

## ‘A Memory and a Prophecy’: Images of W. B. Yeats’s *At The Hawk’s Well*

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*This article examines W.B. Yeats’s ban on press photography during the first performance of At The Hawk’s Well in Lady Cunard’s drawing room in 1916, contrasting this with a photograph taken from a later performance by world-famous Symbolist photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn.*

On 2 April 1916, in an aristocratic drawing room in London, W.B. Yeats and the Japanese dancer Michio Ito staged the first production of *At The Hawk’s Well* – an admixture of Irish folklore and the ritualistic form of a Noh play. The audience for this first performance of the play drew the literary and governing elite present in London at the time – Queen Alexandra, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. In writing *At the Hawk’s Well*, Yeats claimed that his goal was not to attract masses and galvanise nationalist sentiment in the way that *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* had done in 1902 – his last unqualified success in the field of drama. Rather, *At The Hawk’s Well* was self-consciously created as an elite, exclusive piece of theatre:

[...] with the help of Japanese plays [...] I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way – an aristocratic form [...]<sup>1</sup>

In later performances in more conventional venues, Yeats lamented that ‘the muses were but half welcome’, implying that his vision was only properly achieved in this elusive, exclusive setting.<sup>2</sup> When the script for the play was published in *To-Day* in May 1917, it included stage directions that harked back to this original drawing room setting – though, as no photographs of the performance were taken, there was nothing for most readers to look back upon.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the dismissal of photographers from the initial performance seems to have been, for Yeats, a key part of what made it successful. With pride, he describes how:

We found a newspaper photographer planting his camera in a dressing-room and explained to him that as fifty people could pay our expenses, we did not invite the press, and that flashlight photographs were not desirable for their own sake. He was incredulous and persistent – a whole page somewhere or other was at our disposal [...]<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1961) p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Four Plays for Dancers*, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1921) p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> William Butler Yeats, *At The Hawk’s Well and The Cat and the Moon: Manuscript Materials*, ed. by A. Parkin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 179.

<sup>4</sup> *Four Plays for Dancers*, p. 87.

This recollection, together with Yeats's statement of intent regarding his intention for the play, raises questions about the kind of Irish consciousness Yeats was trying to create, and the extent to which his vision of a cosmopolitan Irish identity meant anything to the members of any audience beyond the rarefied group that gathered for the first performance. Yeats condemns photography as freely as he denigrates the mob, and seems intent on fighting the reproducibility and accessibility implied by the medium of photography, which went against his ambitions:

I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many [...] I desire a mysterious art, always reminding and half-reminding those who understand it of dearly loved things, doing its work by suggestion, not by direct statement, a complexity of rhythm [...] a memory and a prophecy [...]<sup>5</sup>

Yeats's attitude towards photography affects how we ought to interpret the play, and what it might offer to audiences outside the charmed circle of his initial viewership. His dismissal of photographers can be read as an insistence upon an Irish national identity that escapes capture by lens. Following Adorno's *Jargon of Authenticity*, Colin Graham has demonstrated how it could be argued that Yeats's work aimed for 'the creation of an organicism which is ideologically-charged, exclusivist' and 'evaluative', and 'a way of resisting multinationalism, post-nationalism and any other contortion [...] to the centrality of the nation as a political unit.'<sup>6</sup> According to Conor Cruise O'Brien especially, Yeats offers a proto-fascist, deliberately impossible schema of Irish identity, offering only meaningless sacrifice as an end in itself without any kind of national community being left present to reap the benefits of the so-called authenticity for which he strove.<sup>7</sup> Seamus Deane goes so far as to cast Yeats's 'anti-modernistic spirit' as responsible for creating 'the Ireland of unemployment, poverty and social alienation'.<sup>8</sup>

However, a photograph of Yeats's collaborator in the production of *At the Hawk's Well* complicates this notion of his 'anti-modernistic spirit'. Despite Yeats's proud dismissal of the newspaperman in April, a photograph of *At the Hawk's Well* in performance nevertheless survives – specifically of his collaborator, the Japanese dancer Michio Ito, in the full hawk costume prepared by Edmund Dulac, captured by the then-famous American art photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn:

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Muriel Bradbrook, 'Yeats and the Noh Drama of Japan' in *Aspects of Dramatic Form in the English and the Irish Renaissance*, vol. 3 (Brighton: Harvester, 1983), p. 160.

<sup>6</sup> Colin Graham, 'Blame it on Maureen O'Hara: Ireland and the Trope of Authenticity', in *Cultural Studies*, 15:1 (2001), pp. 58-75, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Passion and Cunning and Other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988), p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Seamus Deane, 'Remembering the Irish Future', *Crane Bag*, 8:1 (1984), pp. 81-92.



Figure 2: Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Michio Ito as the Hawk in 'At The Hawk's Well', W. B. Yeats*, digital positive from gelatin silver negative, 1916 (Collection of George Eastman Museum (1976.0154.4806))

There are other photographs documenting the creation of the costume, but this is the only visual record of the costume itself being worn in entirety in something like a performance context. Indeed, even in the script for the 1916 performance, Yeats had whittled down his stage directions to simply ‘moving like a hawk [...] for some two minutes.’<sup>9</sup> There is no verbal record of what the dance was like; the photograph is all we have. With his wings outstretched, Ito is likely preparing for or performing the dance that audiences would have seen – he did not improvise his dances, but carefully and deliberately crafted them.<sup>10</sup>

Ito’s mute dance is the dramatic climax of the play. A young Cuchulain, not yet legendary, arrives at a well where an old man is standing vigil. When water flows from the well, drinking it is said to bring eternal life. The old man has been watching the well for years, waiting for the waters to run, but he has twice been tricked by ‘the woman of the Sidhe herself/The mountain witch, the unappeasable-shadow’. After being led astray and returning to damp from where the water had flowed, his chance gone. Angrily, the old man orders Cuchulain away: ‘leave the well to me, for it belongs/to all that’s old and withered.’<sup>11</sup> Cuchulain refuses. Eventually, the old man is lulled to sleep by a distant song, and Cuchulain is led away from the well by the Sedhe in the guise of Ito’s hawk.

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<sup>9</sup> *Manuscript Materials*, p. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Helen Caldwell, *Michio Ito: The Dancer and his Dances* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> *Manuscript Materials*, p. 133.

In the 1916 version of the script used in the drawing room performance, the play ends with the old man lamenting that he has been tricked a third and final time, that ‘Accursed dancers, you have stolen my life/That there should be such evil in a shadow.’<sup>12</sup> In the *To-Day* version published in 1917, an additional section is added, where Cuchulain returns from his daze to the sound of Eoife’s warrior tribe clamouring in the distance. He goes out to meet them, thundering in the third person: ‘Cuchulain, son of Sualtam, comes!’<sup>13</sup> In the original, the dance is a magic trap of pure tragedy, deluding young and old to spend their lives waiting for what never comes. In the published version, Cuchulain is still distracted from the waters of immortality, but, ironically, marches off to begin the adventures that form the ‘immortal’ epic cycles that let his name live on. He loses one kind of immortality, but by action surges out to seize another. In both stories, the dance is decisive.

Kevin Riordan has argued that Yeats’s decision to send away photographers of the initial performance was to limit ‘the archival traces’ and to make the performance ‘as fleeting as the drama’s pivotal moment, when immortality will be possible.’<sup>14</sup> In 1924, Yeats explicitly set up photography as one end of a dichotomy against ‘true creation’, and related both to his hopes for immortality:

No man can create, as did Shakespeare, Homer, Sophocles, who does not believe, with all his blood and nerve, that man’s soul is immortal, for the evidence lies plain to all men that where that belief has declined, men have turned from creation to photography. We condemn, though not without sympathy, those who would escape from banal mechanism through technical investigation and experiment. We proclaim that these bring no escape [...]<sup>15</sup>

Yeats sets up photography as antithetical to his enterprise as a poet and a dramatist. By this time, Coburn himself had abandoned photography to live a life of Freemasonry and Druidism in Harlech, Wales; even to one of its most accomplished early practitioners, photography had a tense relationship with literature and visual art in the early twentieth century. But in Yeats’s Ireland, the political situation gave additional context to artistic snobbery: John Tagg, following Michel Foucault, argues that photography was a key means of population control for the British colonial state.<sup>16</sup> Gail Baylis goes further in delineating the condition of Ireland, which he argues ‘served both as a laboratory for testing out modes of visual control – the institutional use of prison and police photography offer instances where it pre-dates its adoption in Britain – and as a site where difference had to be made visible.’<sup>17</sup> The Irish Special Branch of the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> *Manuscript Materials*, p. 197.

<sup>14</sup> Kevin Riordan, *The Time Machine and the Ghost: Attending to Life-And-Death in Literature, Cinema, and Theatre* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, University of Minnesota, 2011) p. 195.

<sup>15</sup> William Butler Yeats, ‘Editorial’ (or Manifesto) in *To-Morrow* 1:1 (1924), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> Gail Baylis, ‘Metropolitan Surveillance and Rural Opacity: Secret Photography in Nineteenth-Century Ireland’, *History of Photography*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2011), pp. 26-38, p. 27.

metropolitan police in Ireland were critically aware of the extent to which secrecy was one of the main weapons that rebels could use in disrupting colonial rule. Edward Jenkinson, founder of the Irish Special Branch, wrote that ‘to beat secret societies’ one had to ‘work on secret lines’.<sup>18</sup>

Yeats was deeply aware of how images could manipulate and be manipulated; Marjorie Howes has argued that by using theatre as an ‘occult ritual’, he could ‘inspire audiences to practical work in the public sphere precisely because [occult theatre] accessed the intersubjective unconscious, instinct and the emotions.’<sup>19</sup> In his own autobiography, he claimed that ‘all civilization is held together by the suggestions of an invisible hypnotist – by artificially created illusions’. His dismissal of the cameras can be read as an expression of this anxiety; a desire to maintain control over his own illusions, to remain ‘invisible’. The episode is more than a straightforward rejection of a modern visual art in favour of those that are more ‘authentic’; it can also be read as an anti-colonial articulation of Irish identity. In particular, *At the Hawk’s Well* uses a radical *inauthenticity* to connect Ireland with a narrative of global cultural exchange that transcends the imperial connections of the British Empire, while still maintaining Yeats’s overriding preoccupation with making Irish mythology relevant to the current nationalist struggle. Coburn’s photograph of *At the Hawk’s Well* depicts a blisteringly inauthentic melange, giving a visual demonstration of the different layers at work within Yeats’s project: an American photographer depicts a cosmopolitan Japanese dancer who moved freely among the highest social circles in Britain, speaking German with H. H. Asquith at the height of World War One.<sup>20</sup> He wears a Greek-style tragic mask and a hawk costume with Egyptian elements, built by a Frenchman, in a play that celebrates Irish folklore, but was written in English.

The photograph is not mentioned anywhere either by Yeats or by Coburn; the exact terms within and circumstances around which it was taken remain unclear. But it was captured after Coburn had produced his best-known publication, *Men of Mark*, and become internationally known as an art photographer. It was also after Coburn had invented the ‘vortograph’ with Ezra Pound, and created some of the first completely abstract images in the history of photography. An American Symbolist and pictorialist, Coburn was aware of how – particularly to colonised peoples – his camera was seen as ‘the evil eye, the magic box which snares the soul’.<sup>21</sup> In 1910, helping A. J. Anderson with *The Artistic Side of Photography*, he became interested in Japanese painting, which the book suggested was nearer to photography than any other art

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Stephen Bull, ‘Policing the Land Wars: Official Responses to Political Protest and Agrarian Crime in Ireland, 1879-91’, (unpublished PhD thesis, Goldsmith College, University of London, 2000), p. 317.

<sup>19</sup> Marjorie Howes, *Yeats’s Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 89.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Thwaite, ‘Three Meetings’ in *London Magazine*, vol. 37, iss. 3 (Jun 1, 1997), p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Alvin Langdon Coburn ‘Alvin Langdon Coburn Himself’, *The Pall Mall Magazine*, June 1913, pp. 757-763, p. 758.

because of its impressionistic rendering of gradations of light.<sup>22</sup> In turning his lens to Michio Ito as Yeats's Hawk, Coburn fills Yeats's blank in the written script with his own representation of the dance by Ito.

In his autobiography, Coburn claims that 'for the creation of a picture, vision is of prime importance, and patience, discrimination, and even marksmanship[...]<sup>23</sup> This particular photograph of Ito shows him without audience or recognizable location. Our attention is focused entirely on the bird-like stature of his arms and the shape of his body. He has one leg pulled up, reminiscent of the wild birds he apocryphally imitated in public at London Zoo with Yeats while creating this dance.<sup>24</sup> His mask does not quite cover the face, but conceals enough that we have no idea what the dancer looks like beneath, or any idea of his regular stature or appearance. The picture visually challenges us – 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?'<sup>25</sup> The image still demands interpretation and commentary, as was Coburn's aim as a Symbolist. Yeats amassed an extensive collection of photographs of Japanese theatre before writing *At the Hawk's Well*.<sup>26</sup> For someone seeking to do the same with the Noh-hybrid that Yeats and Ito produced, the photograph gives few answers. The action appears on what Albricht, in relation to Yeats's poetry, describes as 'a surface large enough and blank enough to be the mirror of ultimate things'.<sup>27</sup> The dancing figure in this context does not come loaded with recognizable symbols – the heterogeneous grouping makes the meaning of the dance hard to nail down, even with a visual record of what it was like.

This image of mythical Ireland that Yeats, Ito, and Coburn offer is subversive. Such statements of variable identity by a colonised minority are troubling to nation states. Michio Ito, after moving to America, found himself arrested by the FBI after Zeroes bombed Pearl Harbour; though he had committed no crime against the government of the United States, his hearing committee was deeply troubled by his profession and character, describing him as 'an artist of artistic temperament' and his ability to move with ease through the highest echelons of European, American, and Japanese society. In America, Ito's profession, in conjunction with his nationality, allowed the FBI to construct his identity into that of an unpredictable, dangerous character – not criminal, but critically eclectic. J. Edgar Hoover personally recommended Ito's detention 'in the event of a national emergency'.<sup>28</sup> Before Pearl Harbour, the American government had already created a case against Ito, and he was not released until after the end of the Pacific War.

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<sup>22</sup> Mike Weaver, *Alfred Langdon Coburn, Symbolist Photographer 1882-1966: Beyond the Craft* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1986), p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, ed. by H and A Gernsheim (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 44

<sup>24</sup> *Michio Ito: The Dancer and his Dances*, p. 164.

<sup>25</sup> William Butler Yeats, 'Among School Children' in *The Poems of W.B. Yeats: A New Edition*, ed. by R. J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1933).

<sup>26</sup> *The Time Machine and the Ghost*, p. 202.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Albricht, *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Kevin Riordan, 'Performance in the Wartime Archive: Michio Ito at the Alien Enemy Hearing Board', *American Studies*, Vol. 5/6, Iss. 4/1 (2017), pp. 67-89, 232.

Ito's imprisonment for a crime he had only the potential to commit was derived from a judgement by the state regarding the meaning of Ito's identity as an international Japanese dancer. Performances like that of *At the Hawk's Well*, which showed how he could ingratiate and integrate himself via art and identity into the favour of London high society, were alarming to the surveillance apparatus of the state. In similar vein, Yeats aimed his ambivalent articulation of Irish identity in *At the Hawk's Well* at the most elite audience that his influence and reputation could muster – but in dismissing cameras from the event and evading mass scrutiny, Yeats created a work that was harder to interrogate in the same way, both for the British state policing Irish identity, and for nationalists hoping to use his work as part of a stable image of Irish identity that could be used to galvanise armed resistance.

Yeats's dismissal of photography took place within this battleground for control over images. Yeats cast photography as an art that mistook preservation for immortality. Coburn wrote of the 'marksmanship' in his craft. Photography in both cases is about taking shots; killing and stuffing a moment and confusing it for the real thing. But as far as Ito was concerned, photography and his style of dance were a perfect union. In describing his technique, he claimed that 'I am a sculptor, for I work, and I work over each pose until it means what I would have it mean. If you cry "Stop!" in any place in my dance, you will find that it is a pose that means something.'<sup>29</sup> Coburn took Ito at his word, freezing an image of what Yeats left deliberately invisible. But our glimpse of the dance gives us no definitive answer to the questions of immortality, authenticity, and identity with which Yeats was battling – it is only one statue, one aspect of what Yeats envisioned as a changing, shifting identity and heritage – one that is chased after, like the Hawk by Cuchulain, and never found.

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<sup>29</sup> Harriette Underhill, 'Michio Ito', in *New York Tribune*, August 19, 1917, section 4.

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