

April 2021

## “[...] but a play”: Laughter and the Reinvention of Theater in *The Resurrection*

Alexandra Poulain  
*University of Sorbonne Nouvelle*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys>

---

### Recommended Citation

Poulain, Alexandra (2021) "“[...] but a play”: Laughter and the Reinvention of Theater in *The Resurrection*," *International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34068/IYS.05.01.04>

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol5/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Yeats Studies by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).

‘[...] BUT A PLAY’: LAUGHTER AND THE REINVENTION OF  
THEATER IN *THE RESURRECTION*

Alexandra Poulain

For anyone familiar with Yeats’s earlier *Plays for Dancers*, inspired by—but not strictly imitative of—the Japanese tradition of Noh theater, *The Resurrection*<sup>1</sup> at first seems to present a familiar pattern. In the 1931 version, the inaugural stage direction makes the point explicitly that the play, originally intended for “an ordinary stage,” was rewritten to fit the earlier pattern: “I now changed the stage directions and wrote songs for the unfolding and folding of the curtain that it might be played in a studio or a drawing-room like my dance plays, or at the Peacock Theatre before a specially chosen audience” (CW2 481). As Pierre Longuenesse<sup>2</sup> points out, the stage direction thus untypically becomes the site of a metacritical reflection where the playwright, speaking in the first person, reflects on the revision process through which he brought the play closer to the formal pattern of the original dance plays. We recognize the three Musicians, mediating between the actors and the audience, and the framing lyrics which accompany “the folding and unfolding of the curtain,” in lieu of the painted cloth which featured in the earlier plays. More importantly, *The Resurrection* is based on one fundamental principle which the *Plays for Dancers* had borrowed from Noh dramaturgy: the fact that the action revolves on the encounter between two different, incongruent planes of reality—the everyday, commonplace reality of human experience and the spiritual reality of the Otherworld, embodied by ghosts, fairies or divine beings.

For all that familiar appearance, *The Resurrection* has long perplexed critics who puzzle over its real meaning. Is it a pagan or a Christian play? Is it really a theological play, or an allegory of “the creative imagination,” as Helen Vendler suggests?<sup>3</sup> In a recent extensive reading of the play, Charles I. Armstrong astutely picks up Harold Bloom’s comment that “the play hesitates on the threshold of Christianity”<sup>4</sup> and points out that the threshold is a crucial element of the spatial dramaturgy of the play, where the protagonists “keep vigil on a threshold, so as to hold out the outside masses.” “Of course,” he adds, “the followers’ attempt to keep the mob outside is impotent: they cannot ward off the miraculous entry of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Armstrong additionally notes the formal similarity between *The Resurrection* and *The King’s Threshold*, both set in a liminal space (from the Latin *limen*: threshold); but of course his comment implicitly makes the point that the literal threshold on which *The Resurrection* is set doubles as (and materializes) the metaphorical, porous threshold between World and Otherworld through which Christ passes, in keeping with the dramaturgical framework of all the dance plays. In this essay I continue

to explore the implications of liminality in the play, which I read, in the wake of Helen Vendler, less as a theological play than as a meditation on artistic practice. More precisely, I read the play as an attempt to define what constitutes a competent spectator for Yeats's brand of experimental theater, and suggest that its quest for the ideal spectator hinges on its completely unconventional use of laughter (understood here as an event which occurs in the play rather than a reaction the play might elicit in the audience).

I am encouraged to read the play as a meditation on spectatorship by the opening lyric, which starts:

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 (CW2 481).

As Longuenesse observes, the song is not attributed to any specific speaker (unlike in the *Plays for Dancers* where the framing lyrics are attributed to the First Musician). The first words, "I saw," echo the inaugural stage direction ("Before I had finished this play I saw that its subject-matter might make it unsuited for the public stage," CW2 481) which heightens the sense of confusion conveyed by the song on page: does the song prolong the playwright's musing on his own work in the stage direction? On the stage the lines are in fact usually spoken by the First Musician, but the uncertainty of his or her identity remains throughout the song, enhanced by the shifts in time (from past to future and back again), scale (from the particular to the universal), and numerous instances of ambiguity. The phrase "I saw," particularly resonant because it is already a repetition, inscribes from the outset a theatrical dimension—a *theatron*, etymologically, is the place where one sees, from the Greek *thea*: to see.

The anonymous speaker (the playwright?) thus first speaks as a spectator, a mirror-image of the real spectators in the audience. However, s/he is watching a different stage, a different play which predates the drama that will unfold on the stage: the dismemberment of Dionysus at the hands of the Titans in mythological times, as witnessed by Athena—herself a spectator who later becomes an actor and saves his "beating heart." Indeed, the anonymous speaker's gaze ("I saw") is initially replicated by that of the "staring virgin," so that the beginning of the lyric constructs a complex, three-tiered embedding of gazes and stages. The first stanza is borne aloft swiftly on the anaphoric repetition of

“And,” precipitating action until its prophetic conclusion. The final lines depart from the brisk pace and clarity of the preceding ones. In its adverbial use, “but,” in “but a play,” is depreciative and implies an understanding of “play” in the sense of “fake,” “illusion”: if the death and resurrection of Dionysus signals the end of a cycle (a “Magnus Annus”) and the beginning of another, then it might be thought to lose its character of catastrophic finality. However, the phrase “As though” warns us against the naturalistic understanding of theater-as-illusion and points instead towards a ritualistic conception of theater as event. The double modulation in this line (“as though [...] but”) is further complicated by the shift from “Dionysus” to “God,” a signifier which suggests that the death of Christ somehow replays the earlier Passion of Dionysus.

This surreptitious doubling of language is pursued in the second stanza, which ends with the apparent reprise “that fierce virgin and her Star”:

Another Troy must rise and set,  
 Another lineage feed the crow,  
 Another Argo’s painted prow  
 Drive to a flashier 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 (CW2 482).

The deictic “that” ostentatiously returns to the “staring” virgin of the beginning, but the fact that the “virgin” is now accompanied by a capitalized “Star” signals a difference. As Richard Ellmann observes, the “fierce virgin and her Star” now point simultaneously to three referents: Athena and Dionysus; Astraea and Spica, implicitly referenced in Yeats’s ironic paraphrase of Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue* in the beginning of the stanza (with the recurrence of the anaphoric “Another,” prophesying a redoubling of past events in future); and Mary and Christ, signalled by the signifier “God,” the capitalized “Star,” and the title of the play.<sup>6</sup> Creating a complex embedding of gazes and stages in language, rather than on the actual stage, and allowing denotation to branch out equivocally, the first lyric variously undermines the naturalistic paradigm, and keeps us in “fabulous darkness.”

The drama proper, minimalistic as it is, pursues this game of complicating an apparently simple, straightforward storyline, and does this through a systematic doubling of basic dramaturgical elements like space and conflict; there are also two deaths and resurrections, and even two different kinds of laughter. Take the treatment of space, for instance. The stage space represents a single room, the antechamber to an inner room where the Eleven (the Apostles, minus Judas) are hiding from the Christian-hunting mob after the Crucifixion

of Christ. In this antechamber three followers of Christ, a Greek, a Hebrew and a Syrian, discuss the nature of Christ and prepare to give up their lives in order to protect the Eleven. Until the final moments of the play, when the resurrected Christ appears to them, most of what happens on the stage is talk, a theological debate of sorts, and there is a long critical tradition of referring to the play as a Shavian “play of ideas.”<sup>7</sup> But this reading disregards the fact that most of what happens in the play happens offstage. Space doubles between onstage and offstage, and offstage space is itself double: there is the inner room where the Apostles are hiding, materialized by a curtain on one side of the stage, and the street outside the window where the angry mob is expected to appear at any time. While these two areas are invisible to the spectators, they are visible to the three protagonists of the play who watch them anxiously and describe what they see to each other, and to the spectators.

The dramatic tension, which Yeats noted was sustained throughout the revised version of the play,<sup>8</sup> is obtained thanks to *teichoscopia* (literally, “vision from the wall”), a device originally borrowed from the epic where a character, typically, watches a skirmish from the battlements of a castle and describes it, mediating between the reader and the action proper. The three protagonists of the play thus double as spectators and narrators of offstage action, supplementing sight with speech to make this action accessible to us. The Hebrew describes the anxious vigil of the Apostles to the Greek: “If you stand here you will see them. That is Peter close to the window. He has been quite motionless for a long time, his head upon his breast” (CW2 483). Meanwhile the Greek generally stands at the window, watching action out on the street: “It is the worshippers of Dionysus. They are under the window now [...]” (CW2 486). If the play invokes the Shavian play of ideas, then it does so ironically. While the debate about the nature of Christ proves entirely sterile until the entrance of Christ himself, the epicenter of dramatic tension is systematically displaced to the margins of the stage: something is really happening, but not on the stage.

Dramatic tension, as we have seen, is based on the imminent arrival of the Christian-hunting mob, which is expected to come for the Apostles any minute. The room represented on the stage is the buffer area between the Eleven and the as-yet-unseen menace which threatens to destroy them, and the three followers of Christ make it their business to stand between them and destruction. Instructing the Greek about how to facilitate the flight of the Eleven, the Hebrew makes clear the imminence and seriousness of the danger: “We can keep the mob off for some minutes, long enough for the Eleven to escape over the roofs. I shall defend the narrow stairs between this and the street until I am killed, then you can take my place” (CW2 482). Yet this simple pattern is complicated by the presence of another threat—another doubling—in

the streets: the frenzied worshippers of Dionysus, who terrify even the mob. Reporting what he has just seen in the streets, the Greek describes a chaotic situation:

The followers of Dionysus have been out among the fields tearing a goat to pieces and drinking its blood, and are now wandering through the streets like a pack of wolves. The mob was so terrified of their frenzy that it left them alone, or, as seemed more likely, so busy hunting Christians it had time for nothing else (CW2 482).

In this description of generalized confusion which borders on the farcical, the Greek casts the entranced worshippers as a bloodthirsty “pack of wolves,” a description perhaps better suited to the lynch mob which may be “terrified” by the spectacle, but is presumably more concerned to carry out its Christian-hunting mission. Thanks to *teichoscopia*, the scene is filtered through the Greek’s subjectivity. While he is conscious of the real danger constituted by the mob, for whom he expresses only contempt, he is clearly more struck and repulsed by the horrible spectacle of the Dionysian parade. Here and elsewhere in the play, he speaks in the tones of the Apollonian Greek appalled by the advent of Dionysian forces, seen as fundamentally “Barbarian.” The subtext here is Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), which offers a mythical account of the emergence of Attic tragedy as the result of the reconciliation of Apollonian and Dionysian principles.

According to Nietzsche’s mythical narrative, early Greek civilization was Apollonian; Apollo, the God of dreams, sculpture and individuation, inspired beautiful forms to men in order to shield them from the pain and horror which constitute the essence of life. These forms, best expressed by the “naïve” Homer, thus create a comforting veil of illusion. Then from the East came Dionysus, the God of music and drunken ecstasy, who takes his followers beyond the illusion of self, into a communal experience of universal suffering. Attic tragedy appears when Apollonian civilization ceases to resist Dionysism, but becomes reconciled with it. Tragedy expresses the pain inherent in worldly experience and embodied in the Passion of Dionysus, but it reveals this Dionysian essence through the appearances of Apollonian forms, thus allowing art to redeem the essential pain of life. In *The Resurrection*, the Greek features as Nietzsche’s Apollonian man, rational and self-possessed, appalled by the advent of Dionysian forces which he sees as Barbarian, un-Greek influences. Watching the crowd of Dionysian worshippers in disgust from the window, he comments: “All are from the foreign quarter, to judge by face and costume, and are the most ignorant and excitable class of Asiatic Greeks, the dregs of the population” (CW2 486). Nietzsche compares the “Doric state” (of Sparta) to a war camp surrounded by hostile forces:

For the only explanation I can find for the Doric state and Doric art is that it was a permanent *military encampment* of the Apolline: only in a state of *unremitting resistance* to the Titanic-barbaric nature of the Dionysiac could such a cruel and ruthless polity, such a war-like and austere form of education, such a defiantly aloof art, *surrounded by battlements*, exist for long.<sup>9</sup>

In *The Resurrection*, the push of Dionysian forces against Apollonian civilization is translated into spatial dramaturgy, and the house is constructed as a dubious fortress, besieged both by the mob and the ecstatic dancers outside the window. The Greek postures as the guardian of true Greek values against “Asiatic” Dionysian impulses. Seen through his eyes, the “monstrous ceremonies” (CW2 486) of the Dionysian cult are explicitly described in theatrical terms, but this is a sort of theater that threatens to bring down all the barriers that mark out and separate individuals in Greek culture. Particular anxiety is elicited by the dancers’ fluid performance of gender: a “group of women” turn out to be “men dressed as women” (“What a spectacle!” the Greek gasps, CW2 486); a singer is described as “a girl. No, not a girl; a boy from the theatre. I know him. He acts girls’ parts. He is dressed as a girl, but his finger-nails are gilded and his wig is made of gilded chords. He looks like a statue out of some temple” (CW2 486). Pushing irresistibly against Apollonian rationality and subjectivity yet absorbed into the existing forms of Apollonian culture, whose supreme art is sculpture, Dionysian rituals are already turning into a new form of theater.

Rewriting Nietzsche, *The Resurrection* is concerned less with the mythical death and resurrection of Dionysus than with the emergence of tragedy, a brand-new art form which appears at a moment of deep cultural upheaval in the Nietzschean narrative. In the terse dramatic economy of the play, this event is collapsed with the advent of Christianity, and the death and resurrection of the pagan god doubles as the Passion of Christ. The sacrificial goat mentioned in the Greek’s description of Dionysian fury, quoted above, signals the moment when ritual coalesces into the theatrical genre of tragedy. While the exact conditions of the emergence of tragedy remain unclear, the word “tragedy” is derived from the Greek τραγωδία (*tragôidia*), which refers to the song (*ôdê*) which accompanied the ritual sacrifice of a goat (*trágos*) in Dionysian rituals. In Yeats’s occult understanding of history as a succession of contrary cycles, the advent of Christianity signals the destruction of the Greek civilization, as the Greek realizes after the apparition of Christ: “O Athens, Alexandria, Rome, something has come to destroy you!” (CW2 492). The first stanza of the closing lyric concurs:

Odour of blood when Christ was slain  
 Made all Platonic tolerance vain  
 And vain all Doric discipline (CW2 492).

While we recognize the familiar Yeatsian narrative of history, the play's emphasis on the fascinating, horrible spectacle of the Dionysian worshippers just outside the window, rewriting the Nietzschean narrative, points in another direction. I contend that in revisiting the Nietzschean myth of "the birth of tragedy," the play seeks to retrieve the conditions for the birth of a radically new form of theater in the modern age—a form brought to life in the final moments of the play with Christ's silent apparition, which tears a rent in the fabric of the wordy, sterile "play of ideas." For this new brand of modernist theater, Yeats finds an analogue in early Greek tragedy, born of the encounter of Apollonian and Dionysian forces, and he expresses the radical novelty of this new form of theater in his paradoxical handling of laughter.

In two apparently similar moments in the play, first the Greek and then the Syrian look out the window, start laughing uncontrollably, and describe scenes which strike us as particularly unfunny. In the early moments of the play, the Hebrew and the Greek confront their conceptions of Christ: the Hebrew, disillusioned by Christ's arrest and execution, argues that he was entirely human, while the Greek insists his nature is entirely spiritual. Then the Greek starts laughing:

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: I cannot see anything.

The Greek: The hill.

The Hebrew: That is Calvary.

The Greek: And the three crosses on top of it. *(He laughs again.)*

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 (CW2 484).

The Greek laughs out of a sense of intellectual superiority. His is the subjective, Apollonian laughter of individuation: a laughter that separates him from the deluded Romans and serves to reassert his knowledge as the only valid knowledge. While the second passage is dramaturgically similar, the implications of the Syrian's laughter are in fact entirely different. Contrary to the Hebrew and the Greek, the Syrian is prepared to accept the fact that Christ may have been both human and divine—to accept the possibility of the mystery of Incarnation:



The Syrian: What matter if it contradicts all human knowledge?—another Argo seeks another fleece, another Troy is sacked.

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 Syrian: But what if there is something it cannot explain, something more important than anything else?

The Greek: You talk as if you wanted the barbarian back.

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?

The Hebrew: Stop laughing.

The Syrian: What if the irrational return? What if the circle begin again?

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.

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

The Syrian: I thought they were laughing. How horrible! (CW2 490).

In the debate between the Greek and the Syrian, we recognize the terms of the Nietzschean conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian forces. The Greek champions “human knowledge” which founds Apollonian civilization and “stands between us and the Barbarian” (a defensive position which echoes Nietzsche’s metaphor of the “Doric state” as an Apollonian “military encampment”), while the Syrian is open to the possibility that Dionysian irrational forces may take us beyond the limitations of human knowledge, and allow “something else” to “appear.”<sup>10</sup> The scene is crucial, however, not because of the philosophical debate itself, but because the terms of the debate are being acted out dramaturgically. On the one hand, the besieged house beset by the crowd of frenzied worshippers is the objective correlative of the Greek’s vision of modern civilization beset by “the Barbarian.” On the other hand, the Syrian’s laughter signals the moment when the barbarian powers of Dionysian irrationality force their way into the fortress of Apollonian “knowledge and order.” Unlike the Greek’s laughter in the earlier scene, the Syrian’s laughter does not separate him from others, but on the contrary, unites him with the chorus of entranced worshippers in the street. His laughter is prolonged seamlessly by the “drums and rattles” of the dancers outside, abolishing the barriers between inside and outside, a human voice and manufactured instruments, an individual body and a crowd. Again we are reminded of Nietzsche’s description

of “the ecstasy of the Dionysiac state, in which the usual barriers and limits of existence are destroyed.”<sup>11</sup> In allowing Dionysian irrationality into the house, the Syrian creates the conditions for the emergence of a new kind of theater—not Attic tragedy, but its modern equivalent, a new theatrical genre outlined in the Syrian’s question: “What if at the moment when knowledge and order seem complete that something appears?” and realized a few moments later with the apparition of Christ. Thus, I suggest that the Syrian embodies Yeats’s ideal spectator, one who is prepared to leave behind everything he thought he knew, and to embrace theater as the experience of the impossible.

By way of conclusion I want to return briefly to the image of the “staring virgin” in the opening lyric. As we have seen, the opening line constructs the speaker as a spectator (“I saw”), but immediately undermines this privileged position with the mention of the “staring virgin.” On the one hand, the vacant gaze of the “staring virgin” can be understood to mirror the speaker’s gaze, reflecting his inability to see properly. On the other hand, the “stare” may suggest another modality of sight, a gaze which returns the spectator’s gaze with a difference, and sees differently. What this different way of seeing might be becomes clearer if we look further in the script. The “staring” gaze of the goddess is itself replicated by the “unseeing eyes” of the Dionysian dancers at the climactic moment of their trance:

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

The Hebrew: Somebody has come into the room (CW2 491).

At one level, the “unseeing eyes” of the dancers are a mocking reflection of the hollow gaze of the three protagonists, who have spent the duration of the play frantically looking beyond the antechamber, into the inner room or out on the street, and translating sight into vacuous speech. However, the “unseeing eyes” watching the house, returning the three men’s gaze with a difference, also alert us to the fact that there is another way of looking—not for what one knows and expects, but for the unfamiliar, the “strange.” The apparition of Christ is just such an irruption of the “strange” into the familiar “house”—a term which also denotes a theater. In the final moments of the play, action is finally relocated to the stage, and silence succeeds to endless, sterile debate. This is a moment of epiphany—in the Syrian’s words, “something appears” that exceeds human knowledge and is expressed not in words, but in dance—the mere bodily presence and movement of Christ as He crosses over to the inner room. Touching Christ to confirm that He is merely “a phantom,” the Greek

feels his beating heart, and screams: “The heart of a phantom is beating!” (CW2 491) Faced with the evidence of the contradictory nature of Christ, he finally accepts to see differently and becomes in his turn a competent spectator. The play thus delivers—gives birth to—a new form of theater which it parallels with Attic tragedy. It is an epiphanic theater which reveals the truth behind the veil of appearances—the presence of the irrational, of “something” that exceeds human knowledge. It is a theater of unveiling, which demands that the spectators let go of their previous certainties and see differently, with “unseeing eyes.” It is indeed no coincidence that the inaugural stage direction, so uncharacteristically written in the first person, should be literally obsessed with curtains:

Before I had finished this play I saw that its subject-matter might make it unsuited for the public stage in England or in Ireland. 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 studio or drawing-room like my dance plays, or at the Peacock Theatre before a specially chosen audience. If it is played at the Peacock Theatre the Musicians may sing the opening and closing songs, as they *pull apart or pull together the proscenium curtain*; the whole stage may be *hung with curtains* with an opening at the left [...] (CW2 481; my emphasis).

At one level, of course, this passage uniquely conveys the playwright's deep personal involvement with the practical details of the performance as he envisions it, as he says, “in the mind's eye,” paraphrasing the opening lyric of *At the Hawk's Well*. At another level, the highly specific stage direction comments proleptically on the subject matter of the play itself: the emergence of a modernist theater of unveiling which replicates the gesture of Attic tragedy according to the Nietzschean narrative, pulling aside the veil of appearance to reveal “the eternal primal pain, the only ground of the world.”<sup>12</sup> As Yeats points out in his 1935 note to the play, this traumatic unveiling is understood as “a violent shock” (CW2 726), dramatized by the Greek's scream of terror: a shock which will deeply unsettle the spectators spiritually as well as intellectually, and ask of them that they leave behind everything they thought they knew.

The end of the play is fraught with multiple ironies. After the fleeting apparition of Christ who walks silently through the stage and exits into the inner room, the Syrian once more describes what is happening there:

He is standing in the midst of them. Some are afraid. He looks at Peter and James and John. He smiles. He has parted the clothes at his side. He shows

them his side. There is a great wound there. Thomas has put his hand into the wound. He has put his hand where the heart is (CW2 492).

The end thus picks up again the device of *teichoscopia*, which has been associated throughout with the more pedestrian, common form of seeing (as opposed to the epiphanic vision experienced at the moment of Christ's apparition), and the epic mode again replaces the dramatic. The Syrian's narrative paraphrases the sanctioned narrative of the Scriptures, more specifically the episode of the incredulity of Thomas as reported in chapter 20 of the Gospel of John—an episode which is completely redundant in the play insofar as it replicates the staged epiphany of the doubting Greek only a few moments earlier. As Longuenesse comments, this speech, as well as the Greek's subsequent rather obscure quotation of Heraclitus, are "somewhat explanatory and unnecessary."<sup>13</sup> This anticlimactic ending perhaps makes the point that true epiphanic vision "with unseeing eyes" can only be achieved fleetingly; the effort it demands, of shedding all of one's preconceptions and certainties, cannot be sustained for longer than a few moments.

The final lyric introduces yet another change of perspective, and casts Christ's fleeting apparition in the distant past:

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 (CW2 492).

From the vantage point of the Musicians, singing in the present moment of the performance, the advent of Christianity is a given: it happened in the past and changed the existing structure of knowledge, for better for worse. In its original version the play ended here, but Yeats added another stanza to the 1931 version:

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 (CW2 492).

The second stanza changes tack again. Written in plodding iambic tetrameters in the gnomic present of proverbial truth, it sets out to make the rather hackneyed point of the fleetingness of all human enterprise. The final couplet, however, jolts us back into attention with its vibrant image of the flaming torch sustained by the sacrificial burning of “man’s own heart”: another modality of apparition, of dazzling light tearing through the nightly veil of cliché and illusion.

### NOTES

- 1 The play was first published in *The Adelphi* in 1927, and then in a revised form in *Stories of Michael Robartes and his Friends* in 1931. It was first performed in 1934 at the Abbey Theatre in a production by Lennox Robinson. It was published in W. B. Yeats, *Wheels and Butterflies* (London: MacMillan, 1934).
- 2 Pierre Longuenesse, *Yeats dramaturge. La voix et ses masques* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012), 247.
- 3 Helen Vendler, *Yeats’s Vision and the Later Plays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 170.
- 4 Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 337. Quoted in Charles I. Armstrong, *Reframing Yeats. Genre, Allusion and History* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 68.
- 5 Armstrong, *Reframing Yeats*, 73.
- 6 Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 261.
- 7 See for instance Peter Ure, “Yeats’s Christian Mystery Plays,” *The Review of English Studies* 11, no. 42 (May 1960): 171–82; Terence Brown, “W. B. Yeats and Rituals of Performance,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, ed. Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 85. However, in his article “The Intellectual on the Stage,” Tom Kilroy distances himself from this critical tradition: “If this were a play by Shaw we would have been offered a triangular debate between the three figures, on the nature of progress, perhaps, or on what constitutes the exceptional individual, the kind of person who makes a significant contribution to the evolution of the species. While Yeats’s play is also highly verbal, it goes beyond language to ritual.” Kilroy, “The Intellectual on Stage,” *Irish Pages* 7, no. 2 (2013): 97–106, 104. My essay seeks to follow in the tracks of such a reading.
- 8 W. B. Yeats to Olivia Shakespear (December 27, 1930, *CL Intelix* 5428: “At the moment I am putting the last touches to a play called “The Resurrection”—young men talking [to] the Apostles in the next room overwhelmed by the crucifixion Christ newly arisen passes silently through. I wrote a chaotic dialogue on this theme some years ago. But now I have dramatic tension thought out.”
- 9 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, eds. Raimond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 28. My emphasis.
- 10 For a detailed reading of Nietzschean echoes in *The Resurrection* see Otto Bohlmann, *Yeats and Nietzsche: An Exploration of Major Nietzschean Echoes in the Writings of William Butler Yeats* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), 104–06.
- 11 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 40.
- 12 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 26.
- 13 Longuenesse, *Yeats dramaturge*, 316. My translation.