

W. B. Yeats and Gordon Craig

ALAN TOMLINSON

WHEN Yeats first began serious playwriting in the last decade of the nineteenth century he had no very clear idea of what he wanted or of what he was trying to do — apart from an intense loathing of ‘realism’ and of vulgar spectacle, and a desire to write drama in verse. When the Irish Literary Theatre, in the formation of which Yeats had played a major part, included his *The Countess Cathleen* in its first season at Dublin’s Antient Concert Hall in 1899, he attached sufficient importance to the occasion to publish his intentions and beliefs in a letter to the *Daily Chronicle* of 27 January 1899. The cardinal point of this manifesto is Yeats’s firmly stated belief that the drama is pre-eminently a literary form which has, however, been corrupted by commercial interests which have brought about an increasing reliance upon visual spectacle at the expense of verbal quality:

... the reason why the men of letters of this century have failed to master the technique of the modern theatre... is that the modern theatre has discovered that you can move many thousands, who have no imagination for beautiful words to awaken, by filling the stage with landscapes... and with handsome men and women in expensive dresses.¹

The theatre was in past times ‘a part of the intellectual life’ because it worked by the expression of imagination and intellect in verbal invention. The modern theatre has become ‘the amusement of idleness’ because it has concentrated upon diverting its audiences instead of stimulating them, substituting meretricious entertainment for ‘the laborious or exhausting ecstasy in which literature and the arts are understood’. It can only regain its former stature, Yeats concludes, by appealing to ‘that small public which cares for literature and the arts without losing all hope

¹ *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade, 1954, p. 309.

of the theatre', and refusing all compromise with the forces of showmanship and commercialism. Not that Yeats is advocating the formation of a theatre for the élite only: he thinks it likely that the enterprise will eventually draw to it representatives of all classes in Ireland, where the popular imagination is more passionate, more capable of exaltation, than it is in England.¹

As a statement of public policy, of intellectual motives, the letter is an index of Yeats's distinction in the seriousness with which he approached the practice of his art. But when, both in the letter and in the contemporary essay on 'The Theatre' which amplifies its arguments, Yeats turns to considerations of actual dramatic method, his lack of precise theatrical knowledge and experience reveals itself as he persistently mistakes the nature of the problems that face the dramatist. The core of Yeats's argument can be found in this passage from the essay, following on from a remark that actors are no longer capable of speaking verse properly:

Even if poetry were spoken as poetry, it would still seem out of place in many of its highest moments upon a stage where the superficial appearances of nature are so closely copied; for poetry is founded upon convention, and becomes incredible the moment painting or gesture reminds us that people do not speak verse when they meet upon the highway. The theatre of art . . . must therefore discover grave and decorative gestures . . . and grave and decorative scenery that will be forgotten the moment an actor has said, 'It is dawn,' or 'It is raining,' or 'The wind is shaking the trees'; and dresses of so little irrelevant magnificence that mortal actors and actresses may change without much labour into the people of romance. The theatre began in ritual, and it cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient sovereignty.²

It is the business of the writer to embody the essential elements of the play's location in his text, making the audience use its imagination to 'see' what is described by the poet, and so drawing them more fully into the experience of the play than is possible when the stage exhibits 'meretricious landscapes' depicting 'the more obvious effects of nature' as seen by 'somebody who understands how to show everything to the most hurried glance'.³

¹ *Letters*, pp. 310-11.

² W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 1961, pp. 169-70.

³ *Essays and Introductions*, p. 169.

Similarly, 'natural' acting militates against imaginative intensity by pandering to 'that interest in external and accidental things which has marred all modern arts, and dramatic art more than any'.¹ Thus Yeats's principal argument is that the visual elements of the dramatic experience, movement and design, must restrict themselves to being simply 'grave and decorative', so that they do not disturb the imagination in its task of visualizing the scenes described or evoked by the dramatist. Then the actors must rediscover 'the noble art of oratory' with its 'intellectual emotions', and abandon 'the poor art of acting, that is content with the sympathy of our nerves'.²

It would be fallacious to assert that a play is not, nor need be, literature: any play offering an artistic experience of more than transient interest will necessarily possess literary merit because the text of the play and not its performance is permanent. Therefore, the permanence or otherwise of a play's quality is principally determined by the quality of its text. But performance is an essential condition of drama, and it is equally fallacious to assert that a play is only literature, and ignore the function of the words as elements in a theatrical design. It was into this latter trap that Yeats fell in writing the first versions of *The Countess Cathleen*, and in reviewing the 1899 production Max Beerbohm concluded that Yeats was:

pre-eminently, a poet; and for him words, and the ordering of words, are always the chief care and delight. His verses, more than the verses of any other modern poet, seem made to be chanted; and it is, I fancy, this peculiar vocal quality of his work, rather than any keen sense of drama, that has drawn him into writing for the stage.³

In March 1901, however, Yeats encountered the work of Gordon Craig, whose conception of the art of the theatre placed words and speech in their proper perspective as component parts of a design that makes use of other means of communication as well:

No; the Art of the Theatre is neither acting nor the play, it is not scene nor dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which is the very spirit of acting; words, which are

¹ *Letters*, p. 310.

² *Essays and Introductions*, p. 168.

³ *Saturday Review*, 13 May 1899.

the body of the play; line and colour, which are the very heart of the scene; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance.¹

Craig was the son of Ellen Terry, and had begun his theatrical career as an actor, working with his mother in Irving's company. From acting he progressed to the designing of scenery and costumes and to production, and his background was thus as theatrical as Yeats's was literary.

This difference is reflected in their respective attitudes to drama, which for Craig was not a literary form at all. If any one element out of those listed by Craig was to be considered more important than the others, then it must be action, which 'bears the same relation to the Art of the Theatre as drawing does to painting, and melody does to music. The Art of the Theatre has sprung from action — movement — dance'.² Yeats found the origins of drama in poetic recitation, Craig found them in pantomimic dance; Yeats's version of the drama's degeneration was the ousting of the poet by the showman, Craig's the seduction of the actor by the man of letters into using his voice instead of his body.³ Craig's ultimate vision was of an art that belonged to the theatre alone, could only be conceived in terms of the theatre, and was created by the artists of the theatre, reigning supreme in their own kingdom and no longer placing their talents at the disposal of the playwrights, the men of letters, in the role of executive technicians.

Although such an extreme view would have been anathema to Yeats, the two men nevertheless had a great deal in common, and Craig's theories were to prove a lasting, fruitful, and profound source of inspiration to Yeats. Like Yeats, Craig desired a theatre of symbolism and ideal beauty, a theatre purged of 'the falseness and pretentious thought of hideous realism'.⁴ Craig knew that his self-sufficient 'Art of the Theatre' was a thing of the future, and he held that until the artists of the theatre discovered or re-discovered the techniques of their own art it behoved them to continue to place their best work at the disposal of the written

¹ Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, 1924, p. 138.

² *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 139.

³ See, *On the Art of the Theatre*, pp. 58-60. Yeats claims that drama began 'in the chanted ode' in *Letters*, p. 309.

⁴ Gordon Craig, *Index to the Story of My Days*, 1957, p. 290.

play. Craig invoked vision rather than language as the theatre's supreme means of expression, but he conceived of visual design as being something profoundly involved with the substance of the play, and exhorted designers, 'Do not first look at Nature, but look in the play of the poet'.¹ Advocating the fashioning of a symbol for a tree rather than putting up an imitation of one, he cautioned: 'Not that we should allow even the symbol of a tree to appear on our stage merely as something to look at; unless the drama demanded the presence of such a symbol, no tree should be put there.'²

Craig simplified scenery and properties, keeping the stage as clear as possible, and making imaginative use of lighting to attune the stage picture to the moods of individual scenes. Simplicity was the keynote of his famous production of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* for the amateur Purcell Operatic Society, but an imaginative simplicity which harmonized with and underscored every change of mood in the course of the action.³ It was this production that Yeats saw in 1901, writing enthusiastically to Craig, 'You have created a new art . . . I would like to talk the whole thing over with you'.⁴ The breadth of effect and delicate strength of colour in Craig's treatment of scenery, lighting, costumes, and movement opened Yeats's eyes: this was the refined and decorative theatrical style that he desired, but working integrally with the developing significance of a dramatic action.

This discovery produced an almost immediate shift in the emphasis of Yeats's pronouncements upon scenic design. The essay 'At Stratford-on-Avon' is dated in May 1901, and in it Yeats discusses visual design not as something separable from the text of the play, but combining with it in the creation of the dramatic experience:

Decorative scene-painting would be . . . as inseparable from the movements as from the robes of the players and from the falling of the light . . . Mr. Gordon Craig used scenery of this kind at the Purcell Society performance the other day, and . . . it was the first beautiful scenery our stage has seen. . . . Mr. Benson did not venture to play the scene in *Richard III* where the ghosts walk as Shakespeare wrote it,

¹ *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 23.

² Gordon Craig, *The Theatre Advancing*, 1921, p. 17.

³ See, Edward Craig, *Gordon Craig: the Story of His Life*, 1968, pp. 120-2.

⁴ *Index to the Story of My Days*, p. 239. Letter dated 2 April 1901.

but had his scenery been as simple as Mr. Gordon Craig's purple back-cloth that made Dido and Aeneas seem wandering on the edge of eternity, he would have found nothing strange in pitching the tents of Richard and Richmond side by side.¹

Craig maintained that unity is 'the one thing vital to a work of art',² and, echoing Yeats's remark about 'external and accidental things', that 'accident is an enemy of the artist. . . . Art arrives only by design'.³ The stage must display variety, but a variety always closely related to the theme of the play and not something pursued restlessly for its own sake: 'remember never to let go of the main theme of the play when searching for variations in the scene'. The central idea of the play must not disappear beneath a welter of conflicting interests, and so a fine balancing of proportions must be the goal, suggesting a 'sense of all things' rather than trying to simulate parts of reality. By such means the most confined of actual spaces can convey an impression of multitude and grandeur, 'for it is all a matter of proportion and nothing to do with actuality'.⁴ Mass, the weight and density that mould a work of art, giving it power, is achieved through conscious design, not mere bulk:

Masses must be treated as masses . . . and detail has nothing to do with the mass. . . . You do not make an impression of mass by crowding a quantity of details together. Detail is made to form mass only by those people who love the elaborate, and it is a much easier thing to crowd a quantity of details together than it is to create a mass which shall possess beauty and interest.⁵

Craig applied these principles to the staging of plays, but, during the period in which he was under Craig's influence, Yeats came to apply them to the writing of the play itself. *At the Hawk's Well*, the first of the Plays for Dancers, was published in 1917 with a preface in which Yeats wrote that 'our modern poetical drama has failed . . . because, always dominated by the example of Shakespeare, it would restore an irrevocable past'. Shakespeare's art could be a public art, reflecting the life of contemporary society, without losing the depth and resonance of

¹ *Essays and Introductions*, pp. 100-1.

² *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 157.

³ *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 55.

⁴ *On the Art of the Theatre*, pp. 22-7.

⁵ *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 34.

art, because the poetry in which it was founded was close to the experience of that life, to 'a people who had been trained by the Church to listen to difficult words and who sang . . . many songs that are still beautiful'. Drama could be given weight and mass by filling it with detail, and yet retain the subtlety of poetry, but this was no longer so and 'We must recognize the change as the painters did when, finding no longer palaces and churches to decorate, they made framed pictures to hang upon a wall'. The accumulation of realistic detail will, in modern society stifle rather than stimulate the creative impulse, and must be discarded as a means of giving resonance, but 'Whatever we lose in mass and in power we should recover in elegance and in subtlety'.¹

Yeats begins to work towards the intensifying of his plays by a process of condensation that is analogous to Craig's theories of design and production. He pares away all inessential details, concentrating fixedly on the central theme of his action:

An action is taken out of all other actions; it is reduced to its simplest form, or at any rate to as simple a form as it can be brought without our losing the sense of its place in the world. The characters that are involved in it are freed from everything that is not a part of that action . . . it is an energy, an eddy of life purified from everything but itself.²

As his dramatic skills develop, Yeats progressively removes from his plays everything that does not directly contribute to the revelation of the vision. Action is telescoped into its final climax, and symbol and allusion communicate what needs to be known of preceding events.

In order to give the impression of movement, of dramatic development, to the single image presented by such a design, Yeats gradually combines his dramatic symbolism — suggesting Craig's 'sense of all things' — with theatrical conventions that limit the action still further, isolating it from the world and confining it within a precisely defined framework. The moment of time thus isolated acquires added intensity from the very extremity of the concentration upon it: in Craig's words, 'it is all a matter of proportion and nothing to do with actuality'.

¹ *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach, 1966, p. 417.

² W. B. Yeats, *Explorations*, 1962, pp. 153-4.

If a sense of proportion could enable Craig to make a line on a sheet of paper two inches square 'which seems to tower miles in the air',¹ it could also enable Yeats to give depth and scale to his univocal dramas. This is particularly so in the Plays for Dancers, where amongst the formal conventions are the chorus, the source of the Yeatsian 'emotion of multitude'.²

In these plays the sense of reality is dependent not upon the realism of the form, but upon its unity and logical consistency. To quote Craig again: 'Consider only the words. Wind them in and out of some vast and impossible picture, and now make that picture possible through the words.'³ Yeats followed this prescription more literally than Craig can ever have intended it to be followed, eliminating physical scenery altogether in order to realize dramatic location in dialogue and in choric song, and playing variations on his theme by means of a dramatic poetry of tightly controlled associationism. The dance-plays are a truly poetic drama.

But although the means differ the ends are the same, for Yeats is doing with poetry what Craig had shown him could be achieved in the theatre with other tools. Also, although the dance-plays dispense with scenery and with special lighting, they employ performing conventions which appeal to the eye, and in the manner advocated by Craig. Of the dance itself Craig firmly maintained that it was the *fons et origo* of all dramatic art, that the first dramatist 'spoke either in poetry or prose, but always in action: in poetic action which is dance, or in prose action which is gesture'.⁴ The humanity of the actor is the most powerful single agent in the theatre's creation of an illusion of reality, for which reason Craig called for the use of masks, hoping thereby to disguise that humanity:

Masks carry conviction when he who creates them is an artist, for the artist limits the statements which he places upon these masks. The face of the actor carries no such conviction; it is over-full of fleeting expression — frail, restless, disturbed and disturbing.⁵

¹ *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 23.

² See, *Essays and Introductions*, pp. 215-16, for the essay 'Emotion of Multitude'.

³ *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 23.

⁴ *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 141.

⁵ *The Theatre Advancing*, p. 121.

These were sentiments with which Yeats wholeheartedly concurred:

A mask will enable me to substitute for the face of some commonplace player, or for that face repainted to suit his own vulgar fancy, the fine invention of a sculptor, and to bring the audience close enough to the play to hear every inflection of the voice. A mask never seems but a dirty face, and no matter how close you go is yet a work of art; nor shall we lose by stilling the movement of the features, for deep feeling is expressed by a movement of the whole body.¹

I am not suggesting that Yeats ever slavishly copied from Craig; rather was it a case of Yeats finding in Craig a mind akin to his own, but with the theatrical knowledge and technical ability to realize precisely the effects that Yeats wanted in his own work, but of the mechanics of which he knew little. Yeats did not approve of everything that Craig did or said, especially not his belittling of the writer's importance to the drama, and his exaltation of the virtuoso designer-director in his place. Nevertheless, the stage directions in the texts of Yeats's plays and the production notes attached to them often show a clear debt to Craig, as in this note attached to *The Golden Helmet* in 1908:

One gets also much more effect out of concerted movements — above all, if there are many players — when all the clothes are the same colour. No breadth of treatment gives monotony where there is movement and change of lighting. It concentrates attention on every new effect and makes every change of outline or of light and shadow surprising and delightful. . . . One wishes to make the movement of the action as important as possible, and the simplicity which gives depth of colour does this, just as, for precisely similar reasons, the lack of colour in a statue fixes the attention on the form.²

Thus Yeats acquired knowledge of theatrical techniques and ideas on production from Craig and put them into practice in his own work throughout the first decade of this century, but Craig's influence upon the course of Yeats's development does not reside solely in stage techniques, as I tried to show. When the dialogue and the performance of a play are worked out together by the dramatist from the beginning, the manner in which it is envisaged that the play will be performed will naturally affect its verbal structure. In 1910 Yeats acquired a model stage equipped

¹ *Essays and Introductions*, p. 226.

² *Variorum Plays*, p. 454.

with a miniature set of the screens that Craig had devised to make a scene 'capable of endless transformation, of the expression of every mood that does not require a photographic reality', and wrote delightedly that:

henceforth I shall be able, by means so simple that one laughs, to lay the events of my plays amid a grandeur like that of Babylon. . . . Henceforth I can all but 'produce' my play while I write it, moving hither and thither little figures of cardboard through gay or solemn light and shade, allowing the scene to give the words and the words the scene.¹

This was exactly what Yeats did do when working on *The Player Queen*, and he attributed the fantastic form in which that play emerged to his use of the screens.²

Thus Craig's influence upon Yeats is both more extensive and more subtle than is generally realized. Craig's theory and practice of symbolist staging shaped the expression of Yeats's desire for simplification of the stage-picture, and, long before Yeats became acquainted with the Japanese Nō drama, predisposed him towards those theatrical devices out of which he was to compound the Plays for Dancers.

Craig has most profoundly affected the modern theatre not through his productions — of which there were very few — but through the inspiration gleaned by others from his theories, from his writings and the ideal designs which illustrate them. Yeats provides an excellent example of this: he was a fine dramatist — certainly much finer, I believe, than is commonly allowed — who learned the art and craft of his calling under Craig's tutelage. Yeats had seen the practical work that Craig had done, and was intimately acquainted with Craig as a person, and so with Craig's ideas.³ As a result, almost all of Yeats's best work in the theatre exhibits characteristics that can be traced to this involvement, and Yeats must be counted amongst those important figures of the modern theatre who derive their chief inspiration from the work of Gordon Craig.

¹ *Variorum Plays*, p. 1301.

² See *Variorum Plays*, p. 1306. See also Edward Craig, *Gordon Craig: the Story of His Life*, p. 233, for a fuller description of the screens and what Craig hoped to do with them.

³ See, Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats, 1865-1939*, 1962, p. 252. Edward Craig has also described Yeats as his father's 'dear friend', *Gordon Craig: the Story of His Life*, p. 337; see also pp. 254-5 and p. 353.