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Christopher Morash

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THE PROBLEM OF *THE HERNE'S EGG*: YEATS, THEATRE, AND MATERIALITY

Christopher Morash

We can begin by observing the obvious: *The Herne's Egg* is a problematic piece of theater. When it was first published in 1938, the best that the poet Austin Clarke could muster was that “it seems to me that Mr. Yeats succeeds merely in parodying himself unpleasantly.”¹ It has been dismissed or excused by critics from Helen Vendler back in 1963 (who called it “a rather arid and contrived piece of theatrical writing”²) to Alison Armstrong in her apologetic introduction to the Cornell Manuscript Materials edition in 1993 (who diplomatically calls it Yeats’s “least understood and least appreciated dramatic work”). “To those who do not delve into the play’s subtle and very Yeatsian message,” she adds, “the superficial aspects of this philosophic farce seem quite strange, even shocking.”³ Eighty-odd years on, *The Herne's Egg* is still a kind of limit case, the evidence you would adduce if you wanted to argue that Yeats really did not know what he was doing in the theater. Consequently, it is also the play we must confront if we are to take him seriously as a theater-maker.

It does not take much to remind ourselves why *The Herne's Egg* has provoked such puzzled responses. This is a play in which, as Yeats wrote to Dorothy Wellesley in late 1935, “one of the characters is a donkey, represented by a toy donkey with wheels but life size” (L 846). It is also a play where there are characters with names such as Congal and Aedh, who may fit nicely into the narrative of Yeats as the playwright of Irish mythology, but they jostle along with Mike, Paddy, James, and Kate, who clearly are not legendary. Even the priestess of the unseen Great Herne, Attracta, has a servant improbably named Corney. And when Congal kills Aedh with a table leg and the dying Aedh begrudgingly alleges he practiced (with a table leg?) to become “perfect master with the weapon” (VPI 1025), we are clearly not in the heroic age. This is also a play that ends with the sound of two donkeys copulating in a field, and the promise that Congal, King of Connaught, having been killed by a Fool with cooking implements, is now going to be reincarnated as a donkey. We might be tempted here, if we wanted to recuperate the play’s reputation, to trace a lineage in Yeats’s theater through the various Fools who defeat kings, from the chicken-stealing Fool in *On Baile's Strand* to the Fool who kills Cuchulain in *The Death of Cuchulain*. At the same time, being killed—even “symbolically”

(VPL 1038), as the stage directions insist—with a kitchen spit seems like a step too far in testing the possibilities of an heroic existence in an unheroic world.

One explanation for the insistent strangeness of *The Herne's Egg* is that by the mid-1930s Yeats had been speaking his personal symbolic language for so long it was as if he thought of it as a common parlance—much to the mystification of the rest of the world. This approach to *The Herne's Egg* was established early in attempts to make sense of the play, notably in F. A. C. Wilson's *W. B. Yeats and Tradition* from 1958 (to which I will return), which takes as its starting point the proposition that “the play is quite unapproachable without a knowledge of the whole body of Yeats's symbolism.”⁴ However, we find a version of this approach in 2010 in Michael McAteer's reading of the play's symbolism, in which he claims that the Herne is an “esoteric image of a collective libidinal energy in mass civilisation.”⁵ And, indeed, it is certainly the case that a book such as Nicholas Grene's *Yeats's Poetic Codes* is extremely useful to have to hand when trying to make sense of *The Herne's Egg*, in that we are reminded that Yeats's symbols often had very long roots. In the case of *The Herne's Egg*, even if we stick with his plays, there are herons (or “hernes,” Yeats preferring the archaic term) as far back as *The Island of Statues* (VPL 1228, 1253) from 1885, and they flap their way through *The Countess Cathleen* (VPL 157), *Where There is Nothing* (VPL 1145) and turn up inscribed upon the shield of Diarmuid in *Diarmuid and Grania* by Yeats and George Moore in 1901 (VPL 1221). By the time he writes *Calvary* in 1920, with its choral refrain, “God had not died for the white heron” (VPL 780–1), Yeats is able to explain the symbol with some precision: “As I see them, lonely birds as the heron, hawk, eagle, and swan are natural symbols of subjectivity” (VPL 789). We can make the symbol even more precise, as Grene shows us, by turning to Yeats's poetry, where swans are much more likely to be mated and found in groups (making them more objective, in Yeats's taxonomy), whereas the heron is always solitary (and hence subjective). Once we have resolved the symbol in terms of Yeats's understanding of subjectivity and objectivity, the gyres of *A Vision* start to spin, and a reading of *The Herne's Egg* appears to unfold itself. And yet, if we are to project this on to a play in performance, we may still find ourselves wondering what all of this has to do with toy donkeys, battles fought with table legs, or assassinations with roasting spits.

Part of the problem here is that while we have long recognized that the mature Yeats was writing within his own complex and idiosyncratic system of symbolic imagery, it was also the case that he was working within his own equally idiosyncratic understanding of theatrical genre, which had coalesced for him earlier in the century. In some respects, Yeats's particular understanding of theatrical genre is not unlike his use of symbolic language. Ideas take shape early, and over time terminology that appears to draw upon recognizable

sources turns out to be anything but conventional in Yeats's use. So, just as he was refining images like the white heron in his early work to map on to his own increasingly distinctive notion of subjectivity, over the course of an intense decade of workshopping plays from about 1900 onward, Yeats developed his own theories of tragedy, comedy, and farce. As with the image of the heron, or, indeed, the idea of subjectivity, the terms here seem familiar, but Yeats uses them in very precise, and very idiosyncratic, ways. There is not space here to explore his understanding of tragedy, comedy, and farce, although I have done so elsewhere;⁶ however, suffice it to say that when considering *The Herne's Egg*, the most germane of the three is farce.

As is usually the case with Yeats's use of language, his use of the term "farce" is not completely eccentric here. Summing up the permutations of farce in the theater from Aristophanes to Ionesco, Patrice Pavis, in his *Dictionary of the Theatre*, maintains that "farce owes its long-lasting popularity to its intense theatricality, its attention to stage mechanisms, and elaborate body techniques for actors," later calling it "the triumph of the body."⁷ Likewise, perhaps the closest we get to a simple definition of Yeatsian farce can be found in the 1909 diary that he later published as "Estrangement." "Tragedy is passion alone, and rejecting character, it gets form from motives," he writes. "Comedy is the clash of character. Eliminate character from comedy and you get farce. Farce is bound together by incident alone" (CW3 348). While there is considerably more to it than this, for the sake of the current argument we can sum up Yeats's understanding of farce by saying that in Yeatsian farce, the play is driven by a pure, unreflexive hunger, which in turn produces actions in a material world of objects. The term first emerges in his writing around the time he is working on *The Green Helmet*, which he calls "an heroic farce." In that play, Yeats invests an object—the helmet of the title—with so much dramatic significance that the audience is left wondering to what extent the helmet is not something more than simply a piece of metal headwear. In the case of *The Green Helmet*, not having the resources to produce elaborate stage effects, Yeats resorted to color to produce the kind of "intense theatricality" (to borrow Pavis's term) through which farce insists upon its own irreducible materiality. "At the Abbey Theatre" Yeats writes in his stage directions, "the house is orange-red and the chairs and table and flagons are black, with a slight purple tinge which is not clearly distinguishable from black. The rocks are black with green touches. The sea is green and luminous, and all the characters except the Red Man and the Black Men are dressed in various shades of green" (VPI 421). Likewise, he would claim in his notes to *The Player Queen* that after laboring on draft after draft of the play as a verse tragedy, it was not until "I turned it into a farce" (VPI 761) that it fell into shape, and it became a play about theatricality itself, with its central character an actor, and a narrative arc in which appearance becomes the

play's reality. What is more, Yeats would seem to have had *The Player Queen* in mind when he was at work on *The Herne's Egg*, reporting to Dorothy Wellesley on November 28, 1935, that his new play was "as wild a play as *The Player Queen*, as amusing but more tragedy and philosophic depth" (L 843).

It may be that, toward the end of his life, Yeats was still working through the experience he would recall in the early 1920s, in "The Trembling of the Veil," of seeing Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in Paris in 1896, to which he would describe his response in these terms: "Feeling bound to support the most spirited party, we have shouted for the play, but that night at the Hôtel Corneille I am very sad, for comedy, objectivity, has displayed its growing power once more" (CW3 266). On Jarry's stage, however, there were no gods in the wings; there were only Pa Ubu and Ma Ubu, roaring around a stage that represents nothing other than the theater itself. In *Ubu Roi*, the world of the stage is the only world that there is, in all of its chaos and absurdity. "The players are supposed to be dolls, toys, marionettes, and now they are all hopping like wooden frogs, and I can see for myself that the chief personage, who is some kind of King, carries for a sceptre a brush of the kind that we use to clean a closet"(CW3 266). The Yeats who recalled this in "The Trembling of the Veil" seems both fascinated and appalled. Indeed, Michael McAteer has made the argument that we can trace the impact of *Ubu Roi* in both *The Green Helmet* and *The Player Queen*, suggesting that Yeats's plays were "often concerned with disturbing audience expectations regarding the nature of drama itself, and while he never went as far as the full-blown anarchy of *Ubu Roi*, he certainly travelled significantly in that direction."⁸ We might extend that argument to suggest that a king with a toilet brush for a scepter is a near cousin to a king whose weapon of choice is a table leg, or who meets his end on a kitchen spit.

If Yeatsian farce is a genre that insists on the irreducible materiality of bodies and things, what makes *The Herne's Egg* particularly troubling is that the bodily act around which the plot hinges is a rape. This brings us into very problematic territory indeed. We might draw a comparison here with "Leda and the Swan," in which the use of rape as part of its symbolic language has taxed the powers of more than one generation of Yeats scholars. Over the years, readings of "Leda and the Swan" have often fallen back on the sanction of the original classical source, aided by a certain solace of good form offered by the poem's tightly-crafted poetic structure as a sonnet. Of course, against this there is the counterargument that more highly burnished the aesthetic gloss, the more duplicitous the alibi. This is a debate in Yeats scholarship that goes back more or less to when the poem first appeared in the journal *To-morrow* in 1924, when its place of publication situated the poem as a calculated tilt against post-Independence moves toward literary censorship. In that initial publication, it was the poem's sexual explicitness—as opposed to its sexual violence—that

mattered. As we might expect that perspective has changed over time. So, for instance, in Elizabeth Butler Cullingford's *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* in 1993, she concludes that "Leda and the Swan" demonstrates what happens when a writer cares more about using explicitly sexual situations as a strategy for challenging censorship than with the implications of that strategy for women, who are both the subjects of and subject to the power of his imagination."⁹ Something similar can be seen in Declan Kiberd's postcolonial reading of the poem. After suggesting that Zeus in the poem may function as an allegory for a colonizing power, and Leda as a figure of the colonized who "put[s] on his knowledge with his power" (*VP* 441), Kiberd ends by noting that even while the poem supports such a reading, we are still left with "the puzzled poet with his final, rather voyeuristic, query."¹⁰ In both readings, the insistence of rape as a horrific physical reality persists as an excess, refusing signification or aestheticization. We should not find it surprising, then, in light of the accumulation of such uneasy readings over several decades, that an educationalist such as Guy Cook, in his 2021 essay "#Ledatoo: The Morality of *Leda and the Swan* in Teaching Stylistics," might ask if the poem's central image is no longer available to us as a symbol.¹¹

Asking this question can return us to the function of shock in the aesthetics of modernism. Instead of imagining tightly-buttoned priests and nuns covering their eyes before, say, *Un Chien Andalou* or Picasso's *Guernica* (which only serves to produce a consoling sense of our own moral superiority), it may be that to recover the force of shock as an affect in modernism, we need to imagine our own deeply-held moral values being subjected to the same assault. At one level, this is what both "Leda and the Swan" and *The Herne's Egg* force us to do. Indeed, to an even greater extent than the poem, *The Herne's Egg* leaves us with even less scope for readings that would account for rape in terms of classical allusion, poetic form, or allegory; that excess, which is the residue of shock, leaves an even greater stain in the play than it does in the poem.

It is certainly the case that Yeats does not make any attempt to mask with language what is to happen to Attracta. Consider the passage in which King Congal, having demanded an egg from the Great Herne, and having been given a hen's egg instead, declares that he and six of his men will rape Attracta, the priestess who is the "bride of the Great Herne":

[...] We seven must in the name of the law
 Handle, penetrate, and possess her,
 And thereby do her good,
 By melting out the virgin snow,
 And that snow image, the Great Herne. (*VPI* 1028)

The verbs here are direct and remorseless: “handle, penetrate, and possess.” What is more, Yeats’s manuscripts show him crafting this passage so as to strip poetic euphemism from the act of sexual violence. In an earlier draft, now in the National Library of Ireland, it is not Congal, but the character of Mike who decrees what shall happen:

Seve Seven – Seven men

(He begins to count, seeming to strike the table with a table legg. leg & table do not meet. The blow is represented by the sound of a drum)

One. Two. Three. Four

Men

Five. Six. Seven. ~~Seven men~~

Means that we seven in the name of the law

Must handle handle

Handle

It—Kiss; penetrate & possess her.¹²

Watching Yeats at work, we see him first writing the word “handle,” scratching it out a few times, then trying out the euphemistic “kiss,” before crossing it out and settling on the more graphic “handle, penetrate, and possess.” In the writing, the passage becomes more explicit, and hence more tied to the physical, not less. It is not for nothing that Michael McAteer would write in 2010 that “the rape of *Attracta* seems the most disturbing moment in the entire corpus of Yeats’s [theater] work, perhaps even more disturbing than the murder of the young boy in *Purgatory*.”¹³

There can be little doubt that if Yeats was trying to make *The Herne’s Egg* shocking, he was at least successful in his own lifetime. When the Abbey Board considered staging the play in 1936, the government representative, Richard Hayes, declared that he would resign if it were staged. The theater’s director, the famously philistine Ernest Blythe, only supported the idea of a production, according to Frank O’Connor, on the grounds that “it was so obscure that no one would notice that it was obscene.”¹⁴ Ultimately, however, it was shelved. For his part, Yeats was relieved. “I am no longer fit for riots,” he wrote to Dorothy Wellesley, “& I thought a bad riot almost certain” (*CL IntelLex* 6746). It would not be until Austin Clarke’s Lyric Theatre (not to be confused with the Lyric Theatre in Belfast) staged the play at the Abbey on October 29, 1950, that *The Herne’s Egg* was finally performed, in a production designed by Anne Yeats. The play “abounds in the crude earthiness of pre-historic Ireland,” the *Irish Times* told its readers, choosing its words carefully. The review makes particular reference to the challenges that its “robustness” posed for the actor playing *Attracta*, Eithne Dunne, who “gave us a performance remarkably controlled, skillfully modulated to overcome the difficulties with which the part prickles.”¹⁵

The subsequent Irish production history of *The Herne's Egg* can be read as a kind of barometer for the country's changing attitudes to sexuality and sexual violence. When the play was finally staged by the Abbey, under Jim Fitzgerald's direction at the Peacock for the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1973, *Irish Times* theater critic David Nowlan described it (in unlikely terms) as "a lively lovely production."¹⁶ Likewise, a subsequent staging by the Renaissance Theatre Company at the Damer Hall in 1986 was described in the same newspaper as "a thoroughly engaging fifty minute show with lunch served afterwards."¹⁷ To put this in context, this was in the same venue (in the same year) that Sebastian Barry and Operating Theatre staged *The Pentagonal Dream*, with Olwen Fouère, a play about toxic male sexuality that would also test attitudes to sexual violence.¹⁸ For a play designed to shock, what is today most striking about these reviews of *The Herne's Egg* is how blasé they are about a play whose central action is a gang rape. For anyone who has lived in Ireland in the closing decades of the last century, this will be a familiar stance, the eye-rolling disbelief that Ireland a generation or so earlier could have been so benighted to have been made uncomfortable by a play that uses shock as an aesthetic effect, and in that stance, missing the point of the original shock.

At the same time, we might also note that reviewers considered both the 1973 and 1986 productions of *The Herne's Egg* to have worked at a theatrical level (with or without lunch). Here, it may be, we are seeing a genuine diminution of shock. This light smattering of performances in the 1970s and 1980s aside, the Irish theater has largely steered clear of *The Herne's Egg* for much of its existence, in spite of Katharine Worth's claims that the play's wildly clashing stylistic palette needs to be understood as a sign of the "confidence and freedom"¹⁹ of Yeats's late style. So, too, have Yeats scholars largely avoided the play—again, with some notable exceptions, such as McAteer and Worth. For instance, what was for many years the standard work on Yeats's theater, James Flannery's *W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre*, contents itself with a brief summary and a few passing mentions of *The Herne's Egg* in the context of dance plays. Flannery's treatment is not atypical of other studies of Yeats's plays over the years, which tend to skip over *The Herne's Egg* as quickly as is decently possible. Even Harold Bloom handles it somewhat distastefully, calling it "unequivocally rancid."²⁰ In fact, if you want a reading of *The Herne's Egg* that generates anything like interpretative enthusiasm (other than those by McAteer, Worth, and Im), you have to go back more than sixty-five years to 1958, to that strange but enduring book by F. A. C. Wilson, *Yeats and Tradition*, which devotes almost an entire chapter to the play. I say "strange" because there is a feature of Wilson's book that opens up the problem of *The Herne's Egg* from an unexpected perspective.

In his preface to *Yeats and Tradition*, Wilson thanks various people he knew in Cambridge when he was writing the book in the 1950s, particularly Kathleen

Raine, for whom he credits “many talks on traditional religious symbolism,” and for her wisdom and friendship “based as it is upon that perennial philosophy by which we both live.”²¹ It is the throw-away phrase “by which we both live” that opens up the problem at hand. Back in 1958, the phrase “perennial philosophy” would have pointed most readers to Aldous Huxley’s 1946 book, *The Perennial Philosophy*. Huxley’s book (which is largely an anthology of spiritual writings, with his own annotations), was responsible for popularizing the idea of a syncretic, universalist theology, based on the supposition that all of the world’s religions (and, indeed, many folk traditions), not only shared the same root, but effectively told the same story, over and over again—perennially, as it were. This is, writes Huxley, “a metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds.” So, while any one religion can be seen as an attempt to find a language for this reality (or “Reality,” with a capital “R”), the “divine Reality” itself is something that can only be understood through “direct spiritual knowledge.” “The self-validating certainty of direct awareness cannot in the very nature of things be achieved except by those equipped with the ‘moral astrolabe of God’s mysteries,’” he writes. The best the rest of us can hope for “in the field of metaphysics” is to read the works of those who were “capable of a more than merely human kind and amount of knowledge.”²²

If Wilson credits his understanding of this perennial philosophy to his conversations with Kathleen Raine, he would be only one of many to whom Raine would evangelize her beliefs throughout her long life, not least in her role in the founding of the Temenos Academy in 1991 (which attracted the patronage of the then-Prince Charles, and which continues to teach courses in perennial philosophy). A skeptic might be tempted to observe that an elite group in post-World War II Britain choosing to believe that all of the world’s major religions could be accommodated by a set of tenets that would not have been out of place in a bookish Anglican rectory might be seen as a spiritual form of imperial hangover. And yet, writing about Yeats from this position of belief does produce some interesting results. As recently as 1999, in *W.B. Yeats and the Learning of the Imagination* Raine confronted, with more than a hint of frustration, what she saw as the core problem with Yeats scholarship:

Academia seems to understand Yeats no better now than did Yeats’s contemporaries of the ‘thirties. The Universities, having replaced new criticism, Marxism, behaviourism, existentialism, and the rest with minimalism, post-modernism, feminism, deconstructionism, political correctness and whatever other “original” theories ingenious ignorance is able to generate seem to understand Yeats not a whit better, for the premises remain unchanged—materialism remains an unquestioned orthodoxy.

She goes on to suggest that postcolonial readings of Yeats and Irish nationalism (at that point still in their first flush of critical ascendancy), or biographical work that traces his “meetings with literary or political colleagues” (the first volume of Foster’s biography had just appeared), all overlook, or fail to take seriously, her view that Yeats’s work “rests on other premises, for which not matter but mind, spirit, Imagination, is the living ground.”²³ In short, for Raine, the biggest obstacle to understanding Yeats is a critical bias toward materialism.

Now, it is easy to dismiss this sort of thing, and Wilson is probably who Bloom has in mind when he writes that “of the excesses of less balanced doctrinal exegetes, I will not speak.”²⁴ At the same time, there is a sting to Raine’s point. There is, after all, a certain logic in saying that if—as has long been well established—Yeats took seriously the existence of a metaphysical reality (or even “realities”), then maybe the fundamentally materialist formation of literary critics and scholars of all stripes and generations has led us to ask the wrong questions. It is an unsettling thought. What gives even more point to Raine’s jab is that back in 1958, Wilson’s perennial philosophy allowed him to launch into an assured and relatively coherent explanation of a play that so many others found utterly baffling, ridiculous, or simply an inept mess. He admits that *The Herne’s Egg* is a “difficult play,” because “it does not yield its full meaning to the reader who goes to it without a knowledge of philosophy.”²⁵ For Wilson, *The Herne’s Egg* is unlocked when we understand that it was written at a point where Yeats had turned from “Platonism to Pythagoras and the Upanishads, from the abstract to the concrete.” What is more, we know that Yeats was in fact working on his translation of the *Upanishads* as he was writing *The Herne’s Egg*,²⁶ telling Dorothy Wellesley on December 16, 1935, that “Shri Purohit Swami is with me, and the play is his philosophy in a fable, or mine confirmed by him” (L 844).

Once you accept this, says Wilson, it is just a matter of reading the symbolic language. The “Herne is divine Selfhood [...] of which each individual Self constitutes a part.” Congal “represents pride in the Self or if we prefer it [...] ‘energy.’” Once we know this, Wilson writes, “the meaning is clear: energy, proceeding from the Self, is always beautiful, and misdirected energy is not less beautiful in that is also tragic. ‘Everything that lives is holy.’ This,” he writes, “is made clear in the scene after Attracta’s rape.”²⁷ At this point, it would be all too easy to set up this seventy-odd-year-old piece of criticism as a kind strawman, particularly given the ease with which it seems able to accommodate rape into a symbolic system. What is more, as Yeeyon Im has shown in a 2020 essay, it is possible to challenge Wilson on his own ground, arguing that the kind of one-to-one symbolic correspondence that he wants to see between the play and the *Upanishads* is misleading, and that “direct application of Hindu concepts to the play can generate more confusion than clarification, for there exists a

gap between Yeats's understanding of the Self and that of orthodox Vedantic philosophy."²⁸ At the same time, it is difficult to ignore that a writer who claimed to "live by" the "perennial philosophy is able to produce a reading so coherent and assured—at least on its own terms.

The real value of Wilson's book today may be not whether he was right or wrong, but in its sheer strangeness from the perspective of contemporary critical practice. Put simply, it is difficult to imagine anyone writing a book like this today. In an essay published in *ELH* in 2019, "Important Nonsense: Yeats and Symbolism," David Dwan puts the issue succinctly: "We may no longer inhabit the problem of the symbol because we no longer entertain the metaphysical picture from which it derives," he writes, "but this postmetaphysical position is a highly questionable form of enlightenment if it neutralizes our ability to grasp basic literary concepts. We will certainly find it difficult to grasp Yeats."²⁹ Writing along the same lines the previous year, Catherine E. Paul (no doubt on foot of having coedited an edition of the 1937 version of *A Vision*), published an essay in the *Yeats Annual* entitled "W.B. Yeats and the Problem of Belief." "In studying Yeats's long exploration of the realms of magic, mythical beings, and communication with spirits," she admits, "[we ...] must take very seriously the province of the supernatural—a province with which modern scholarship, like empirical science, is deeply uncomfortable."³⁰

There is an important distinction to be drawn here, however, between Wilson in 1958 (and, indeed, Raine in 1999), for whom "living by" a perennial philosophy is a precondition for reading Yeats, and Dwan and Paul in more recent years, who argue for acknowledgment of the metaphysical underpinnings of Yeats's work, while at the same time not advocating that we need to become card-carrying adepts. If we want succinct articulation of this distinction, we can go back before Wilson to that most sensible of critics, Northrop Frye (himself an ordained clergyman), who in 1946, in an essay entitled "Yeats and the Language of Symbolism" makes one of those logical cases that continue to make him so useful: "A set of symbolic conventions differs from a symbolic system, such as a religion or a metaphysic," he writes, "in being concerned, not with a content, but with a mode of apprehension. Religions, philosophies, and other symbolic systems are as a rule presented as doctrine; poetic symbolism is a language." We can learn the language, he reminds us, without accepting everything that can be said in that language. Or, as he puts it, "we can learn French without being converted to any Frenchman's views."³¹

What strikes me about the work of David Dwan and Catherine Paul (and, indeed, of Northrop Frye so many years earlier), is that they point the way to a third position, one that involves neither doctrine nor critique, crediting the space that a metaphysic might produce, insisting neither that we need to occupy

it, nor, conversely, that we need to argue it out of existence. This third stance can be located in what people like Simon During are calling “postcritique,” drawing on Bruno Latour’s question: “Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” “My question is simple,” says Latour. “Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction?”³² Or, as Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick once remarked, “To apply a hermeneutics of suspicion is, I believe, widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities.”³³ My question, then, is: How do we read Yeats’s symbolic language in a way that is neither a materialist critique of metaphysics per se, nor, at the other extreme, an evangelical call to endorse something like the “perennial philosophy,” or a New Age embrace of mysticism. And that question, it seems to me, lies at the heart of the real problem of *The Herne’s Egg*.

Perversely enough, *The Herne’s Egg* forces us to confront this choice through its insistent materiality. This begins with the stage itself. When he was drafting *The Herne’s Egg*, the physical stage took shape for Yeats relatively early in the process, and the first thing in his earliest manuscript is not simply a description of the stage, but a prescription for a mode of representation that foregrounds the theatricality of the stage: “MIST AND ROCKS; HIGH UP ON A BACKCLOTH A ROCK, ITS BASE HIDDEN IN MIST: ON THIS ROCK STANDS A GREAT HERNE. ALL SHOULD BE SUGGESTED, NOT PAINTED REALISTICALLY.”³⁴ This is in keeping with the theory of nonrepresentational stage design that Yeats had first articulated almost forty years earlier. “My own theory of poetical, or legendary drama, is that it should have no realistic or elaborate, but only a symbolic & decorative setting,” Yeats wrote to Fiona McLeod [William Sharp] in January of 1897. “A forest for instance should be represented by a forest pattern not by a forest painting” (CL2 73–74). For Yeats, this power to suggest (rather than to show) was what constituted theatricality, and the kind of overt, self-conscious theatricality mentioned earlier in relation to *The Green Helmet* is the logical development of that. By the time he wrote “The Tragic Theatre” in 1910, he is able to state his visual aesthetic with some precision. “If the real world is not altogether rejected, it is but touched here and there, and into the places we have left empty we summon rhythm, balance, pattern, images that remind us of vast passions, the vagueness of past times, all the chimeras that haunt the edge of trance” (CW4 177). The language here, with its “vague passions” and “chimeras,” is actually more precise, and, indeed, more prescriptive, than it sounds, for it is predicated upon a relationship between the physical elements of performance (“rhythm, balance, pattern, images”) and their affect. By the time he reaches *The Herne’s Egg*, Yeats is pushing the self-conscious theatricality of his materials to their limits. This reaches a kind of

apogee in the play's final scene: "A mountain top, the moon has just risen; the moon of comic tradition, a round smiling face" (VPI 1034). At this point, what the audience sees is not simply the moon, or the idea of the moon; they see theatricality in all of its ineluctable materiality.

In order to understand how this insistent materiality operates in *The Herne's Egg*, we can turn from the visual to the aural, and listen to what Pierre Longuenesse has called the "acousmatique" in Yeats's theater. For Longuenesse, the acousmatique is "a sound that one hears without detecting the causes." On stage, he argues, this produces the effect of an absent presence: that which is there-and-not-there, which Longuenesse situates in relation to Derrida's concept of spectrality.³⁵ Although Longuenesse does not discuss *The Herne's Egg* at any length directly in *Yeats dramaturge: La voix et ses masques*, the principle of the acousmatique can help us to understand the insistent theatricality of *The Herne's Egg*. In the play's opening moments, during the combat between Congal, King of Connaught, and Aedh, King of Tara, the stage directions are precise: "The men move rhythmically as if in a dance; when shields approach one another, cymbals clash; when swords and shields approach drums boom" (VPI 1012). In short, from the opening moments of the play, the apparent source of a sound and its actual source are separated. However, the effect of this is quite different both from having a character clash a sword against a shield to produce a sound that is an element embedded in the fictional world of the play, and from hearing the sound offstage, so that it intimates an uncanny, unseen source. Instead, the effect here is a kind of antispectrality, in which the separation of sound and source in plain sight foregrounds the theatrical materiality of both: the swords and shields are just props, and the sounds just something produced by a musician or a stage hand standing in the wings. Yeats deploys the same device in the scene in which a table leg is beaten upon a table to sound out the number seven (the number of the men who will assault Attracta). The stage directions are quite clear that "table and table-leg must not meet, the blow is represented by the sound of the drum" (VPI 1027). In both instances—the battle and the counting—the device of separating sound and source is present in Yeats's earliest drafts,³⁶ suggesting that it is a foundational idea for the play, not something that developed as he came to imagine a production more fully. What is more, it could be argued that these moments of this inverse acousmatique are preparing the two uses of unseen sound to which the play is building: the final braying of a donkey, which signals Congal's punishment, being reincarnated as a donkey, and before that, the voice of the Great Herne as a peal of thunder.

The argument here becomes a bit more complex: on one hand, by the time we hear the offstage donkey at the play's end, we have had before us the insistent visual image of the large toy donkey, producing something of that same self-conscious theatricality of the sounds separated from their causes that

we encounter in the opening battle. The voice of the donkey may be unseen, but it has a visual referent that foregrounds its own material theatricality. The voice of the thunder, however, is different. While there is an image of the heron suggested on the backcloth, the disjunction between image and sound here is of a different order. Here, we are back in the territory of the *acousmatique* as the site of a spectral absent presence: or, to put it another way, we are in the presence of “dark matter.” This term comes from Andrew Sofer, who develops the idea in *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, Performance*. Predicted on a metaphor taken from physics “translated into theatrical terms,” Sofer suggests that we can use the term “dark matter” to refer “to the invisible dimension of theater that escape visual detection, even though its effects are felt everywhere in performance. If theater necessarily traffics in corporeal stuff [...], it also incorporates the incorporeal: offstage spaces and actions, absent characters, the narrated past, hallucination, blindness, obscenity, godhead, and so on.” To put it simply, “Dark matter’s presence observably distorts the visible through its gravitational effects.”³⁷ What makes this such a useful idea with regard to Yeats’s theater—and *The Herne’s Egg* in particular—is that dark matter allows us to think of the relationship between the visible and the invisible in performance as a dynamic one. It is not just that what Sofer calls “the corporeal stuff” produces the invisible; once produced, the invisible in turn exerts a gravitational pull on the visible world of the stage.

This is a powerful interpretative lens through which to understand *The Herne’s Egg*, and its relationship both to materiality and to metaphysics. From its strange opening battle dance to the appearance of the large toy donkey wheeled onstage in the second scene to the killing of Congal with a cooking spit, the grotesque stage world of *The Herne’s Egg* looks as if it is being distorted by some massive gravitational forcefield somewhere in the wings. What is particularly helpful about the concept of “dark matter” is that, like so much in modern physics, it has the shape of a metaphysic, but it remains firmly rooted in the materiality of the world—in this case, the world of the theater event itself.

The problem of *The Herne’s Egg*, then, revolves around the complex and conflicted nature of what is not seen. As theater, it hinges around the play’s central action, the rape of *Attracta*. Most accounts of the play proceed as if we are to understand that she is, in fact, raped by Congal and six of his soldiers. Although this happens offstage, and therefore in the realm of dark matter, it has, as we have seen, a horrifyingly vivid physicality. As an audience, no matter how we may feel obliged to make sense, this is the point at which shock overrides sense-making. And yet, no sooner has each man affirmed that the rape has taken place, then *Attracta* calls out to the Great Herne to “declare her pure,/ Pure as that beak and claw”; upon which the play once more deploys

the acousmatique; for no sooner have all of the men asserted that the rape took place, than there are a series of rolls of thunder, whereupon all of the men, except Congal, agree with Attracta that no rape took place. Only Congal insists, "I held you in my arms last night,/ We seven held you in our arms"; to which Attracta counters, "You were under the curse, in all/ You did, in all you seemed to do" (VPI 1032–33). The undecidability of the play rests in those ten words: "In all you did/ In all you seemed to do." The central action of the play is both viscerally, shockingly, real, and it exists in the realm of dark matter, both unseeable and unknowable.

Michael McAteer perhaps comes closest to what is taking place in *The Herne's Egg* when he observes that the play's "techniques constantly challenge the audience's perception that what is happening is real: swords and shields do not touch in battle; the fight at the banquet is carried out with the table legs; a cooking-pot is worn as a helmet and a wooden donkey appears on stage." However, I would differ with him when he suggests that *The Herne's Egg* is founded on a "deep ambivalence to mysticism; [...] it takes its audience's credulity in mystical symbolism as far as it can go, holding open the possibility that the entire process is built on delusion."³⁸ What we have in *The Herne's Egg*, I would counter, is not the suspicion of metaphysics that we have been trained as materialist critics to find, nor is it ambivalence, but rather, we have a performative metaphysics of unknowing, which produces the dark matter of unknowing experientially. *The Herne's Egg* needs its audience to be able to imagine the rape of Attracta in all of its horror, and to hold in the mind at the same time the opposite possibility, that there is an offstage, unseen force, the "Great Herne" who not only prevented it, but who will punish her would-be assailants: "I lay there in my bride-bed,/ His thunderbolt in my hand, /But gave them back, for he,/ [...] Shall give these seven that say/ That they upon me lay/ A most memorable punishment" (VPI 1032).

In this respect, the problem of *The Herne's Egg* boils down to a complex set of tensions between the nonpresent presence of the unseen, and the insistent materiality of the theatrical event, in all of its messy, but irrefutably present physicality. Here we might conclude with something Alain Badiou writes at the beginning of the second volume of *Being and Event*: "The materialist dialectic says: 'There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths.'"³⁹ Elsewhere, in "In Praise of Theatre," he develops this argument in relation to theater as one of the sites on which this exception—the event—might occur. "What true theater presents is not represented," he insists, "and the word 'representation' is misplaced. [...] All theatre is theatre of Ideas."⁴⁰ In Yeatsian farce, of which *The Herne's Egg* is perhaps the most developed instance, the material necessity of theatrical representation is pushed to the point at which it implodes, collapsing in on itself, leaving an untidy pile of objects, bodies

and sounds. "All that trouble, and nothing to show for it," says Corney at the curtain. "Nothing but just another donkey" (*VPl* 1040). And where there is nothing, as Yeats writes elsewhere, there is God; or, if "God" is too much of a stretch, at least the theatrical dark matter allows us to think what Alain Badiou has called "metaphysics without metaphysics."⁴¹ This might be an apt phrase through which to understand *The Herne's Egg*. In the end, the play leaves us not with the denial of metaphysics, but with the black hole in which it might reside, visible only by the piles of broken wreckage that surround it. First, however, we must credit its possibility. And therein lies the problem of *The Herne's Egg* for a materialist critical practice.

ENDNOTES

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- 3 Armstrong, "Introduction," xiii.
- 4 F. A. C. Wilson, *W.B. Yeats and Tradition* (London: Methuen, 1958), 101.
- 5 Michael McAteer, *Yeats and European Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 159.
- 6 For a fuller discussion of Yeats's distinctive, and idiosyncratic, understanding of tragedy and comedy, see Christopher Morash, *Yeats on Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 65–92.
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- 24 Bloom, *Yeats*, 422.
- 25 Wilson, *Yeats and Tradition*, 101.
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