensions, meanings and associations on both the philosophical and the symbolic level, which reflect the universal laws governing mankind.

The action is set in a house where Christ’s disciples are awaiting the news. The eleven apostles, unseen by the audience, are gathered in the inner chamber which is separated from the stage with a curtain. The two guardians, the Greek and the Hebrew, are exchanging the creeds and reporting the events which are not directly shown to the audience. When the play begins, the Hebrew is discovered alone on the stage, while the Greek enters through the audience. Yeats uses the stage space here as a factor in dramatic meaning. The curtain separates the stage from the invisible inner room where the action proper takes place, the actual events are presented to the audience by the mediators – all these structural devices introduce the aura of the miraculous and open the mind for creative thinking. The dramatic tension is built around the ideological debate between the Greek and the Hebrew, who argue about the nature of Christ – whether He was God or Man. According to the rational Greek, Christ was a mere spirit and could not have died, as: *No god has ever been buried; no god has ever suffered.*⁴ The Hebrew, on the other hand, assumes that Christ *was nothing more than a man, the best man who ever lived*, whose death on the Cross proved Him to be mortal.

³ The stage in the Peacock consisted of a platform, some twenty feet across, at the end of a long Georgian room, separated from the auditorium by two steps which were the full width of the stage and behind which ran the stage curtains. There were two entrances to the stage: one which led to the scene docks and another one through the auditorium doors. The auditorium, with a raked floor, had 102 seats (Miller 1977:268).

⁴ All unmarked quotations have been taken from Yeats (1976:364–373).

Their argument reveals another feature of the diegetic theatre – the conflict of ideas that replaces the conflict between characters in a traditional play. The characters are generic types who represent different points of view: a point emphasized by using nationalities instead of personal names. The Hebrew reflects a natural, matter-of-fact attitude of someone whose primary concern is to fulfil his human wishes and ambitions.

***The Hebrew:** One had to sacrifice everything that the divine suffering might, as it were, descend into one's mind and soul and make them pure. [...] It must be a terrible thing when one is old, and the tomb round the corner, to think of all the ambitions one has put aside; to think, perhaps, a great deal about women. I want to marry and have children.*

In contrast to him, the Greek embodies the qualities typical of the Hellenic ideal – rational, logical and order-loving humanism. According to him, gods and men inhabit two separate spheres.

***The Greek:** They can be discovered by contemplation, in their faces a high keen joy like the cry of a bat, and the man who lives heroically gives them the only earthly body that they covet. He, as it were, copies their gestures and their acts. What seems their indifference is but their eternal possession of themselves. Man, too, remains separate. He does not surrender his soul. He keeps his privacy.*

The debate reveals another antinomy: the conflict between the two systems of values which the characters represent. On the level of artistic experience, these two approaches comment upon Yeats's *Vision* and refer to the inner conflict of consciousness between subjectivity and objectivity, which is illustrated here as the clash between the two civilizations: Hellenic and Christian. The Hebrew, with his submission to God's will, self-denial and rejection of individuality in order to participate in God's suffering, represents the objective approach, which is typical of the Christian civilization. In contrast to him, the Greek represents the subjective approach characteristic of the Hellenic civilization, which respects the privacy and independence of gods and humans. The nature of gods is perfect, independent, distant and unapproachable to men. They are statues which man can know only by contemplation.

The characters inform the audience of the two crowds outside – the followers of the Dionysian rite and the anonymous mob that is *busy hunting Christians*. Their comments and reports open up another dimension which is reflected in the organization of space: the room stands for the natural and measurable world of rational behaviour while outside there are unknown irrational forces that are going to break into it. The organization of space reflects the Nietzschean conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses that give birth to genuine art. The stage with the actors represents the Apollonian order which is threatened by the frenzied crowd of Dionysian revellers, who are

invisible to the audience, but are invoked in the characters' reports. The room with a window is a symbol of a reasoning mind which observes the world and builds understanding. Apollonian aesthetics is displayed at the beginning of the play in the Greek's detachment at the sight of Calvary:

The Hebrew: *What makes you laugh?*

The Greek: *Something I can see through the window. There, where I am pointing. There, at the end of the street.* [They stand together looking out over the heads of the audience.]

The Hebrew: *Be quiet. You do not know what you are doing. You have gone out of your mind. You are laughing at Calvary.*

The Greek: *No, no. I am laughing because they thought they were nailing the hands of a living man upon the Cross, and all the time there was nothing there but a phantom.*

The Greek is laughing because he is certain that Christ was a ghost and His death was but a play. He believes Christ's crucifixion to resemble the Dionysian ritual and reports on the crowd outside in a similar way as if it was a spectacle:

The Greek [who is standing facing the audience, and looking out over their heads]: *It is the worshippers of Dionysus. They are under the window now. There is a group of women who carry upon their shoulders a bier with an image of the dead god upon it. No, they are not women. They are men dressed as women. I have seen something like that in Alexandria. They are all silent, as if something were going to happen. My God! What a spectacle!*

The Greek believes that Christ's death on Calvary was a spectacle repeated many times in which a deity dies and revives at the spectators' wish. Both the Greek and the Hebrew recount the excesses to which the crowd goes – the gashing of themselves with knives, the coupling of a man and a woman in the street and their frenzied dances which culminate in an awesome calm as the revellers approach the house. The tension generated by the image which is conceived in the mind through their reports and commentaries is reinforced by the off-stage noises made with rattles and drums, auguring the presence of the wild irrational force which gradually emerges out of the darkness and interrupts the peace and quiet of the room. Thus the dramatic tension results from the clash of the two dimensions: the visible reality of the stage and the invisible reality outside; the safe domain of the reason confined to the stage space and another reality that intrudes upon the order of rational argumentation, whose suggestive image is contrived in the audience's imagination through the characters' reports. A compelling vision of total anarchy gradually dominates the atmosphere of the play.

The antinomy between the safe and comfortable atmosphere of the room and the barbarian chaos outside is resolved on the dramatic level by the appearance of the Syrian, who brings the news of Christ's resurrection. His sudden entry effects a complete change of tone. He enters the room with a scream: *Something incredible*

has happened. His excitement and spiritual intoxication are mingled with the drum-beats and off-stage noises auguring the presence of the Dionysian worshippers, which reinforces the dramatic effect. He says that the stone was removed from Christ's grave and there were witnesses who saw Christ alive, saying that He had risen from the dead. The Syrian's laughter marks the release of dramatic tension which results from the clash of two different orders:

The Greek: *Why are you laughing?*

The Syrian: *What is human knowledge?*

The Greek: *The knowledge that keeps the road from here to Persia free from robbers, that has built the beautiful humane cities, that has made the modern world, that stands between us and the barbarian.*

The aesthetic order built on rational evidence on which the Greek's convictions are founded is threatened by an irrational barbarian force that intrudes upon the realm of his beliefs. The Syrian is coming with a proof that counters the Greek's rationality.

The Syrian: *What if there is always something that lies outside knowledge, outside order? What if at the moment when knowledge and order seem complete that something appears? [...] What if the irrational return?*

The Syrian's hysterical laughter signals the intrusion of a new truth in the Greek's rational order. It augurs the moment of losing self-control, the Greek's terror at the irrational truth which intrudes upon his order-loving mind. It dispels all his preconceived notions about the world and shakes the foundations of the ancient civilization.

The Hebrew: *Stop! He laughed when he saw Calvary through the window, and now you laugh.*

The Greek: *He too has lost control of himself.*

The Hebrew: *Stop, I tell you. [Drums and rattles]*

The Syrian: *But I am not laughing. It is the people out there who are laughing. How horrible!*

The Hebrew: *No, they are shaking rattles and beating drums.*

The Syrian: *I thought they were laughing. How horrible!*

The Syrian's laughter recalls the Greek's detachment and intellectual scoffing at the validity of Calvary, which he displayed at the beginning of the play. As the Greek is unable to accept the Christian revelation, he projects his own hysteria onto the worshippers outside; their drum-beats externalize his own inner disintegration as the new truth gradually overcomes him. His terror is reflected in his description of the wild ritual of the Dionysian worshippers:

The Greek: *They will cry 'God has arisen!' through all the streets of the city. They can make their god live and die at their pleasure; but why are they silent? They are dancing silently. They are coming nearer and nearer, dancing all the while, using*

some kind of ancient step unlike anything I have seen in Alexandria. They are almost under the window now.

Symbolically, the Greek's inner disintegration is projected outside as an image of the wild dance of the Dionysian worshippers; its dramatic effect is reinforced by the suggestive sound effects and off-stage noises. The turbulence outside reaches its climax in the cries: *God has arisen!* repeated again and again to the rhythmical sound of drum-beats. All this augurs the intrusion of a blind force which emerges out of the dark and disturbs the peace of mind.

The Greek: *How they roll their painted eyes as the dance grows quicker and quicker! They are under the window. Why are they all suddenly motionless? Why are all those unseeing eyes turned upon this house? Is there anything strange about this house?*

The wild rhythm of the dance movements, reinforced by the increasing tempo and repetitive rhythm of speech, abruptly turns to an ominous silence while the sound of steps anticipates someone's entrance:

The Hebrew: *Somebody has come into the room.*

The Greek: *Where?*

The Hebrew: *I do not know; But I thought I heard a step.*

The Greek: *I knew that he would come.*

The Hebrew: *There is no one here. I shut the door at the foot of the steps.*

The Greek: *The curtain over there is moving.*

The Hebrew: *No, it is quite still, and besides there is nothing behind it but blank wall.*

The Greek: *Look, look!*

In this moment all the strands of the dramatic texture are woven together in anticipation of the miracle. The Syrian is slowly raising the curtain which shows the entrance to the inner chamber and thus opens the space for the new truth to enter the room. Out of the darkness a figure of Christ makes his silent entry into the inner chamber where the apostles are gathered. The moment when a masked figure emerges out of the 'fabulous darkness' into the light of the room is thrilling – it strikes the audience as a sudden release of unknown energy which augurs metaphysical transformation. The mystery of God-become-Man is revealed not in a form of an intellectual argument, but emerges as a kind of dramatic epiphany – the entry of the risen Christ. The Greek, who has so far believed that Christ was a phantom, is now horrified to discover that the heart of the phantom is beating.

The Greek: *O Athens, Alexandria, Rome, something has come to destroy you. The heart of a phantom is beating. Man has begun to die. Your words are clear at last, O Heraclitus. God and man die each other's life, live each other's death.*

Brought face to face with the miracle of God-become-Man, the Greek loses control as all his preconceived notions collapse. Everything is seen in a new light and history reveals itself as a series of revolutionary movements – the cosmic process of endless destruction and renewal. In his introduction to the play Yeats wrote: *the sense of spiritual reality comes whether to the individual or to the crowds from some violent shock, and that idea has the support of tradition* (Yeats 1962:399). The revelation comes as a shock to the characters threatening all their systems of values. It also sheds a new light on history showing the present moment in a universal perspective.

The spiritual character of the play as an act of transgression, which is dramatically effected in both aural and visual terms, is completed in the poetic language of the choric songs, which present the events in a larger context of universal experience. The choric songs reflect the universal drama of history in which the contrary impulses to destroy and renew are set against each other to generate new energy. The songs not only comment upon the theme but also bring all the elements of experience together and impose a metaphysical frame on the structure of the play. A complex symbolism of the songs, which is rooted in Platonism, Greek mythology and astrology, serves to reveal the analogy between the ritual of the death and rebirth of the Greek god Dionysus and the resurrection of Christ.⁵ Recurring motifs and symbols allow us to present the play as a drama of cosmic renewal in which old generations die and are replaced by new ones.

The recurring metaphors of the beating heart, the ‘fabulous darkness’ and laughter are binding images which transform throughout the play and give it a sense of movement ‘in the mind’s eye’. They also restore the dramatic unity of effect by combining the visual and aural sensations (Knowland 1983:170). The metaphor of the beating heart is the central image in the play – the so called ‘binding metaphor’ (cf. Nathan 1965:207), which combines all the structural elements of the play into a unity:

*I saw a staring virgin stand
Where holy Dionysus died,
And tear the heart out of his side,
and lay the heart upon her hand
And bear that beating heart away;
And then did all the Muses sing
Of Magnus Annus at the spring,
As though God’s death were but a play.*

⁵ Yeats refers here to the concept of the Great Year, which is the time required for one complete cycle of the precession of the equinoxes, roughly about 26,000 years. He believes after Ptolemy that about the time of Christ and Caesar the new era began as the equinoctial sun had returned to its original place in the constellations (Yeats 1962:395). For the elucidation of the symbolism in the songs, see Ellmann (1975:260–263).

The image of the heart torn out of the god's side by the virgin, which recalls the Dionysian ritual, recurs in the dramatic structure as the beating heart of the risen Christ, which is heard in the Greek's final speech: *The heart of a phantom is beating.*

The motif of darkness recurs in the opening song as the 'fabulous darkness' out of which the virgin and her star emerges:

*Another Troy must rise and set,
Another lineage feed the crow,
Another Argo's painted prow
Drive a flashing bauble yet.
The Roman Empire stood appalled:
It dropped the reins of peace and war
When that fierce virgin and her Star
Out of the fabulous darkness called.*

It also appears as an element of the dramatic structure in the image of the unseeing eyes of the Dionysian revellers invoked by the Greek: *Why are all those unseeing eyes turned upon this house?* Their painted eyes are turned upon the window – the symbol of the mind through which man perceives reality. This image reflects the impotence of man who is faced with a blind force exceeding the boundaries of rational understanding. In the closing song the 'fabulous darkness', which would set the ground for the Dionysian spectacle, is transformed into an image of universal chaos and anarchy that shakes the foundations of all rational order and discipline.

*In pity for man's darkening thought
He walked that room and issued thence
In Galilean turbulence;
The Babylonian starlight brought
A fabulous, formless darkness in;
Odour of blood when Christ was slain
Made all Platonic tolerance vain
And vain all Doric discipline.*

The natural response to that absurd force is laughter which signals the loss of control. The Greek's ironic sneering at the sight of Calvary at the beginning of the play, which shows his self-defence against the irrational, by the end of the play turns into madness.

The final stanza of the closing song explains the philosophical meaning of the play which alludes to the irresistible human fate that destroys everything by feeding upon the heart's desire. The metaphor of the beating heart recurs here as a channel of universal energy, the human heart which partakes in God's act of salvation.

*Everything that man esteems
Endures a moment or a day:
Love's pleasure drives his love away,
The painter's brush consumes his dreams;
The herald's cry, the soldier's tread
Exhaust his glory and his might:
Whatever flames upon the night
Man's own resinous heart has fed.*

Theatrically, what accounts for the diegetic character of the play, is an experiment with the audience, a form of dialogue in which both the actors and the spectators are expected to participate. Although the audience do not respond to the dialogue directly, they are invited to share in the common space. The barrier between the stage and the audience is frequently crossed. The actors enter the stage straight through the auditorium door. Whenever they address the crowd, they look in the direction of the audience, which suggests ascribing certain roles to the spectators: they become the participants in the Dionysian orgy, as well as the witnesses of Christ's crucifixion. This allows for the fourth wall to disappear and thus opens the theatre space for both groups of interlocutors. The experiment aims at transforming the spectators into participants who are invited to share in the experience of mystery. The triumph of the irrational force over order and peace of mind proves that destruction is a necessary act without which no transformation in the universe is possible.

To conclude, let me present William Worthen's statement which proves the significance of Yeats's experiment for the development of modern theatre:

Although Yeats's search for "theater's anti-self" often assimilates the incantatory gesture of ritual to the rhetorical patterns of the spoken word, the dance plays structure a dialogue between poetry and its incantation in speech, song, acting, and dance. Far from being theater-less drama, Yeats's plays break the realistic subordination of verbal to scenic representation and open a far-reaching investigation of how the language of the text can be inscribed in the practices of the stage. (Worthen 1992:108–109)

Yeats's diegetic theatre does not deprive the theatre of its dramatic function. On the contrary, by replacing the mimetic actor and traditional setting with diegetic techniques Yeats's poetic drama opens the performers and the spectators up to new ways of communication.

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