n both *Plays for Dancers* (1921) and *Wheels and Butterflies* (1934), Yeats channels the figure of the dancer to embody the merger of the muse and the daemon, creating a character type who can simultaneously inspire and terrify. His use of the dancer figure creates one of the first presentations of dance within drama, which was destined to become one of the staples of musical theatre. Unlike drama, though, which relies almost completely on words and silences, “dance creates an immediacy of action that words can impede” (McMillan 140). The dancer figure is a representation of the hysteric, giving body, but not example, to the idea of a non-Symbolic theatrical character and suggesting a close proximity to the Real. The dancer figures are characters who are caught in the motions of their own drives or have reached a state of ultimate, willed separation from society. They are marked in the plays by their singular ability to move; thus, movement becomes the *sinthome*, or self-defining characteristic, of the dancer figure. The dancer figures, however, do not dance for themselves, but always dance in the service of an Other.

Yeats’s dancer figures exemplify the “missed” element of Yeats’s concept of Modern theatre. To recall chapter 1 of this book, the “missed” is the lack, or it is knowledge without truth. Lacan poses the question “What is truth without knowledge?” in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (36). He goes on to explain that the position of truth without knowledge does exist
in the form of the enigma, which he likens to the figure of the changeling or “a half body, with the risk of disappearing altogether once the solution has been found” (Other Side 36). The dancer is hyper-real, to forestall the inevitable overtaking of her truth by the knowledge of the figure for whom she dances.

She enacts the discourse of the hysteric as she dances. In the hysteric’s discourse, the hysterical figure positions herself in relation to the dominant position of the master’s discourse. According to Lacan, “It is around the symptom that the hysteric’s discourse is situated and ordered” (Other Side 37). It is important to remember that the symptom, not the sinthome, is the thing around which the hysteric situates herself. If the hysteric centered her energy on her own sinthome, she would be free, but as she is still marginally tied to the master, she chooses her symptom as her default position. Lacan goes on to explain, “If this place [the hysteric’s discourse] remains the same, and if in a particular discourse this place is that of the symptom, this will lead us to wonder whether the same place is that of the symptom when it is in use in another discourse” (Other Side 37). The site of the symptom or its staging is the dance itself. The dance, from that position, is able to suggest the position of the Real that Yeats does not fully allow to enter his plays. He prefers to suggest the Modern condition, which forecloses on the Real as it approaches in a pathetic version of self-punishment for the human condition, which is always split and unsettled.

(CONTRADICTIONS AND CONTINGENCIES)

The duality of daemon and muse, terror and inspiration, found in each dancer figure is a condensed embodiment of Yeats’s complex theories of drama. Three great dichotomies exist within Yeatsian drama. Yeats’s plays are plagued with the seeming contradiction between his affinity for aristocracy and coterie drama and his longing to create a national theatre built, at least partially, on Celtic peasant mythology. As Yeats’s plays demonstrate, however, Yeats does not perceive a contradiction between coterie and peasant drama. Yeats believed that the former peasant class was the aristocracy of mythic times; they were the people best able to embody Irish nationalism. Yeats feels that in his historical moment, members of the aristocracy are not best equipped to carry on the fight for nationalism, and he longs to merge contemporary characters and audience with peasant sensibilities.
Chapter Two

The second contradiction commonly identified in Yeats’s drama centers on the tenuous hierarchy of words and action. As Richard Ellman points out in his biography, *Yeats: The Man and the Mask*, “Yeats himself is a contradiction of reverie and action” (2). In his poem “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” Yeats most directly addresses this profound divide of character. The self is the earthbound, mask-wearing component of the human person who “is content to live it all again” (Finneran ed. ln. 57), whereas the soul, prefiguring the great question of “Among School Children,” states, “For the intellect no longer knows / Is from *Ought*, or *Knower* from the *Known*—” (Finneran ed. ln. 35–36). That “great question” is found in Yeats’s famous lines, “O body swayed to music / O brightening glance / How can we know the dancer from the dance?” McMillan explains that these lines resonate for all dance in theatre as “[t]he meaning of the dance is the dancer engaged in the dance” (141). The repetitive circularity of McMillan’s phrase is remarkable. It points to the whirling of the dancer figure as she creates a centrifuge, pulling in all surrounding elements to create one new one. All is equal to the dancer as she dances, just as the soul is unable to distinguish differences in connotation and possessions. The dead fuse together idiosyncratic differences because, to them, meaning is unimportant, yet that meaning remains significant to the living. While Yeats did not have Lacan’s terms, it is feasible to consider an equation between the dead soul and the Real character, as both are figures who cease to function in society. Despite the apparent differences in Yeats’s dramatic approaches between those plays he staged for the Abbey and those intended for drawing-room audiences, their essences are the same. Each play, regardless of form, is intended to function in the same fashion as Yeats’s landscapes; as Paul de Man in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* claims, the plays give a “pattern of motion . . . with a final drop into nothingness” (de Man 135). Whether stories of contemporaneous Irish nationalism, mythic reconfigurations, or religious allegories, all of Yeats’s dramas stage the instability and changes of state inspired by action, regardless of the actor involved. By making action primary, Yeats upholds Aristotle’s ancient *Poetics*, at least in this one respect.

The third seemingly unresolved difference found in Yeats’s dramatic body of work is one identified by Gordon Armstrong as “the failure of W. B. Yeats to develop a dramatic technique for dealing with dissociated phases of consciousness as they are, or can be, connected with normal experience” (136). Yeats, however, does not indicate this dissociation is a problem, because he makes no attempt to create a realistic drama that would require the explanation or justification of the “phases of consciousness” or the blurring of the lines between psychic registers. Yeats seems
to suggest that the only way to redeem oneself in the Modern world is to, in fact, eliminate these hard-lined distinctions. In his introduction to his collected plays, Yeats asserts that the very purpose of his drama is to rid the theatre of conventions. He states, “I wanted to get rid of the irrelevant movement, the stage must become still that the words might keep all their vividness and I wanted vivid words” (Collected Plays 23). This paring down that Yeats demands is an effort that removes false constructs or distinctions as they limit potential, but Yeats’s words create another problem. The reader wonders how a playwright who longs to eliminate movement writes his best works for dancers. If Yeats’s dancer figures are hysterical and they are governed by a symptom which they simultaneously want to embrace and escape, then they are both the silence and the word, the merger of all that sparkles and conveys non-Symbolic meaning.

Yeats’s dramatic characters are not fully developed psychological portraits, as are the characters of many of his Realist contemporaries such as Ibsen, O’Neil, or even Wilde. Instead, Yeats’s characters are reduced to one particular trait, equated with a specific goal. Such condensation increases the potency of each character’s actions and prefigures Lacan’s *sinthome*, or the uniary trait of the individual in the Real. For the dancer figures, that trait is the motion of the dance, which is the aim or the tract which the dancer figure’s drive takes. As Lacan states, “The satisfaction of the drive is reaching one’s Zielk, one’s aim” (Four Fundamental Concepts 165). That aim, or uniary trait, is the outcome of the subject’s self-directed thrust into her drive. The drive of the character, though, must not be confused with a goal or conclusive outcome. The drive is the sustained motion of the character’s physical and mental projections of the self. The formation of the *sinthome* allows each person, or character, the chance to project an image of self derived from the self. This *sinthomatic* creation, then, need not be tragic or even serious, but it can be quite playful and entertaining as in the manic elation that Lacan describes as being the tone of Joyce’s *sinthomatic* work, *Finnegans Wake*. Yeats’s *sinthomatic* characters, however, do not frequently display this potential amusing nature, although more of the figures in Beckett’s and Sondheim’s works do.

The hero and dancer figures of Yeats’s drama are exclusively defined by their self-instantiated relationship to one drive. For the Young Man of *At the Hawk’s Well*, it is achieving immortality by drinking from the well; for John Corbet of *Words upon the Window Pane*, it is proving or disproving the presence of the occult. The characters and their actions become Real because there is no subplot or history. The characters are hyperpresent and fixated on and in their drives. As David Richman reminds us in *Passionate
Action: Yeats’ Mastery of Drama, personality makes passion individual, but Yeats did not want the “intricacy and detail of ordinary life to limit characters” (36). The nuances of fully developed characters would trap the audience in the minutiae of daily life, reminiscent of the Symbolic, and thus limit the play’s transgressive potential.

Instead of the conventional nature of mimesis, Yeats’s plays lead to what he terms “tragic reverie.” This state or mood requires the loss of character-driven narrative, which is sacrificed to lyricism, according to John Rees Moore in *Masks of Love and Death: Yeats as Dramatist*. Moore terms the compression of personality in Yeats’s plays the building of a “master image” (9), which is again a direct correlation to Lacan’s *sinthome*. The usage of the term “master image” at first makes Yeats’s usage of the mask sound remarkably like Roberto Harari’s version of the Lacanian *sinthome*,¹ which states that the *sinthome* is a formulation of the psyche that makes up for the lacking phallus, or the master signifier, of the Symbolic order. Since Yeats does not believe in primary images or any one dominating, natural image, which using de Man’s definition “starts from the perception of an actual thing” (152), such an image would be too mimetic for Yeats’s plays or the version of the *sinthome* found within the plays. Instead of the image, according to de Man, the emblem is the most important characteristic of Yeats’s writing. The emblem is that which has “its meaning by a traditional and not by a natural right” (165) and is equated with the divine. In Yeats’s *A Vision*, each human being is endowed with the ability to be his own god figure or emblem that resembles Yeats’s “self-born” entity, a form akin to the *sinthome*. Thus, the Yeatsian *sinthome* is the result of the recognition that the phallus is unnecessary. A subject in the Symbolic believes the image of the phallus holds his psychic well-being together or binds the rings of the Borromean knot. Yeats’s dancer figures know that the phallus is a myth, and it is the *sinthome* which holds together the knot. The Yeatsian hero does not need a “master image” or individual beyond the self to help create his identity. Instead, the Yeatsian hero uses his internal modes of self-generation to formulate his presentation. He becomes his own daemon.

The donning of masks in many of Yeats’s plays, especially those deriving from the Japanese Noh tradition, helps simultaneously to eliminate idiosyncrasy, particularly of the actor himself, while creating a fiercely stylized character. James Flannery in *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* claims that “donning a mask . . . make[s] a virtue out of the war of ‘incompatibles’ that prevented ‘Unity of Being’” (13), but I would argue the opposite is cor-

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¹ See Harari’s *Lacan’s Seminar on “Anxiety”: An Introduction*. 
rect. The usage of masks removes the physical particularities of each actor playing the role, condensing the actor’s portrayal with the text’s lyric intent to achieve a being that is, in fact, made whole through the addition of a new artificial element.

The use of masks assists in another Yeatsian dramatic demand, his desire for “tragic pleasure,” which merges disparate elements of performance and character on the stage. By condensing and reducing physical attributes into the mask, the playwright, with the scenic director, is able to construct physical presentations of character that totally support that playwright’s vision.

Yeats’s associations with theatre practitioners Edmund Dulac and Edward Gordon Craig help Yeats to realize on the stage his concept of Unity of Being. Drawing on the Wagnerian practice of unified presentation, Yeats sought ways of making his plays completely integrated and interrelated presentations. Even in an integrated production, however, one element must be the primary motivation or governing aesthetic concept. Recent analysis by David Richman in *Passionate Action: Yeats’ Mastery of Drama* states that Yeats “advocated the word as the theatre’s most important element” (19). While Yeats’s plays certainly display admirable attention to diction and verse, their construction reveals an element more essential than the spoken word. If we stretch Hartman’s comments outlined in chapter 1, we can assert that not only the written word but also the articulation of the written word will always be limited in Lacanian usefulness by its desire to heal the wounds it creates. In Lacanian terms, the spoken word belongs to the Symbolic order and thus does not have the transgressive power with which Yeats wants to endow his plays. Instead, Yeats, especially in his use of ritualized theatricality as a connection to the sacred rituals of the occult, gives ultimate primacy to movement that acts like the drive. Paul de Man in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, as we have seen, claims that Yeats’s poetic landscapes give “a pattern of motion” (135). The Old Man in *At the Hawk’s Well* describes to Cuchulain the dance, or action, that precedes the running of the well: “It was her [the guardian of the well] mouth, and yet not she, that cried. / It was that shadow cried behind her mouth” (ln. 185–86). Words are useful for description, but when the well is ready to bubble again, and the Guardian is ready to dance, there are no words. Even the voice is detached from the figure, acting not as its speaker, but as its conduit. Words, in Yeats’s dancer plays, fail in the face of potent action. Words belong to the realm of desire, or the wish for action, while motion belongs to the realm of the drive, or engagement with the wish itself.
When directing his own plays, Yeats tried to make the voice into an agent of motion, or the drive, by instructing his actors to use the “subtle monotony of voice which runs through the voice like fire” (Flannery 201). The vocal outcome of such a demand must have sounded something like the low rumble of an approaching avalanche or the constant lapping of the waves on the shoreline. The rhythm and consistency would gain primacy over meaning, rendering definition and syntax unimportant and giving significance to sound itself. In her early work, especially Desire in Language, Julia Kristeva identifies the echolalia, la langue, or pre-linguistic babble that occurs between mother and infant. She goes on to assert that the conversational language of adults can never possess or convey the same intensity and intimacy as la langue, but poetic language, especially in its attention to rhythm, can. She goes on to claim that “poetic language pursues an effect of singular truth” (Kristeva 146). Since Kristeva did attend Lacan’s seminars and draws extensively on his theories in her writing, it is quite a small step to connect that singular truth to the sinthome. Through verse, combined with his specialized vocal presentation, Yeats’s plays, as originally staged, were able to exemplify the sinthome or singular truth. The sinthome itself is not composed of a single trait, action, or residue; it acts as an amalgamation of many disparate instances that allows the subject recognition of the failures of the governing Symbolic and their personal Imaginary worlds. That is not to claim that the character whose sinthome is displayed understands or wills, in any symbolically comprehensible way, what she is doing. Again, as Kristeva points out, “the artist speaks from a place where she is not, where she knows not” (Desire in Language 242). The Guardian of the Well occupies that place; the unknown voice produces fear in the Old Man. The Old Man fears the Guardian because she is able to produce something that emanates from beyond herself, or his perception of her. Her sinthomatic presentation causes his apprehension as she is able to access all that he is denied. The operative key to Yeats’s vocal demands is obviously actresses, trained as singers, who can perform the required technique without calling attention to it. In the voices of both Maud Gonne and Florence Farr, Yeats found satisfaction.

Yeats’s dramaturgy is essentially minimalist, to gain the greatest intensity of presentation. Flannery describes his style as “relatively uncomplicated though compelling dramatic situations within ritualistic context” (83), with the “appeal to his audience on both a conscious and unconscious level simultaneously” (83). The appeal of ritual also leads Yeats to appreciate Edward Gordon Craig’s development of the acting style of the Über-marionette. The actor abandons himself in total service to the play-
wright in much the same way Yeats demanded that his actors abandon their natural speech patterns in favor of his vocal style. Such acquiescence appealed to Yeats because it supports the idea that the playwright is the most important figure in theatre, and it presents an actor in body, totally void of preconceived meaning or interpretation. The actor himself is abject. As such, Craig states, “The Über-marionette will not compete with life—rather, it will go beyond it” (Kolacatoni et al. ed. 154). The actor, as “it,” is no longer human, but is an empty shell and represents the first stage in moving toward the Real. While Yeats certainly did not have the Real in mind, he did want theatre to be a means for the Irish citizenry to realize their true selves as related to Irish nationalism. The true Irish citizen, one who merges intense nationalistic loyalty with fierce individualistic assertions, rarely exists beyond mythology or the stage. To give his audience examples of what they should strive to become, Yeats creates a theatre that merges feminine space and truth, which predates Lacan's assertion that “truth is firstly a seduction, intended to deceive you” (Other Side 185). The feminine space reveals its truth as it tempts its audience into communion with it, so that the audience member remains rapt in the dance that clears the way for a truth that the protagonist is always doomed to miss.

Drawing primarily on Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection and Hélène Cixous’s theories of theatre, I define the feminine space as the edge of womanhood, the border of abjection where a woman rids herself of the refuse of the Symbolic order, or phallic society, so as to begin a process of creating a new person via the construction of the *sinthome*. Still relying on the Other as a means of allowing the woman engaged in the process of abjection to see herself, Kristeva describes the process as one in which “*they* see that ‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which ‘I’ become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit” (3). We see from this passage that abjection is localized, not on the body, but on that which the body expels. The waste material of a woman becomes the fertilizer for her new growth. Abjection can then be considered the Real pastoral, as it uses elements of nature in their most unsanitized and raw states. Such pastoral elements may be disorienting, or even repulsive, but they bring a person closer to the Real by allowing her primitive sensory access to those substances that cannot be governed by society, no matter how much society tries to impose its rules.

Abjection alone, however, is doomed to fail because there is not sufficient distance placed between the abject object and the person in abjection. The person in abjection, without constant reminders of the circulation of the drive connecting the person to the Real, will wallow in the
abject material, unable to fully break her link with that refuse. This lack of distance between abject subject and object is what causes tragedy in Yeats's drama. Yeats purposefully makes his characters miss their chances for distance to show the danger of overstimulation targeted at someone else’s pleasure. The character who misses her opportunity to create the new pastoral space is the same dancer figure who moves for an Other. Abjection, especially in Yeats, can be considered the Real pastoral wasteland, as it uses biological elements to bring a person closer to the Real by allowing her primitive sensory access to those substances that cannot be governed by society, no matter how much society tries to impose its rules.

The new female growth that arises out of abject material is not rebirth or metaphorical springtime of perennial revitalization. It is an entirely new creation. For that reason, the woman must experience her own death. In its literal sense, death may end the cycle of adherence to the patriarchy and the expectations that order puts on women, but it does not leave much hope for a physical future. Cixous gives us the theatre as a way for a woman to experience her own death, through the catharsis resulting from the stage experience. For Cixous, theatre “gives back to us: the living part of death; or else the deadly part of life” (Sellers 153). Theatre is a sacred space that allows the audience to think about death and experience it vicariously, emotionally, and psychically without enduring the biological finality of the act itself. Yeats provides several interesting examples of figures resurrected from the dead in his first collection of plays for dancers. The first is the figure of Cuchulain in The Only Jealousy of Emer, and the second is Lazarus in Calvary. The resurrected dead figures in these two plays react to their resurrections in opposite ways. Cuchulain is thrilled to be returned to life after being held in the grips of the Sidhe, and rejoices in the arms of his lover. This convention reaction adheres to the audience’s expectations.

> **YEATS’S DEAD MEN WALK**

In his second dancer play, Yeats presents the hero Cuchulain, hovering between life and death while his wife and lover join forces against the Sidhe to bring him back to life and save him from his would-be daemon lover. Neither Emer, Cuchulain’s wife, nor Eithne Inguba, his mistress, is a well-rounded figure. Instead, each takes the form of one psychic quality, or comes close to being defined by a *sinthomatic* characteristic. Their singular defining characteristics go beyond limits and stereotypes because
the characters themselves are beyond a society which acknowledges such things. The space of the play is a mythic world, in which the confines of society are nonexistent. Emer, the older woman, embodies contemplation as she is able to create the plan to save him, but she is not able to carry it out. In that way, Emer also represents unsatisfied desire that longs to use another figure, Eithne Inguba, to satisfy her desire. Eithne Inguba is pure action, or drive, but she is not self-directed. Instead, she is prey to Emer’s plot. Neither woman can achieve her goal, to bring Cuchulain back to life, without the other. It seems that Yeats’s work is claiming that desire and drive need each other to achieve a goal, but what the play actually demonstrates is that each of these two female characters acts as an audience member experiencing a death staged before them. Emer believes that she, acting as director, has power over both Eithne Inguba and the Sidhe, but she is mistaken. At the end of the play, she learns that the only way she can achieve her desire is to subject herself to the will of another. She must give in to the figure of Cuchulain, possessed by the Sidhe, and shun him. Only when she concedes her power can she attain her wish. She is laid bare but is not abject, because the cry she issues is not of her own volition. While the release of fluids of any kind associated with Kristevian abjection can, especially in violent and aggressive instigation, be instigated by another, the state of abjection must be self-generated. In simplified terms, abjection is not just the fluid release but the psychological drainage process that accompanies the physical loss. Such a psychological state can come only through the volition of the subject. Without such willing adherence, as in Emer’s case, abjection fails. Thus, Yeats reminds his audience that the only true freedom, or means to attain one’s passion, is through one’s self-directed actions. The play shows that characters who miss their chances at new expression of definition after abjection are doomed to tragedy. Emer’s is a tragedy of the missed, because she is fated to sacrifice herself for her Other as she encourages her husband’s desire for another at the play’s end. If she no longer desired her husband and if his shifted desire brought her freedom, her choice would be positive, but she still longs for him, and this desire is doomed by her missed chance to escape desire altogether.

Unlike Cuchulain’s joyous return from the underworld, Lazarus, in Calvary, is angry about his resurrection. Instead of exultation and gratitude, he demands, “You took my death, give me your death instead” (Calvary 331). Lazarus goes on to explain, “Alive I could never escape your love. . . . You dragged me to the light as boys drag out / A rabbit when they have dug its hole away” (Calvary 331). In the mytho-Christian world of the play, death assumes an afterlife, or a new space of generative possibility. That place,
according to Lazarus, is one not buried under the “burden of love,” which suffocates the potential of the individual to achieve mastery over himself. Love forces submission to a master, and Lazarus, in death, temporarily conquers that pressure to surrender. When Lazarus is awakened by Jesus, Yeats creates a character who is forced by an Other to miss his opportunity for self-assertion. The play reflects Yeats’s massive distrust of purely Christian teachings and stages the problem and result of blindly adhering to expectation and tradition. In *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, the title character misses her opportunity for freedom from desire by showing her rival how to arouse that object of desire to return; in *Calvary*, it is the raised man who is forced to miss his opportunity to escape the limits of love and desire. Yeats uses the action of rising from the dead as a single step or miniature of the dances he stages more fully elsewhere in these two plays.

**TREADING ON THE TRUTH**

Dance is Yeats’s most prominent form of action. Toni Bentley, a Balanchine dancer, addresses the feminine space of the theatre, or encounter with death, that is experienced most readily through the action of the dance. Whether performing the steps of ballet or burlesque, she claims the dance is “about removing our self-directed will in order to reveal the unseen, the unspoken, the feared, and the desired” (Bentley 6). Bentley’s concepts are a contemporary refashioning of comments made by Yeats’s contemporary, Isadora Duncan. Since Duncan was romantically involved with Edward Gordon Craig, it is likely that some of her ideas were filtered down to Yeats. In her recent book, *Women, Modernism and Performance*, Peggy Farfan reminds readers that Duncan disliked the traditional choreography of the ballet and musical theatre because, she claimed, it encouraged female subjection. Duncan’s reactions to Auguste Rodin’s comments on her work reveal the origin of this opinion. Rodin commented to her that dance is a form of the quintessential realization of the female form. That form is the material from which male artists create.

Despite Yeats’s sometimes ambivalent attitude toward women in his poetry, his dancer figures consistently adhere to the first part of Rodin’s comments, the part Duncan believed. Yeats, like Duncan and Bentley, believed in choreography that would allow the female figure to express herself in a fiercely unique and untried, perhaps nonreplicable, pattern. Yeats’s texts provide short descriptions of the dances he envisioned, but
there is no dance notation or record of specific choreography. In Yeats's Noh dramas, like *At the Hawk's Well*, the choreography was left up to the dancer himself.

*The Only Jealousy of Emer* is again a useful play to illustrate the fierce self-direction of the dancer. In this play, the title character is unable to dance or act because she will not relinquish her desire; she chooses to maintain it by working toward Cuchulain's resurrection. The self-direction of which Bentley speaks is actually the guidance of our internal censor, or the Other or phallic law, guiding us to act in a socially prescribed manner. To abandon that, to get beyond the law into the realm of the soul, a realm in which a woman has “power and safety within her own circumscribed world” (Bentley 4), would entail the creation of Real pastoral space, where woman can be herself without recourse to preconception or desire.

Theatre, the region of the abject which allows us to know death, becomes the thicket from which truth can emerge. My notion of truth is directly indebted to Alain Badiou's *Ethics*, in which he theorizes that a person does not become a subject until she has encountered an event of truth. Badiou begins by defining truth as multiplicity: “There is not, in fact, one single Subject but as many subjects as there are truths, and as many subjective types as there are truth procedures” (Badiou 28). If no two people are alike, which in Lacanian terms is accurate, since no two people have the same *sinthome*, then no two people can have the same truth event which will shock them into subjectivity, the position from which they can live their self-defined lives.

As Badiou states, “the subject of truth as pure desire of self” (56) is not easy for any person, especially a woman, to accept. Badiou’s “desire of self” seems reminiscent of Yeats’s “passion,” a quality which he required of all his tragic actors. Yeats believed, despite his affinity for Craig's Über-mari-onette, that each actor relies on both her personality and instincts as the basis upon which she builds her performance. Speaking specifically about Olivier, Yeats claims the best tragic actor should be so focused “on the dialectic within his own soul” (Flannery 194) that he forgets the audience. The intense solipsism required of the performer can lead, in theatre of the Real, to a position of truth, not for the character, but for the actor, as that person uses performance as an opportunity to delve into his own soul. Because theatre lives, like a *sinthome* itself, its nuances are nonreplicable; thus, an individual performance act becomes truth itself, even though its psychic complement, the drive, requires repetition.

In Yeats’s work, at least as exemplified by the plotlines of many female characters, it is more difficult for a woman than for a man to find a truth. A
woman has been socially conditioned to desire others or, even more accurately, to desire that others fulfill their desires. We can again use *The Only Jealousy of Emer* as our reference point. The title character cannot become a subject and does not find truth because her desire to bring Cuchulain back to the world of the living is not solely for her pleasure. She sacrifices herself to give him new life. Thus, she denies her own subjectivity. An actor performing that role must use it as an example of how not to act instead of an illustration of freedom.

For a woman to obtain a subject position, she must be made abject by the visceral knowledge that, through facing death, she can begin to desire herself when she encounters truth, a singular event so dramatic that it forever alters her concept of self and allows her to be a subject for herself and not a subject for others. It is important to remember that the knowledge a woman has here is not that of intellectual comprehension, but that of the intimate working of her sexuality in both physical and psychological form. What one woman may find extreme, another woman may find tame. Such are the intended actions of the dancer figures in Yeats’s plays.

It is such a seemingly tame quest for knowledge via which the subject can assert herself that Yeats presents in “Michael Robartes and the Dancer.” The female figure in the poem is like an anti-muse for the provincial, stifling male figure, determined to thwart the young female character’s drive toward subjectivity. Robartes, in this poem, is closely related to Yeats’s own ironic mask, whereas the dancer figure is loosely based on Iseult Gonne, daughter of Maud Gonne, Yeats’s long-time obsession. Yeats had also shown a brief romantic interest in Iseult. In the poem, although scholastic learning is usually considered an element of the Symbolic order, the female speaker’s longing for it is so great that it becomes akin to her sinthome, something that, if she can attain it, will define her uniqueness. The male figure acknowledges this fact, as he tries to keep her from learning. To her unadorned plea, “May I not put myself to college?” (ln. 18), the male speaker answers:

Go pluck Athena by the hair;
For what mere book can grant a knowledge
With an impassioned gravity
Appropriate to that beating breast,
That vigorous thigh, that dreaming eye?
And may the devil take the rest. (ln. 19–24)

His language, heavy with a caustic use of allusion and imagery, through
negation, depicts the image of a more typically adorned woman, bringing to light the poem’s deep irony. The male figure, so opposed to female intelligence, allows the crafty female figure to disarm him so that he gets trapped in the image of sexuality he envisions. The female dancer figure is able to co-opt the male voice as she takes knowledge and makes it her own, leaving the confused male figure in her shadow. As she rids herself of all the typical syntactic associations of female voice, she practices verbal abjection. The male speaker, too mired in tradition to really escape, is left to wallow in the puddles of her disregarded language. Encountering the truth, however, is not enough, according to Badiou, for a woman to maintain her position as subject for self. She must then remain loyal to the event by enacting truth procedures or ways of living her new life so as to remain on the border of abjection, in the shadow of death.

The woman who has experienced a truth event has had the experience of the feminine jouissance. The jouissance of woman is, however, an ironic position, for it is one that can be set only in relief against an Other. Lacan explains that “what a woman has to deal with, insofar as we are able to speak about this, is this jouissance that is her own and is represented somewhere by a man’s omnipotence, which is precisely where a man, when he speaks, when he speaks as master, discovers that he is a failure” (Other Side 154). The truth of a woman is that her self-definition can be recognized only in the crumbling of her master. For a woman to remain loyal to her truth and acknowledge her experience with the Real, she must always exist in the feminine space on the edge of abjection and force the downfall of her former object of desire. When the truth event ends, the master must collapse while the hysterical dancer looks on. Yeats needs his master figures to live on potently, even if doomed, to expose the underlying tragedy of Modernism, so the dancer figure cannot remain loyal to her truth. In the moment of the truth event itself, she must never stop the whirling dervish of her dance,. She never reaches socially prescribed maturity, which would mean literal death, but stays in a holding pattern of intensification, which carries with it all the pain of growth. The dancer figure is then a pastoral impossibility, a figure of immortality, like the Guardian of the Well, who exists in nature but radically apart from its laws. In this state, she has missed her opportunity to generate something new, as she is limited by her immaturity. This is the missed chance to make the dancer’s body, as her sinthome, into a space for new creation.

Yeats’s dancer figures are the daughters of Salome, women who live on the edge. They have experienced their own truths and, through their dances or equivalent actions, stage the theatrical death. The witnesses of
the dance, either other actors or audience members, are not to follow its steps precisely, but use the dance as the template which must be modified for each person’s specific needs. The dancer figures are the positive version of Yeats’s “Second Coming”; as we see them “[t]urning and turning in the widening gyre” (Finneran ln. 1), anxiety acts as a witness that does not derive from our fear of an ending, but from our trepidation about a new beginning.

As the daughters of Salome, the dancer figures are the silent royalty born of the abject material streaming from Salome herself. Until Oscar Wilde’s play of the same name, Salome had “never been herself but always in bondage, serving men’s ideas, desires, and fears about the erotic woman” (Bentley 19). As part of the myth, Salome was the ironic antithesis of Toni Bentley’s self-possessed female dancer. Through Oscar Wilde’s interpretation, Salome gains the assertiveness she needs to fall tragically into her own demise. In Wilde’s drama, Salome is a conflicted woman longing to be virginal, like the moon she admires, while expressing a profound, all-encompassing desire for John the Baptist. In her attempt to consummate that desire, by kissing his severed head, Salome’s tears mix with the Baptist’s blood. Passion and fidelity meet in the merger of abject material, and out of that mingling is born Yeats’s figure of the dancer, a female aptly described by Kermode in Romantic Image as “unity of being represented . . . so complete as to be unattainable” (71). What Kermode identifies as image is, somewhat confusingly, what de Man defines as emblem. The image, for Kermode, is a nonorganic entity that springs from the author’s creation of himself and focuses attention on itself as a nearly divine leitmotif and not a natural mimetic image.

Kermode goes on to explain that “[t]he dancer here reconciles antithetical movements: the divisions of soul and body, form and matter, life and death, artist and audience” (72). Removing the dancer figure from the Symbolic order makes her an emblem of the divine occult and places her in her own female space. She is able to realize a truth, that the artificiality of binary distinctions is unnecessary. We can broaden the definition and function of the “romantic image” of the dancer that Kermode wants to explain by saying that she is the image of wholeness, the simultaneous link to past tradition and future illumination. As she dances, she overwhelms time. The dancer, via that ability to overwhelm time, unifies past, present, and future, essentially making time into space. She takes time out of the Symbolic order, governed by man, and spatializes it, making it subject only to contingent pastoral caprices. The spatialization of time links to Lacan’s concept of the drive, as the drive ignores temporality by
its very persistence. This concept is linked to Lacan’s image of the drive as montage, “which, at first, is presented as having neither head nor tail—in the sense in which one speaks of montage as in surrealist collage” (Four Fundamental Concepts 169). Montage is lack of beginning, and ending is atemporal and then overcomes the same obstacles which the dancer figure overcomes. The dancers’ successes in the plays give witness to the positive action of merging past and future in the present as a way to manifest and continue one’s own particular truth. Truth itself is not found in the continuum of time, but is located in an episodic pastoral moment which must constantly be repeated as a theme, with minor variations. The paradox of using the non-natural emblem to create a pastoral or natural space cannot be ignored. Because this pastoral space is one linked to the Real, a position in which the subject is her own father and her own god, the emblematic tie to the divine is necessary. The emblem allows the imagery and language to merge into one consistent presentation, while the temporal and spatial elements split to allow a gap in the social order to open and create a place for the dancer to reside.

The vast majority of Yeats’s plays, especially the dancer dramas that will be explored individually now in more detail, do not focus on characters who attain, or even have the ability to attain, the Real. Instead, Yeats’s dancer figures are gateway figures, or compromise formations, who can demonstrate sinhomatic singularity, and in some cases maintain their own truths, but whose existence is still hampered by the intrusion and backward pull of characters not yet ready to accept the Real. They are figures who miss the chances they create. John Rees Moore describes Yeats’s dancer plays as compressed, compact, reduced, and intensified “morsels” (193). It is useful to visualize them in their own theatrical terms, as a form which through the intensity of their language and character becomes the spot around which the dancer figure, or the drive, turns. That form is also visually realized in Yeats’s concept and presentation of the pastoral landscape, which reflects tenuous middle ground.

The majority of Yeats’s dancer plays are set in the wasteland. The inhospitable clime of At the Hawk’s Well is the most obvious pastoral setting. As Moore points out, the pastoral conventions, represented by the well, are for Yeats mostly empty and dry (204) and mimic the interior worlds of the characters who come to reside in them (202). In At the Hawk’s Well, Moore’s claim is easily justified. The Old Man, who lives at the well, is only a shell of a subject with no real ambition or drive. He claims to want the water more than anything, but he warns the Young Man against piercing his foot to stay awake, because such an action would produce pain. If the Old
Man were truly committed, he would welcome pain that would fill his emptiness with something; instead, he chooses to leave his emotions vacant.

Death, or near-death, is the most common and dangerous pastoral element that recurs in Yeats’s dancer plays. Communication with the figure of death in each dancer play is the only means for the other characters, and subsequently the audience, to approach the Real, but as the living characters engage with death or its representative form, the living characters draw the dead back to life, even if that life is not welcomed. The pastoral form, then, is not hell or paradise, but purgatory, an unsettled and unsettling space whose beneficial quality in Real terms is its status as a borderland.

>PASTORAL PEEPS AND SQUAWKS

Yeats’s first dancer play, *At the Hawk’s Well*, was originally performed in Lady Cunard’s drawing room on April 21, 1917 (Jeffares 86), but not published until 1921 (Clark and Clark 689). It is the story of the young Cuchulain seeking eternal life at a well spring guarded by a dancer costumed as a hawk. The play is meant to have musical accompaniment, and all performers—three characters and three musicians—either wear masks or wear make-up to give the illusion of masks. It is the first of Yeats’s plays to employ elements of the Japanese Noh theatre (Jeffares 83), to which Pound had introduced him. Since the Irish audience was not, however, familiar with the usage of masks in the Noh theatre, the immediate reference for mask tradition among the audience is that of ancient Greek theatre. This connection helps to mark the play as tragic, placing the audience in the position of the detective trying to discover whose tragedy it is. The easy answer would be that the tragedy belongs to both the man young and old, who, distracted by sensuality, miss their opportunity to drink from the well. I believe, however, the real tragic figure of *At the Hawk’s Well* is the dancer figure. The dancer figure, or the Guardian of the Well, experiences what Yeats referred to as the “tragic reverie” of the surrendering of personality to lyricism (Moore 3), here in the form of dance. According to Moore, a state of “tragic reverie” enabled an ideal audience member “to recollect his own moments of most intense life and by sharing his emotion with the rest of the audience to enlarge his capacity for exalted experience” (4). Moore’s explanation here serves as an unlikely basis for the claim that in theatre, the approach to the Real is a communal experience. As one person begins to experience a truth, she serves as an example for another person.
to begin her own quest. The dancer figure is best suited as the catalyst in this process, as her anti-Symbolic movements are simultaneously observed by all. By acting as a conduit for others, she misses her own chance for a sustained Real.

As the Old Man points out, the Guardian of the Well, or the dancer, belongs to “The Woman of the Sidhe herself, / The mountain witch, the unappeasable shadow. / She is always flitting upon this mountain-side, / To allure or to destroy. When she has shown / Herself to the fierce women of the hills / Under that shape they offer sacrifice” (Clark and Clark ln. 160–66). This dancer is not dancing for herself and catching the men in hypnotic spells of her own will. Instead, she herself is under a spell and, like Flaubert's Salome, “does concentratedly, like a somnambulist, her eyes fixed in front of her but seeing nothing” (Ellis 41). Yeats's text supports the sleepwalker description when the Old Man again says, “It was her mouth, and yet not she, that cried. / It was that shadow cried behind her mouth; / . . . She is possessed” (Clark and Clark ln. 185–86, 190). If the dancer figure in At the Hawk's Well is possessed, she is under the control of another figure. That means she has not become a subject of her own truth. She is still bound to another, specifically to the Sidhe. Since the Guardian of the Well is under the control of a supernatural female figure and is not a representative of the male order, she does have a greater chance for abjection and death, and she tries to meet those desires in her last dance. Without complete autonomy, without relinquishing all ties to an Other's desire, the Guardian of the Well cannot abject herself and cannot reside in her feminine space. The Well, which should be emblematic of that space, is an empty marker now, and not the location of female freedom. If feminine space is vacant, it is a place, to varying degrees, of the “missed.”

We learn from Yeats's stage directions that when the Old Man ceases to look at the Guardian of the Well, because she has so tired him that he falls asleep yet again, she “throws off her cloak and rises. Her dress under the cloak suggests a hawk” (Clark and Clark ln. 207–8). Her presentation of herself as a bird of prey during her final dance is the final indication of her tragic flaw, or her failure to assert her unique femininity as fidelity to her truth. Because she is still tied to another being, this dancer figure is not able to encounter truth. She is not even tied directly to the woman of the Sidhe, but is most directly linked to the image of a bird, or the symbol of the Sidhe, and for Yeats, something that is both in and beyond the confines of the natural world as we know it. Birds are a potent symbol for Yeats, because their ability to fly gives them a means of escape. Such escape for Yeats, though, may not always be a welcome change, as the character
represented by or linked to the bird is fleeing without making a lasting change. Her participation in the dance, though, which represents a mode of expression beyond the confines of language and society, proves that she still longs for such a truth event. As Badiou suggests, we cannot strive for truth; it must crash into us. The whirling of the dancer figure here can do nothing but push away the truth with the winds which she stirs.

It is also significant that the dancer figure dances not as a woman but as a bird of prey. If she had experienced a truth event and danced as witness to that event in an act of fidelity, she would not be preying on those who see her, but she would be sharing with them an example of freedom which they too could have if they created and inhabited the appropriate spaces. For this reason, the dance does not inspire feelings of sublime tranquility that society usually believes dance, especially ballet, will produce. Instead, Yeats’s dances, prefiguring Lacan’s theory, produce moments of profound and necessary anxiety.

Watching this dancer, this false prophet of truth who is still searching for truth herself, produces negative reactions. First, the Old Man curses her, saying, “You have deluded me my whole life through, / Accursed dancers, you have stolen my life” (Clark and Clark ln. 232–33). A figure who has found her way through the process of abjection would have no interest in taking anyone else’s garbage. Second, “She has roused up the fierce women of the hills, / Aiofe, and all her troop, to take your life, / And never till you are lying in the earth / Can you know rest” (Clark and Clark ln. 241–44). Her movements have not brought immortality in the way the male figures believed they would. Instead, the dancer’s steps have set Cuchulain on the path that will ultimately lead to his death. Ironically, though, as Jeff eries points out, the dance leads to Cuchulain’s ultimate immortality through legend. Although the literal immortality that Cuchulain hoped for never comes, the Guardian of the Well’s dance locks Cuchulain into a moment of eternal tension and longing, qualities that will eventually lead him to an experience of the Real, found in other Yeats plays when he fights the tides with his sword. The immediate goal of everlasting life is missed, but the metaphoric goal of immortality, through a delayed experience of the Real, is not.

Despite the awkward success of the play for Cuchulain, the dancer figure does not experience such hope because of her tragic flaw, or her inability to recognize her failure at freedom and continued adherence to an Other. This, in turn, sets in motion the tragic destiny of one of the greatest Celtic heroes. If Yeats’s dramatic romance with the dancer were to end, instead of begin, with this play, it would be easy to read the dancer figure as an incar-
nation of Eve, leading men to sin through her own misguided desire, but this play only represents the young Yeats. Instead of being a Sidhe herself, the Guardian of the Well is the daughter of the Sidhe who does not live up to her mother’s expectations. She does not solely lead Cuchulain to his destiny, but does arouse other women who will then set him on his journey. It is after her dance that Aiofe’s troops are roused and spur Cuchulain into battle. The Guardian of the Well misses the chance to create a space for the truth event, but produces the desire in others who possess that creative power. She is the tragic muse.

WOMAN AS THE WHIRLING DERVISH

Following *At the Hawk’s Well*, Yeats wrote *The Only Jealousy of Emer* about Cuchulain’s experience with the space between life and death. *Fighting the Waves*, written in 1930 and published in *Wheels and Butterflies: More Plays for Dancers*, stages the same scene. In both plays, the figure of the dancer is transformed from the servant of Sidhe, as she is in *At the Hawk’s Well*, to the Sidhe herself. This transformation makes the dancer figure part of the occult and natural worlds. Yeats’s affinity for Hinduism and the yogic tradition helps the audience to understand his connection of the mythic and the pastoral. According to yogic philosophy, Siddha “means a semi-divine being supposed to be of great purity and holiness, and to possess supernatural faculties called siddhis” (Iyengar 116). Yeats was enamored of Eastern religion and even translated *The Upanishads* with Shree Purohit Swami in 1937. Yeats's fascination with the East began long before that translation, dating back to his introduction to the Noh theatre by Pound, and before that to the 1880s, when he was introduced to and became friends with Madame Blavatsky, the author of *Isis Unveiled* (1892).

The semidivine beings of Hinduism reside in the natural world, and the goal of following the yamas and niyamas of the yogic tradition is to make oneself into the image of the divine; if the image of the divine resides in nature, then part of the goal of the dancer figure is to make herself into the personal goddess of her pastoral space. She does not want to rule others, only to exert dominion over herself. Since the feminine space is not a physical but a metaphysical concept, it seems more appropriate that the dancer figure be divine. Although the legend of the Sidhe, in Celtic lore, marks her as a witch, a woman to be feared, Yeats, in these two plays, presents her,
in an ironic variation on Shelley’s “The Witch of Atlas,” as the life-giving force.

She achieves creative ability not through language, which is too conventional, but through her own unique choreography, which attains a communicative power beyond speech (Ellis 719). Like a god figure, Fand has the power to awaken, through the movement expressing her unbound desire. Stage directions in *The Jealousy of Emer* state:

> The Woman of the Sidhe moves round the crouching Ghost of Cuchulain at front of stage in a dance that grows gradually quicker, as he slowly awakes. . . . Her mask and clothes must suggest gold or bronze or brass or silver, so that she seems more an idol than a human being. This suggestion may be repeated in her movements. Her hair, too, must keep the metallic suggestion. (Clark and Clark 325)

There is much irony and sadness in this figure. Even though she can give life, which Yeats, in this play, equates with the truth of life on the brink of death, she herself does not live such truth. Her presence is antithetical. She takes a natural form, but that form is unexpectedly hard, as her costume suggests metallic substances. The hardness of her exterior presentation contradicts her necessarily fluid movement. When asked why she needs Cuchulain, she replies, “Because I long I am not complete” (Clark and Clark 226). She needs Cuchulain’s dead body to allow her to live on the edge of death. She is searching for a way to overcome her desire and sink more deeply into the circulation of her drive. She needs to accomplish the rebellion, because desire is always tied to the perceived needs of another and thus limits the desirer’s chance for independence. The drive allows a subject access to the free-wheeling, unstoppable pulse of her own libido. Ultimately, the Woman of the Sidhe needs to feed on the love of the great hero, as we learn from her lusty speech: “When your mouth and my mouth meet / All my round shall be complete / Imagining all its circles run; / and there shall be oblivion” (Clark and Clark ln. 262–65). The imagery and rhythm suggest “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” written by John Donne, whose work Yeats admired. In the original poem, the lover/speaker addresses the beloved on the subject of their impending separation. The lover describes their love as transcending the usual pastoral trappings of love poetry, but aspiring to mimic the grand movement of the Earth and the heavens. For Donne, nature is the only force as great as love. For Yeats, nature alone is able to present conditions as hard as passion is. Woman of the Sidhe wants to use the rounded lips of the
kissing mouth to cement the circulation of her drive, sacrificing her lover in the process.

With Yeats’s affinity for Eastern religion and the occult, especially as tied to the cosmos, it seems appropriate here to relate the kissing mouth to Bataille’s imagery of the solar anus. Georges Bataille was a teacher and friend of Lacan, but Bataille’s influence on Lacan is often ignored, even though Lacan married Bataille’s ex-wife. In *Visions of Excess*, Bataille introduces the concept of the pineal eye, which when applied to yogic philosophy is located at approximately the seventh chakra, or the crown of the head, believed to be the energy source. When accessed, the pineal eye leads to a connection with the divine. According to Bataille, the pineal eye exists in the immediate present, with the ability to open and conflate itself simultaneously (82). It is an energy source which gives access to great understanding even as that access destroys the subject. The pineal eye’s continual presence locates it in the pastoral space of the Real; its location on the physical body combined with its shape makes it a formulation of the divine drive.

Bataille develops the concept of the pineal eye into that of the solar anus, linking together vision and excrement. The solar anus, literally depicted as the sun, has the ability to link together the verbs “‘to be,’ as the vehicle of amorous frenzy” (5) and “‘to have,’ or the means of controlling the frenzy” (5). From this “‘to be” and “‘to have” combination, we can trace the roots of Judith Butler’s argument in *Gender Trouble*, that being the phallus implies a state of ownership, and having the phallus implies a state of control over the object owned by another person. The combination of “‘to be” and “‘to have” also creates a linguistic circle of existence and possession that places the subjects in a continuously rotating circle or formulation of the drive, combining the most essential elements of the cosmos, life and death. Yeats’s staged kisses share the qualities of the solar anus, or the ability to push the subject into a sexual dance of life or death.

The dancer, whose body can break societal expectations in presentation and movement, cannot break them in her own desire. She desires the circulation of the drive but cannot experience it because she is too dependent on the conventional love of another male figure. While she allows Cuchulain the truth of his existence, she is denied her own truth because the space of her dance creates a void which only Cuchulain can fill. The dancer figure makes herself into literal feminine space, the vaginal opening, which Freud surmises each hysteric needs to fill with the phallus. The hysteric wants to make the Other aware of her opening while denying him access to it. Yeats’s dancer figures do not want to deny access, but want to fill their spaces with the Others on their own terms. The frenzy of wanting it all,
or wanting to fill and control, leads to defeat, as Yeats seems to advise his audience that total adherence to only one drive or demand is best.

As Sylvia Ellis explains:

Fand never achieves the dignity which is naturally Emer’s and her dance is staccato and frenzied since she is desperate for a consort. . . . When Fand’s influence wanes and she is cheated of her prize through Emer’s loyal courage, Cuchulain awakens to the arms of his young mistress, Eithne Inguba, a mortal version of the defeated goddess from the sea, not the selfless love of his wife to which he had just been alluding so insistently and with such remorse. (290)

The dancer has missed her chance for the freedom of the Real because she loses direction or becomes dizzy with the process and forgets the consequences of her actions. She is also the figure of the third, or the necessary outsider, in the trio of women who inhabit this play.

Fand, Emer, and Eithne Inguba are all enraptured with Cuchulain. Only Emer knows how to use the hysteria of the other women to achieve her own goal. Here, Yeats presents women negatively, as being conniving betrayers. Such a portrayal would not be so offensive if any of the women recognized the damning component of her actions, but none does. The female figures, especially Emer, make themselves into Other figures, demanding that the other women in the play do as they are bid. Emer, as the former object of desire, exploits Eithne Inguba’s position in the role of objet a and doubles it. Eithne Inguba is the objet a both for Cuchulain and for Emer, as she relinquishes her desires to both of their demands. Eithne Inguba misses her opportunity to disobey at least one of her masters, and Emer misses the ability she has to undermine the position of the phallus from within.

It seems that Yeats wants to give his dancers the ultimate freedom and power but knows that his society, even that of highly selected drawing-room audiences, is not ready to accept such passionate victory from a woman. The combination of lust and the occult, which compose Fand, is still too dangerous and must be modified through the shift to the triumph of her human counterpart, a woman beyond convention, but a human figure nonetheless.

Emer, unlike Fand, does not dance, but through the vocative drive, or her ability to control sound, she does get her wish. The play begins as Emer, seeing Cuchulain’s body hovering between life and death, recruits his mistress, Eithne Inguba, to help call him back to the world of the living. Emer
is willing to concede that her words cannot call Cuchulain back, but she knows that Eithne Inguba’s words can and encourages her to speak to him:

“Bend over him; / Call out dear secrets till you have touched his heart” (ln. 115–16). Eithne Inguba follows Emer’s instructions, but her words are useless because they are not her own. The same ineffectual result occurs when Emer prompts Eithne Inguba to kiss Cuchulain. Eithne Inguba, being young and directionless, cannot understand Emer’s true motives, which the Woman of the Sidhe sees completely, saying, “You loved your mastery, when but newly / married / And I love mine for all my withered arm; / You have but to put yourself into that power / And he shall live again” (ln. 168–71). Emer is instructed not only to master her own drive, but to control that of Cuchulain. Emer can never have freedom, though, if she is trying to use her freedom to control another. Again, the Woman of the Sidhe acts as a teacher: “Cry out that you renounce his love; / make haste / And cry that you renounce his love forever” (ln. 286–88). Emer resists at first, but she eventually speaks the words that will free her husband.

Emer must renounce her love, because love and its expression is always flawed. As Lacan points out, love cannot be an equal exchange between two people, but its altruistic conception “is changed inexplicably into a gift of shit” (Four Fundamental Concepts 268). Thus, love is a dissolution of the subject into only the abject component which attracts a particular lover. It is not the person who is loved, but only the part of the person identified with the partial object of the lover’s drive that is loved. What is “loved” in “love” is not another subject, but the allusion or reflection or part of the lover in the other person. This reduces, or according to Lacan “mutilates,” the loved one, combining Freud’s ideas of narcissism and the fetish object. The loved one is nothing more than the abject material of the lover that is rejected and cast out, only to be desired again. When Emer renounces Cuchulain’s love, she returns both him and herself to wholeness of being, by allowing both to be more than partial objects for each other. Emer uses her voice, her words, to satisfy her drive, to have Cuchulain live, even though it means that her desire will go unsatisfied, since he returns to his mistress. The voice, as we will explore in greater depth with Sondheim’s work, begins as an internalized movement or dance, which is then expelled or abjected out of the subject, to gain freedom. The voice allows the words of the Symbolic to be spoken, but uses inflection and intention as means to strip away the façade of denotative meanings.

The Musicians’ song ending the play explains what Yeats is trying to accomplish with the figure of Emer. They sing:
When beauty is complete
Your own thought will have died
And danger not be diminished;
Dimmed at three-quarter light,
When moon’s round is finished
The stars are out of sight (ln. 333–38)

Beauty is the element necessary in life to escape the Symbolic. Only when one recognizes true beauty can one abandon thought, the progenitor of word, or the father of the Symbolic order. In this system, reminiscent of Kant’s theory of beauty, thought or Symbolic activity halts in the face of both loveliness and the sublime, as Seminar 7: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis suggests. Such lack of thought may put the subject at risk of social alienations, since she is no longer processing exterior information in a usual way. That same lack of Symbolic management, however, allows her access to the deepest darkness. In such darkness, the soul experiences its “bitter reward” (ln. 337), as it is not loved or loving, but still not whole.

Fighting the Waves tells nearly the same story as The Only Jealousy of Emer, even keeping the dancer figure as she who can create a space of truth for others but cannot find it for herself. The first noticeable difference between these two plays, which share the same plot, is Emer’s attempt to bring Cuchulain back to life after he wages a mad battle against the sea when he learns he has murdered his own son. Unlike the musical verse of The Only Jealousy of Emer, Fighting the Waves is written in prose. The only verse elements are the songs with which the musicians open and close the play.

Verse, according to theories of Geoffrey Hartman and Julia Kristeva’s concept of echolalia explored in Desire in Language, is much closer to the mother tongue and conveys a communicative bond more essential than Symbolic language structures. It would seem to follow, then, that Fighting the Waves, in prose, would grant its characters less opportunity to collide with the Real; however, that is not the case. Fighting the Waves, despite its prose format, offers more characters the opportunity to dance. The play grants freedom of movement that allows the figures to whirl their way out of convention. As they whirl, their full bodies that participate in the stylized motions of the dances have a semiotic experience, every bit as elementary as, even if in a noticeably different mode from, echolalia.

Fighting the Waves opens with the male figure of Cuchulain dancing. Yeats describes: “He dances a dance which represents a man fighting the
waves. The waves may be represented by other dancers; in his frenzy he supposes the waves to be his enemies; gradually he sinks down as if overcome, then fixes his eyes with a cataleptic stare upon some imaginary distant object” (455). Yeats’s stage directions here are more explicit than usual regarding the dance. This dance is designed to mimic action instead of presenting a free-form display of movement. The main dancer is not alone, but can be accompanied by other dancers. By indicating the actions needed to be performed, Yeats removes the dancer figure’s potential freedom. To think back to Bennett’s distinctions, the problem with this dance is that it makes an effort to represent, instead of creating, form. Still, it is an attempt at the Real, since the main dancer is overcome by madness, and thus is already beyond the law.

Cuchulain’s dance stops when he fixates on a distant object. Using Lacanian theory, we could term that point the partial object, or objet petit a, which is the object of the drive. The partial object sets the drive in motion, as it allows itself to be chased but never captured. Yeats, however, uses the gaze as the linchpin to temporarily halt the drive in this scene. As Cuchulain stares at the object, his potential subjectivity is lost until he feels he is looked back upon by the object itself. The gaze cast by the partial object initiates a connection that helps to define the gazer as a subject of the Symbolic order. As a Symbolic subject, the subject being gazed upon is prey to her desire, or the desire of the Other, which she takes upon herself. Yeats wants his figures to have sexual energy more primal and freeing than desire, so he finds a way to access the drive.

Just as the kiss in The Only Jealousy of Emer was able to embody and then formulate the drive, so too in Fighting the Waves does a kiss grant Cuchulain the ability to reactivate his drive. Eithne Inguba is the partial object whose mouth completes Cuchulain’s circle and brings him back to life, where he can live in the shadow of his nearly Real truth event.

The most significant difference between The Only Jealousy of Emer and Fighting the Waves is the number of dances that occur. Until this play, all of Yeats’s dancer plays contained only one dance. In Fighting the Waves, dancers act like bookends, or momentary glimpses of the Real that will contain the Symbolic within them. As the play begins with Cuchulain’s dance of death, it ends with Fand’s dance, as an attempt to mourn. Yeats describes her dance, which closes the play, as “a dance which expresses her despair for the loss of Cuchulain . . . It is essentially a dance which symbolizes, like water in the fortune-telling books, bitterness” (463). According to

Yeats’s directions, Fand may dance alone or with the waves, as Cuchulain did. The representation that Yeats refers to here is not the same mimicry as in the first dance. The actress playing Fand is directed toward an emotional state, not a specific portrayal of action. She may achieve and convey that state in any way available to her.

In the dance, though, it is essential that Fand convey her failure to obtain her desire. Her desire misses its target. This dance leaves the audience with a last impression of chaotic despair that, as we will later see, is akin to that of Sondheim’s *Company.* This profound melancholia of the dancer is her tragic truth; she will never attain her desire, but that is not a negative position. One’s truth, according to Badiou, can be either pleasant or painful. The only essential component is that after the experience, one remains loyal to it. Fand must dance to express her truth; even though it is painful, she dances at the end of the play. By doing that, she is loyal to herself and gives and allows others a means of attaining their truths. She remains with the audience as their final image of the play; they see her devotion to the self and to her lover as a fidelity beyond social expression.

Fand’s final dance is also a great sacrifice. By echoing the dance that begins the play, Fand assumes Cuchulain’s grief. At the beginning of the play, Cuchulain believes that his truth is defined by infanticide, but Fand shows him that is not his truth. By letting him scorn her, Fand shows Cuchulain that the truth of his life is his passion for the women he loves. By revitalizing his drive for both Emer and Eithne Inguba, Fand shows Cuchulain the way to his truth. Her dance functions as a Real kiss parallel to the actual kiss Eithne Inguba bestows. Once Cuchulain occupies his truth position and abandons the space of grief, Fand can take up that space, as it is her truth alone.

MALE DANCERS

Trivializing the Feminine

*Calvary* (1920), the final play in *Plays for Dancers,* stands out as unique in the collection. Each of the first three plays, *At the Hawk’s Well,* *The Dreaming of the Bones,* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer,* uses Irish mythology and nationalism as the basis for its plot. In *Calvary,* Yeats turns instead to Christianity as the play is set on Golgotha, with Christ’s crucifixion taking place. In “The Tragic Generation” section of Yeats’s *Autobiographies,* he recounts Oscar Wilde’s composition of “The Greatest Short Story,” or the
episodic recounting of Christ’s chosen postmiracle believers. None ends well, but according to Yeats, Wilde “spoiled it [the story] with the verbal decoration of his epoch” (224). Yeats instead recognizes the story’s “terrible beauty” and seeks to capture that in his play. Calvary’s setting changes the previous pastoral dynamic of his dancer plays. Instead of a raw, combative world, the audience is now faced with landscape that is nothing but death. Yeats uses remnants of his Christian childhood, making death, the play’s setting, a place of new beginnings, not endings. Both Lazarus and Judas are angry with Christ for the same reason: Christ takes away their freedom. When Christ raises Lazarus from the tomb four days after his death, Christ takes away the freedom death grants by thrusting him back into life. Lazarus views death as a gateway to chance and contingency. These elements are necessary for an individual to escape the laws of the patriarchy and to begin the process of abjection. When Christ beckons Lazarus to live, Christ acts as a mediating figure, functioning as a placeholder for the phallus that is God. Because Christ uses words to awaken Lazarus, Lazarus too uses words to reclaim death, this time Christ’s death. Lazarus’s will is once again thwarted, though, for Christ’s death cannot be taken from him.

Lazarus further indicts Christ for not acting of his own accord when he responds to Christ’s explanation, “I do my Father’s will” (ln. 72) with the snide comment, “And not your own” (ln. 73). Because Christ does not carry out his own drive but brings to fruition his father’s desire, his freedom to create his own sinhome is compromised.

Judas advances Lazarus’s argument against Christ’s actions with the simple line, “I have betrayed you / Because you seemed all-powerful” (ln. 108–9). The word “seemed” is key here. The verb “are” would denote an absolute state of being or existence, but “seemed” as a verb suggests to the audience that Christ’s phallic power exists solely in relationship to Christ’s father’s will. It was Judas’s original belief in Christ as the phallic power that led him to revolt. Judas explains: “that [Christ’s omnipotence] was the very thought that drove me wild / I could not bear to think you had but to whistle / And I must do; but after that I thought, / ‘Whatever man betrays him will be free’” (ln. 114–17). Judas does not want to assume Christ’s power, but only wants to escape from it. Judas knows that Christ’s power is a façade; the power that Judas longs for must come from within the self.

To read the relationships among Lazarus, Judas, and Christ in Badiou’s terms, Christ is not a subject, but a subjectified being, carrying out a replicated and diminished version of someone else’s truth. Christ’s attempts to superimpose the already weakened truth on another person are too much for Lazarus or Judas to bear. Each man would rather face death,
as a gateway to freedom, than live under the desirous love of an Other. Both Lazarus and Judas have their own truths, then—their willingness to defy Christ, or phallic authority. They aspire to the self-directed abandon of Yeats's dancer figures but cannot quite achieve that status. Yeats stages their impossible position through what they do not do; they do not dance.

Instead, Yeats uses the Roman guards as his dancer figures. This, too, is a huge change from Yeats's previous dancer plays, in which the dancer figures were all women. Their dances were always solitary and silent, as they abjected themselves through choreography and danced themselves into their own truth. The soldiers are a tawdrier and more awkwardly practical version of that dancer figure. As Moore comments, the soldier's dance "is a dumb show . . . more ironic by its good natured intent, of the meaninglessness of purpose in a universe governed by chance" (241). The guards, even before they dance, are in possession of that which Christ denied his friends, chance and contingency. The Second Roman Soldier states noncommittally, "Whatever happens is the best, we say, / So that it's unexpected" (ln. 153–54). The dance that follows, as they play craps for Christ's clothes, is not sketched in stage directions, as are the dances in previous dancer plays, but is described by the Second Roman Soldier: "In the dance / We quarrel for a while, but settle it / By throwing dice, and after that, being friends / Join hand to hand and wheel about the cross" (ln. 164–67). For these rogue soldiers who prefigure the vaudevillian nonsense of Beckett's thinker, Lucky, in Waiting for Godot, the dance is a game that allows them to revel in the contingent circumstances they welcome into their lives. Each soldier's outcome will be different and beyond his control. The soldiers experience life in the moment of change, unlike Lazarus and Judas, who are denied chance by Christ's miracles and prophecies. While the soldiers methods are tawdry and their truths, articles of a dying man's wardrobe, are mockeries of truth events, their process does allow them the contingency necessary for freedom. Because the soldiers are deeply flawed human beings, the potential for audience identification with them is greater than with dancer figures of previous plays. When an audience is able to identify more closely with a character who lives on the fringe of society, the audience members are more likely to want to create spaces in their lives for random events of freedom. The opening of such a space allows for the sinthome to emerge as the truth event of a subject. Yeats will take his audience that far. To achieve the Real, however, the audience must continue to live that truth or continue to dance with wild abandon. Yeats's dances all come to an end.
In *Calvary*, Yeats misses the opportunity to create a dance that would not end for one of the characters. If Yeats had allowed Lazarus to dance, the effect of the play would have been much different. Instead of being a semimutilation of Christian tradition that denigrates one theory but fails to set forth a corrective one, Yeats could have staged a radically new alternative with Lazarus’s dance. This potential male dancer could have whirled himself into a frenzy against God, the most potent yet ironically fallen phallic symbol of modern society. Yeats misses the chance to enact such a revolt and thus limits the transgressive potential of his drama.

In *Calvary*, Yeats is innovative in his handling of language versus movement in his plays. The trend toward the voice having a power similar to movement begins, as we have seen, in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*. In *Calvary*, however, the dance is a word game itself. Again, we see very early intimations of what will become a postmodern catchphrase, “the game.” The words the soldiers speak are in the confines of a game. A game, as played, is removed from the constrictions of societal rules. It allows the players to establish a new set of rules upon which only the players must agree. The words which the soldiers speak are part of the game and thus meaningless apart from its rules. They move in unnatural ways, just as the body moves differently in dance than in everyday action.

**A-RYTHMIA**

*Creating New Steps*

Apart from *Fighting the Waves*, the three other plays in *Wheels and Butterflies* are oddities. They employ the dancer figure, but they do not follow the pattern of the previous dancer plays or establish any new pattern. *Cat in the Moon*, the first play in the collection, is Yeats’s weakest dancer work and is rarely discussed. The play is notable primarily for its pre-Beckettian scenario of a blind and a lame beggar helping each other search for St. Coleman’s well, which will cure their handicaps. Its tone is nearly postmodern as the audience unwillingly laughs at these two pathetic creatures, so diminished by their hardships that even their capacity to evoke sympathy is gone. When the pair finally reaches the well, each has to choose whether he wants to be cured, and relieved of his burden on Earth, or blessed, and relieved of his burden in heaven. The Lame Man chooses to be blessed and is rewarded by having his lameness cured as well. This miracle, as Yeats terms it, is the impetus for the dance. Yeats directs: “The Lame
Beggar begins to dance, at first clumsily, moving about with his stick, then he throws away the stick and dances more and more quickly” (453). The dance shows exultation and freedom of the physical body, but it is not self-directed. He dances in praise of the miracle granted by an Other. The Lame Beggar dances only because he is instructed to do so by the First Musician. The only truth found here is the truth of the Symbolic order. While Yeats has attained a unity of being, that unity is created only by an Other; to be singular and free, the Beggar would have had to possess the ability to cure himself or dance in some awkward, barely mobile way, despite his infirmity.

In *Words upon the Window Pane*, Yeats’s next dancer play, infirmity again plagues the dancer figure. In this play, Yeats abandons both Celtic and Christian mythology to stage what seems to be, at least in presentation, a drawing-room drama. The setting, “A lodging-house room, an armchair, a little table in front of it, chairs on either side. A fireplace and window. A kettle on the hob and some tea-things on a dresser . . . ,” would be more readily found in Wilde or Ibsen. Its realistic setting does not employ musicians or even involve the choreographed beginning, in which a piece of cloth is folded and unfolded to indicate the opening of the theatrical space; it does not even include a dance. This can be read as a dancer play only when the audience understands that the heart of the dancer plays is not the choreography. Freedom of movement was essential to Yeats’s conception of his dances. Yeats frequently left choreography to his actors, such as Michio Ito, who created the dances for and performed the role of the Guardian of the Well, or Ninette de Valois, with whom he created Fand (Ellis 329). It is the freedom the character achieves, mostly easily through dance, which allows a person to escape convention and express an emotional and spiritual power unattainable in daily life. In *Words upon the Window Pane*, the emphasis on the vocative drive present in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and *Calvary* becomes the only form of the dance.

In the guise of a quaint drawing room, Yeats stages a meeting with occult forces through the medium, Mrs. Henderson. Her role in this play is two-fold: to convince the cynic John Corbet of the validity of the occult and to show how truth can happen to a group, not just an individual. Early in the play, Mrs. Henderson defines her role, as medium or channel through which things can happen for other people, by stating, “We do not call up spirits; we make the right conditions and they come” (Clark and Clark ln. 210–11).

At the end of the play, the audience learns that the first of Mrs. Henderson’s two tasks is incomplete; she has not convinced John Corbet of her truth, the truth of the spirit world. Mrs. Henderson’s séances are her
means to give witness to the encounters she has with the occult by making them public and allowing others contact with their own truths. Corbet is impressed, but he says, “I prefer to think that you created it all, that you are an accomplished actress and scholar” (Clark and Clark ln. 227–28). His words “I prefer” show that he is making an active choice to resist the truth to which he has been privy. The spirit of Jonathan Swift is the key to Corbet’s truth, but Corbet cannot accept it. Instead, he “prefers” to fool himself into thinking that nothing occult occurred, so that he can remain in the patriarchal societal order instead of slipping into the feminine space of the medium’s belief. This is not Mrs. Henderson’s failure, however; she was loyal to the truth that some are not yet ready to accept.

She is outwardly successful in demonstrating how a truth event can happen to a group. Badiou is careful to point out that truth can be encountered by any number of people, but that each person will give witness to the event differently, so as to remain loyal to her particular experience. Badiou’s own words seem to channel Yeats when Badiou writes, in the voice of someone experiencing truth: “I am altogether present there, linking my component elements via that excess beyond myself induced by the passing through me of a truth” (49). This passage describes the position of the medium, who allows the excess of the occult to use her as a gateway to achieve contact with those seeking their truths. Although the figure of Jonathan Swift dominates the séance and forbids others present to contact their loved ones, the people in attendance are still satisfied. As Mrs. Mallet explains, “A bad séance is just as exhausting as a good séance and you must be paid” (Clark and Clark ln. 411–12). This statement testifies to the audience’s knowledge that the experience of the séance was valuable, even if it did not meet preconceived notions.

The séance to which the audience is privy is also, as Jeffares points out, an instance of what Yeats describes in *A Vision* as “dreaming back” or the tendency of a spirit, when entering the nonspirit world, to relive its most intense moments instead of simply “returning,” during which a spirit adheres to the chronology of its life. Corbet believes the medium is discussing Swift in his prime with Vanessa, which would make Swift’s physical appearance young and healthy. The medium instead describes Swift as follows: “I saw him clearly just as I woke up. His clothes were dirty, his face covered with boils. Some disease had made one of his eyes swell up, it stood out from his face like a hen’s egg” (ln. 445–48). The disparity between scene and appearance that the medium witnesses displays Yeats’s principle of “dreaming back,” or the ability to recount the most potent moments without continuity. The intensity of actions relived in “dreaming
back” leads the medium and even Corbet to greater emotional reaction to the scene. This pattern of the moment of greatest drama is one under which all of Yeats’s dancer plays operate. The Cuchulain plays highlight the most mythic moments of his life, and Words upon the Window Pane recalls the most important moment in Swift’s life to force Corbet into contact with one of his most intense experiences as the potential for spiritual awareness. Corbet’s rejection of his chance to accept the occult shows the growing cynicism that plagued Yeats as he grew older, a tendency displayed in his poetry, beginning with The Tower.

Yeats presents dance in a crafty form. Instead of choreography, we are given the steps of ghosts. Yeats’s earlier plays seem to adhere to “the belief in the primacy of and purity of movement over the corruptness and only approximate adequacy of language” (Ellis 247). In Yeats’s system, the essence of movement is that it can convey a more essential and primal system of meaning and emotion than words can. In Words upon the Window Pane, Yeats uses the near-unintelligible language of the medium channeling the spirits as a transformation of movement back into language. The only person who truly understands most of Mrs. Henderson’s words is Corbet, to whom they are directed. This is like the dance itself. Dance, in Yeats’s plays, always has a target audience in the play itself, the person(s) whose truth can be encountered through it. Words, mixed up and turned into historical riddles by Mrs. Henderson, are her verbal dance that attempts to lead Corbet to the truth. She is successful in her role; the dancer figure here does carry out faithful witness to the truth. She cannot be blamed if her audience is not yet ready to accept that truth. Corbet, as a representative of the audience, misses his chance to leap off the precipice of his desire for conventional understanding. The dancer figure does her job, but the audience does not appreciate it.

A second and even less obvious indication of the role of the dancer can be found in the Swift/Vanessa/Stella love triangle that the medium reveals. As Corbet recounts, “He [Swift] met Vanessa in London at the height of his political power. She followed him to Dublin. She loved him for nine years, perhaps, died of love, but Stella loved him all her life” (In. 91–94). The triangular structure of the relationship recalls that of Cuchulain, Emer, and Eithne Inguba. Corbet at first believes that Stella is the woman more favored. He describes her love for Swift as lasting her entire life, but as we know from Lacanian theory and its conjunctions with Yeats’s work, love can be damning. Such is the case with Stella, according to Swift, as we learn late in the play: “Then, because you understand that I am afraid of solitude, afraid of outliving my friends—and myself—you comfort me
in that last verse—you over praise my moral nature when you attribute
to it a rich mantle, but O how touching those words which describe your
love . . . Yes, you will close my eyes, Stella” (ln. 387–96). Stella, like Einthe
Inguba, will never achieve her own freedom because her movements are
directed by another. She is told by Swift what to do. He choreographs her
life.

Unlike his physical relationship with Stella, Swift refuses to touch
Vanessa. She protests, misunderstanding the freedom he is granting her,
pleading, “Why have you let me spend hours in your company if you did
not want me to love you?” (ln. 245–46). Moments later, it is Vanessa who
controls the action or movement when she instructs, “Give me your hands.
I will put them upon my breast. . . . O it is white—white as the gambler’s
dice—white ivory dice” (ln. 314–16). By describing her breasts as dice,
Vanessa makes love a gamble, an uncertain contingency or an exchange
always teetering on the edge of disaster. This is Vanessa’s dance. She is
willing to risk her emotional and physical health to get what she wants.
Since what she wants is the touch and love of another, she is not really
free, but I believe Yeats intends Vanessa’s actions to be her freedom. She
is self-directed here and willing to assume all risk to attain her goal. She,
too, proves that for some people, the truth of the Real can be connected to
another person’s truth.

In Resurrection, his final play for dancers, Yeats further mutates and
divides the singular figure of the dancer into three figures or sets of fig-
ures: the Dionysian revelers, Christ, and the Syrian. The mass of Dionysian
revelers are actually described as dancing. As the Greek points out to the
Hebrew, “Though the music has stopped, some men are still dancing and
some of the dancers have gashed themselves with knives imagining them-
selves, I suppose, at once the god and the Titans that murdered him” (ln.
151–54). Dionysian revelers take pleasure in their own blood, or abject
material, but abject materials are too close at hand to provide Real freedom.
Instead, the sight of their own blood makes them feel omnipotent. They
are not content to be god figures for themselves, or even to be one version
of a god figure, but want to encompass all manifestations of the divine.
Their greed binds them to the Symbolic; they miss the chance to relinquish
influence over others to gain control of the self.

The second choice to fill that position is Christ. His appearance at the
end of the play is silent; he wears a mask and only moves from the exterior
space to the interior room, passing by each of the three main characters
(Ellis 300). As Christ passes, he exposes the different beliefs or truths that
each has espoused throughout the play.
The differing belief systems represented in the play help to show Yeats’s growing ability to maintain minority points of view while still using his work as witness to his own truth. The first figure to examine is the Hebrew, who consistently denies that Christ is the savior, saying, “I am glad that he was not the Messiah; we might all have been deceived to our lives’ end, or learnt the truth too late” (Clark and Clark ln. 130–31). The Hebrew is the only one of the three main characters who has no comment at the end of the play, which seems to imply that the Hebrew, upon sight, knows that his prior belief was false and thus cannot give witness to it.

For the Greek, Christ is a representative, a spirit figure meant to inspire human beings, but not to manifest God. Christ, as image, does not have the power and originality of form or structure which the god of the Syrian has. Thus, when the risen Christ passes by the Greek, he witnesses his own truth, saying, “It is the phantom of our master. Why are you afraid? He has been crucified and buried, but only in semblance, and is among us once more. There is nothing here but a phantom, it has no flesh and blood” (Clark and Clark ln. 323–26). The Greek may have his own truth, but it also is not Yeats’s truth.

The Syrian is the character whose beliefs most closely follow Yeats’s own. The character’s faith in Christ derives from his belief that Christ is related to Dionysus, another god born of mortal woman. Like Yeats, the Syrian combines religious traditions into something intensely personal, into his own singular truth. For the Syrian, Christ is the event of truth that supports his rhetorical questioning: “What if there is always something that lies outside knowledge, outside order? What if at the moment when knowledge and order seem complete that something appears? . . . What if the irrational return? What if the circle begins again?”4 (Clark and Clark ln. 280–83, 285–86). Christ’s return, silent, in the mode of expression beyond words, reinforces the truth of both the Syrian and Yeats himself.

It is easy to understand, then, that Christ is the dancer figure of the play, but if the dancer figure is more than one who escapes language and expresses unique physicality, the Syrian could also be considered a dancer figure. It is the Syrian whose beliefs transgress societal expectations. Historically, his belief in the risen Christ would have placed him in the tiny minority. Though he speaks, his message is about escaping language and meaning, “the irrational return.” It is also the Syrian who has the privilege

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4. Again we hear echoes of Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” but this time the echo is ironic. In Donne’s work, the circle is closed, encapsulating and protecting the loving partners. Here, the circle may be pried open to begin a new search.
of seeing the empty tomb. He encounters the void, which is equivalent to feminine space void of all expected materials. He runs to proclaim the truth he has encountered in that journey, and, like a dance, he longs to bring the example of truth to others. While he is not able to convert them, or show them new truths, he does allow them to become subjects by reinforcing their beliefs. Traditional expectations lead the reader to believe that the Syrian is a man, but Yeats gives no indication of gender. In fact, by designating characters with their ethnicities instead of their names, Yeats leaves the genders of all the characters, except Christ, ambiguous. The ambiguity helps to show that in Real truth, even anatomical sexual differences do not matter. The Syrian has encountered feminine things in proper spirit, and in doing so is privy to feminine experiences. The character is able to transgress gender along with societal norms. It is the Syrian who stands as Yeats’s last and most successful dancer figure.

Yeats’s own words in Anima Hominus bring together Badiou’s truth and that of the dancer figures. Yeats writes, “The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat. The desire that is satisfied is not a great desire, nor has the shoulder used all its might that an unbreakable gate has never strained” (Kolacatroni 341). Just as truth is a personal event, so are Yeats’s creations. His creations, those that “satisfy desire,” are not intended to quench the desperate thirst of his audience members, but simply to sate his own longings.

Since most of his dancer figures fail to achieve their own truths, Yeats displays the deep desperation of the Modern condition. Yeats’s dancer enacts Aristotelian tragedies. The key to Aristotelian tragedy is the tragic flaw with which the hero figure is born. This flaw is a destiny which the hero cannot escape. Yeats turns the traditional flaw of hubris into self-sacrifice. The dancer figures devote their lives to others, dancing in a frenzy so that those who watch can live by their example, but not allowing themselves enough distance from the others, or their own garbage, to escape their former selves. Their dances are abject sinthomes. If we think back to Kristeva’s explanation of abjection, it is the process of ridding the body of waste materials, those very things which mark us as human. Kristeva, however, does not indicate what we are to do with those materials once they are expelled. The dancer figures keep them close and thus allow themselves to be contaminated by the stench of their own refuse. The sinthome of the dance is then a material representation of the abject process, but Yeats’s work does not display the full potential of sinthome. Lacan’s sinthome has the potential outcome of positive creation, while Yeats’s exploration of a similar concept ends with abject destruction.
The dancer puts himself or herself at risk to make the space necessary for truth. The space in which the dancer dances is a pastoral landscape, being cleared by the scythe-like movements of each dancer. In pastoral terms, the dancer clears the fields of both good and bad growth, or positive and negative connections to the conventional world; the dancer figure is denuded. The dancer figures litter the natural and formerly clean landscape with their expelled materials. The landscape in which the dancer figures remain is polluted by these excretions and made barren. Their worlds are desolate, while those who watch them are spurred on to new territories. Thus, the pastoral in Yeats’s dancer plays is not the Real pastoral of wild self-generation, but a truly wasted land, or graveyard of convention that cannot be revitalized.

Only Yeats’s final dancer figure, the Syrian, succeeds in bringing a glimmer of the hope of Modern truth that art can save. The art of the dance that Yeats puts on display is not one that can be copied or imitated. It is passionately personal and even dangerous. The drawing-room audience, in close physical proximity to the actors, can feel the palpable tension and trauma of the dancer figures and see the jouissance of the dances themselves. The ecstatic pain of the dancers, when conveyed as potently as Yeats intends, spurs the audience on toward action. The dancer figures sacrifice themselves not only to the other characters, but also to the audience. Yeats’s dancer figures remain in the Symbolic, fertilizing its greedy crops with the abject material, still tied to them like uncut umbilical cords, while the audience members sever all ties, hopefully kicking and screaming their ways to the Real. Yeats sacrifices the dancer figures in his plays, forcing them to miss their prospects of freedom so that the audience can see the fate to which this missed opportunity dooms them. The glimmer of Modern hope in a Yeats play is that the audience can capture what the characters miss.