



Bewildered Remembrance:
**W. B. Yeats's *The Dreaming of
the Bones* and 1916**

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1916 and Remembrance

*Have not old writers said
That dizzy dreams can spring
From the dry bones of the dead?
And many a night it seems
That all the valley fills
With those fantastic dreams.¹*

Commemoration, we are all now acutely aware, is not a simple business; and, although the point might sometime be obscured in the current round of centenaries, it is not only about marking the round numbers of decades or centuries, or even about grasping the span of intervening years. Instead, we might think of commemoration as the noisy, public face of something far more intimate and elusive: remembrance. It is one thing to act out commemoration on the streets, in a newspaper, or in a public debate; it is another thing entirely to keep the past in mind. But then, as Edward S. Casey once asked: ‘Where else is it going to be kept?’²

Almost from the moment that he first heard that something was taking place in Dublin over the Easter weekend of 1916, W.B. Yeats seems to have grasped that the Rising would pose a problem of a remembrance. He was in London at the time, and with Dublin’s main telephone exchange on Dame Street seized by the rebels, and telegraph communications uncertain, for the first few days news as to what was going on in Ireland was sporadic, and not always reliable. A letter in the library at Princeton, written by Yeats to his sister Elizabeth, captures his initial response: ‘I have no new news but what everyone has’, he writes. ‘I know most of the Sinn Fein leaders & the whole thing bewildered me. Mr. Connolly is an able man & Thomas McDonagh both able & cultivated. Pearse I have long looked upon as a man made dangerous by the vertigo of self sacrifice.’³ Filtered through through a haze of rumour and misinformation, Yeats’s immediate response was indeed one of ‘bewilderment’. It is possible to understand his responses to 1916 over the years in terms of what we might call a kind of creative bewilderment, a shaping of that initial sense of disorientation, without ever fully dispelling it. Here, for instance, we might think of ‘Easter 1916’, in which the word ‘bewildered’ re-appears in the culminating lines:

*To know they dreamed and died
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died.⁴*

The word ‘bewildered’ itself may not appear in Yeats’s main 1916 play, *The Dreaming of the Bones*; however, the very first lines in his first draft of the play, from 1917, begin with words that are an echo of the conclusion to ‘Easter 1916’, turning ‘excess of love’ into ‘the evil of love’:

*– Dierdre [sic] & Grania
& all the ruin they brought – Helen
Why should love that so uplifts the
heart bring so great evil.⁵*

- 1 W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Plays*, ed. by Russell K. Alspach and Catharine C. Alspach (London, 1965), 763
- 2 Edward S. Casey, ‘Keeping the Past in Mind’, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 37: 1 (Sept., 1983), 77–95; 77.
- 3 W. B. Yeats to Elizabeth Yeats; Princeton University Library; Folder 4: AM 14788; [ca. April 1916; n.d.]. Original emphasis
- 4 W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, eds. (New York, 1957), 394. [Hereafter: *Variorum Poems*].
- 5 W. B. Yeats, ‘The Dreaming of the Bones’, NLI 8775(1) 1r 3, in ‘*The Dreaming of the Bones*’ and ‘*Calvary*’: *Manuscript Materials*, ed. by Wayne K. Chapman, The Cornell Yeats (London, 2003), 2/3. [Note: The Cornell Yeats provides facing page transcriptions of photographic reproductions of the manuscripts. Hence, all page references refer to two pages: the reproduction of the manuscript, and the transcription opposite.]

The original word, 'bewildered', that triggered the idea may have been sublimated; however, the same sense of bewildered wonder remains.

In terms of the parallel production histories of both works, it makes sense that this should be the case. The writing and publication of *The Dreaming of the Bones* effectively parallels Yeats's work on 'Easter 1916'. In a letter to Lady Gregory dated 11 May 1916, he writes: 'I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me – and I am very despondent about the future. At the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned,' while also noting that he was trying 'to write a poem on the men executed – "terrible beauty has been born again"'.⁶ He continued work on the poem between May and September 1916, and Clement Shorter published it for him in a private edition of twenty-five copies later that year; it did not surface again until it appeared in *The New Statesman* on 23 October 1920, and was reprinted in *The Dial* the following month. Indeed, Roy Foster argues that the death by hunger strike of the Republican Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, which had particularly gripped Yeats's imagination, prompted him to publish in *The New Statesman*, which had been supportive of MacSwiney.⁷ It was not until February 1921, however, that it appeared in the collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*.⁸ Work on, and publication of, *The Dreaming of the Bones* follows a very similar arc. Yeats began writing the play in the summer of 1917, and as with the 1916 poems he was writing at the same time, he was aware that he was working with very volatile material. 'I have almost finished my Dervorgilla play,' he wrote to Lady Gregory on 12 June 1917. 'I think the best play I have written for years. It has grown greatly since you saw it and is I am afraid only too powerful politically.'⁹ As a result, he held back publication until January 1919, when it appeared alongside a chapter from Joyce's *Ulysses* in *The Little Review*, the New York-based avant-garde journal for which Ezra Pound was foreign editor. The play subsequently appeared in a small edition in the press run by Yeats's sisters, the Cuala Press, later that same year. However, the first major publication, in *Four Plays for Dancers* (where it appeared alongside *At the Hawk's Well*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and *Calvary*) had to wait until October 1921, just as the War of Independence was coming to an end.

The *Four Plays for Dancers* marks a turning point in Yeats's dramaturgy, the result of his excited engagement with the forms of Japanese Noh. Although Yeats had earlier been interested in Japanese art, his knowledge of the Noh was primarily filtered through Ezra Pound; in the years in which Pound and Yeats were closest, Pound was working on the manuscripts of the late Ernest Fenollosa. His edition of Fenollosa's 'Noh' or *Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan* appeared in 1917. Prior to this, Pound had published his version of one of Fenollosa's translations of the play *Nishikigi* in the Chicago-based journal, *Poetry*, in May of 1914, one of the products of the winter of 1913–14 that he spent with Yeats in Stone Cottage, Sussex. Later, the Yeats sisters' Cuala Press republished Pound's *Nishikigi*, along with three other plays, and Yeats's introductory essay, as *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* in September 1916 in a limited edition of 350 copies, just as Yeats himself was completing 'Easter 1916'. The colophon of that edition reads: 'published in the year of the Sinn Fein Rising', suggesting that Yeatsian logic was forging a link between the Easter Rising and the Noh, a convergence of events and aesthetics that would shape Yeats's theatrical practice. *Nishikigi* would later

6 W. B. Yeats to Augusta Gregory (11 May 1916), in *Collected Letters*, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954), 613.

7 R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life: Volume II: The Arch-Poet 1915–1939* (Oxford, 2003), 182.

8 Yeats, 'Easter 1916', *Variorum Poems*, 391–94.

9 W. B. Yeats to Augusta Gregory (12 June 1917), in *Collected Letters*, 626.

provide Yeats with the plot for *The Dreaming of the Bones*; indeed, Yeats's play might almost be said to be a version of the Japanese play. 'Among the most weird and delicately poetic pieces is *Nishikigi*,' writes Fenollosa, in which the hero and the heroine are the ghosts of two lovers who died unmarried a hundred years before. Their spirits are in the course of the play united near a hillside grave where the bodies had long lain together.¹⁰

'With the help of Japanese plays translated by Ernest Fenollosa and finished by Ezra Pound,' Yeats announced in 'Certain Noble Plays,' 'I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way — an aristocratic form.'¹¹ The usual interpretation of this claim to have created 'an aristocratic form' is that Yeats was retreating into the aesthetic in his theatre, away from the more overt political engagement of a play such as *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and away from the wider audience on which the Abbey was increasingly dependent. And this is largely true. However, putting Yeats's excited encounter with the Noh in the context of the 1916 Rising suggests something else that Yeats found in Pound and Fenollosa's work. 'The beauty and power of Noh lie in the concentration,' writes Fenollosa. 'All elements — costume, motion, verse, and music — unite to produce a single clarified impression. ... Thus the drama became a storehouse of history.'¹² Commenting on this, Pound notes archly that the Noh is thus 'a theatre of which Mr. Yeats ... might approve.'¹³ At a moment when the fabric of history seemed to be tearing, a dramatic form that functioned as 'a storehouse of history' had a powerful attraction.

There was a third element in the convergence of forces that fed into *The Dreaming of the Bones*. In the same winter at Stone Cottage during which Pound translated *Nishikigi*, Yeats was writing 'Swedenborg, Mediums and Desolate Places', a formative attempt to weave together the various threads of his philosophical reading, his interest in folk memory, and his involvement in magic, all circling around the idea of death. 'Last winter,' he notes early in the essay,

Mr Ezra Pound was editing the late Professor Fenollosa's translations of the Noh Drama of Japan, and read me a great deal of what he was doing. Nearly all that my fat old woman of Soho [the rather unflattering way in which he refers to a medium he was consulting at the time] learns from her familiars is there in unsurpassed lyric poetry and in strange and poignant fables.¹⁴

In the period that he was writing *The Dreaming of the Bones*, Yeats was deeply immersed in the ideas percolating in the Swedenborg essay, soon to be bubbling furiously in *A Vision*, on which he had begun work with his wife, George, shortly after their marriage in October 1917. Indeed, so dominated was his thought by occult inquiries in these years that the 'Note' with which Yeats introduces *The Dreaming of the Bones* in *Four Plays for Dancers* is effectively a statement of the eschatology that he was concocting in *A Vision*. 'The conception of the play,' Yeats explained, 'is derived from the world-wide belief that the dead dream back, for a certain time, through the more personal thoughts and deeds of life.' He goes on to distinguish between a 'Shade' who 'dreams back through events in the order of their intensity,' and a 'Spiritual Being, which lives back through events

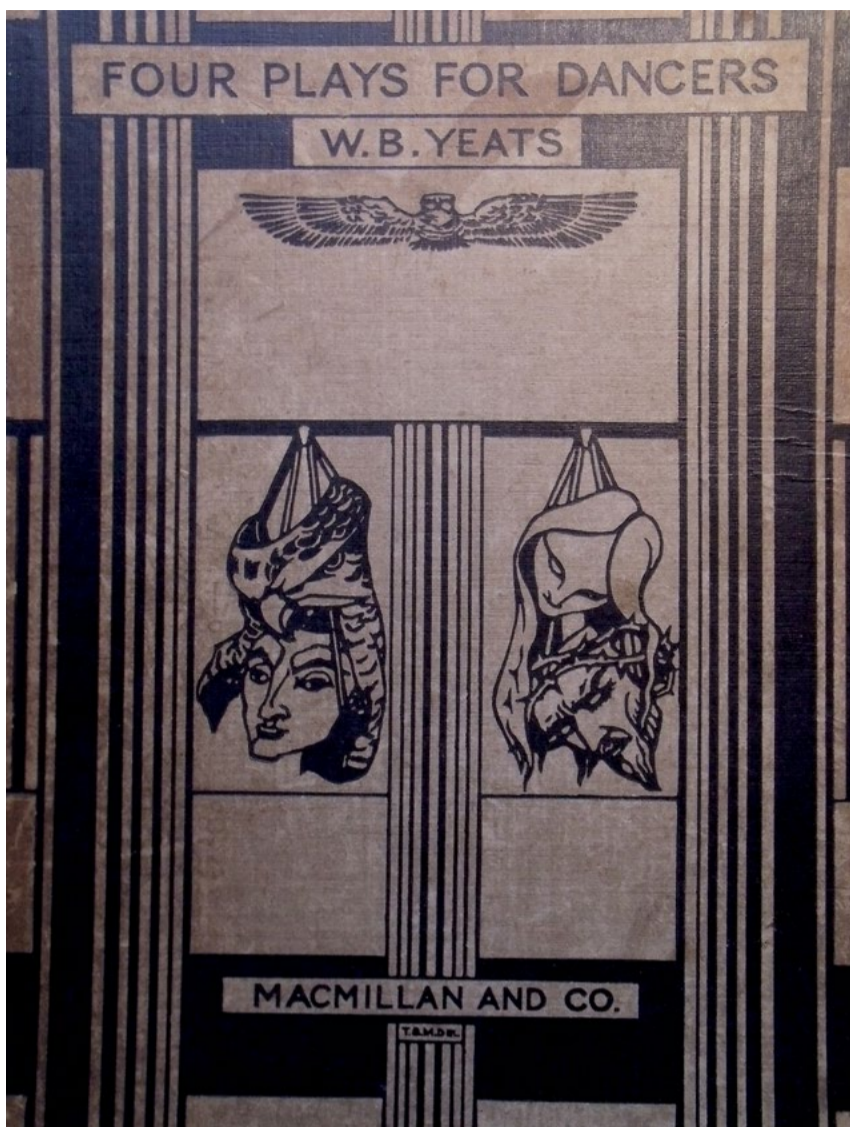
10 Ernest Fenollosa, and Ezra Pound, 'Noh' or *Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan* (London, 1916), 122–23.

11 W. B. Yeats, 'Certain Noble Plays of Japan', *Collected Works Volume IV: Early Essays*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran and George Bornstein (New York, 2007), 163.

12 Ernest Fenollosa, and Ezra Pound, 'Noh' or *Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan* (London, 1916), 120–21.

13 Pound and Fenollosa, 'Noh' or *Accomplishment*, 6.

14 W. B. Yeats, 'Swedenborg, Medium, and Desolate Places', in *Collected Works: Vol. V: Later Essays*, ed. William H. O'Donnell (New York, 1994), 69.



Cover of 1921 Macmillan edition of *Four Plays for Dancers*.

in the order of their occurrence.’¹⁵ As puzzling as this explanation must have been for many readers at the time, there is a characteristically Yeatsian mixture of intense seriousness and nonchalance here, as if what he is saying is glaringly obvious (a ‘world-wide belief’) rather than obscure and idiosyncratic.

The idea that Irish folklore and legendary material was part of a ‘world-wide’ system had been with Yeats since at least the 1890s; however, the clarity with which he was able to formulate the idea in 1914 changed his relationship to this material. ‘Much that Lady Gregory has gathered,’ he wrote of her folklore collections in the Swedenborg essay, ‘seems but the broken bread of old philosophers.’¹⁶ This indicates how important it is to understand Yeats’s decision to cast his Noh-inflected play about 1916 with characters from Irish folk legend in terms of his new, broadened understanding of the significance of the Irish material. As a folklorist, Yeats was never much interested in accuracy, or provenance, or such matters; for him what mattered was his audience’s relationship to the material. The two spectral characters in the play, Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, are real historical figures. However, when we tease out the differences between what is known about this pair and their roles in Yeats’s play, it becomes clear

that he is interested in something other than history. The historical Diarmait Mac Murchada was, in fact, a King of Leinster (which makes it a bit of a puzzle as to why he might have been wandering around the Burren). Mac Murchada alternated between waging local feuds and allying with a rival king, Tiernan O’Rourke, whose wife, Dervorgilla, he is reputed to have kidnapped at one point – although some sources suggest that she was complicit in the kidnapping, aided by one of her brothers, who was also an enemy of O’Rourke. In any case, she was not young at the time she was carried off (whether willingly or not), nor was Diarmuid. When he committed the symbolic originating moment of Irish colonization, for which he is inscribed in popular memory – inviting soldiers of the English King, Henry II into Ireland to help him defeat O’Rourke – the historical Diarmuid Mac Murchada was in his fifties.¹⁷ So: Yeats is working here not with history, but with a popular memory of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla as young lovers who defied a king and betrayed a kingdom for their love. ‘Why should a love that so uplifts the heart bring so great evil?’ asks Yeats’s opening chorus at the beginning of his first draft of *The Dreaming of the Bones*. In fact, love probably had little to do with it; but, for Yeats, this is not the point. Quite the opposite. The point is that he is confident that his audience shares a folk knowledge of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla as the main actors in a tale that is about love and betrayal, and it is with remembrance as such that he is concerned. In a sense, collective memory is the play’s raw material, shaped by a form, the Noh, that is a ‘storehouse of history’, to produce a work that is about death, and the way in which the past – even the recent past – can inhabit the present as lived remembrance.

¹⁵ Yeats, *Variorum Plays*, 777.

¹⁶ W. B. Yeats, ‘Swedenborg’, 66.

¹⁷ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Mac Murchada, Diarmait (MacMurrrough, Dermot)’, *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, James McGuire and James Quinn, eds. (Cambridge, 2009). (<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a5075>) [accessed 10 July 2015]. Mac Murchada was born ca. 1110; he fled Ireland to seek Henry II’s help in 1166.