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Modalities of Revival

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Yeats, Revival and the Temporalities of Modernism

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*Down the mountain walls
From where pan's cavern is
Intolerable music falls.*

Yeats, "News for the Delphic Oracle"

1 Yeats and the Dialectics of Modernism

Oscar Wilde, in "Critic as Artist," has Gilbert admit that he "lived in terror of not being misunderstood." The point, for Gilbert, is that misunderstanding is the sign of an artistic temperament, one that can be neither contained nor trained through education, for "nothing that is worth knowing can be taught" (1114). What is worth knowing is what must be, at least at first, misunderstood.¹ W. B. Yeats also lived in terror of not being misunderstood, in just this pedagogical sense, for his poetry, his drama, his criticism, his autobiographies, all were elements of a constantly evolving, self-revising *personality*. This is to be expected of a poet whose aesthetic sensibility required the mask and the symbol, required dissimulation as well as revelation, required in short a dialectical logic of misprision. Yeats knew from the first that eternity must accommodate the time-bound violence that it appears to transcend, that we must "[h]ate on and love through unrepining hours." For to "hate on" is to live on in the world, amid the "fury and mire of human veins" (Byzantium" 8) that does not transcend itself, even as we aspire to become *ensouled* as love: "Before us lies eternity; our souls / Are love, and a continual farewell."²

The passage, from naïve faith in the possibility of transcendence to the wisdom of skepticism, is a familiar narrative in Yeats studies; however, it presupposes that Yeats's faith in transcendence was absolute, at least at first, and that he became a modernist only

after he abandoned that faith. In this narrative, the poet's Revival period (early 1880s to sometime around 1910) is cordoned off as a preliminary stage of his development, one that prepares for modernism but is still too deeply invested in Romantic nationalism to allow the poet to modernize himself.³ I want to suggest that Yeats's modernism is rooted in and continuous with Revival, in part because Revival taught the poet that faith in transcendence, in an *otherworld* of eternal Beauty could only be grounded in the historical world he occupied. After all, the hidden "faery vats and the "olden dances" take place amid the "rocky highland / Of Sleuth Wood in the lake" or where "the wave of moonlight glosses / The dim grey sands with light" ("The Stolen Child" 6, 17, 13-14). Yeats learned that eternity was always already embattled by time. In fact, I submit that the poet's misrecognition of faith enabled his later recognition that *embattlement* itself, a kind of aesthetic adversity, was the true object of his faith: not the resolved dialectic but the friction and struggle that dialectics never quite overcomes, a "continual farewell," a looping backward in order to pitch forward again into "dim coming times" ("To Ireland in the Coming Times" 46). To the extent that it resists closure and leaves behind a "remainder" (a residue of hate after love's triumph, for example), Yeats's is a negative dialectics in Theodor Adorno's sense, one that makes way for the separate being of the negative moment and the separate temporality of its resistance.⁴

Negative dialectics accommodates the struggle between contraries; it does not seek to resolve them. For Calvin Bedient, this irresolution constitutes "a dialectic of staying and going, of surrender and self-assertion" (8). Yeats's modernism is a "joy in motion" (77): "His dialectic, one term of which is movement, is itself movement" (170). In reading Yeats, Bedient turns to Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou, arguably anti-

dialectical thinkers, to make a case for Yeats's dialectical sensibility. I want to build on his argument, to sound out his logic, for if movement, chaos, noise are all valences of the Real, as Bedient suggests (see 87), then in a negative dialectics understood as "itself movement," movement (presumably the *negative* term of the process) is propelled dialectically toward itself; the goal of a timeless and absolute self-identity is thus displaced by the temporality of propulsion.⁵ It is this temporality—the materiality of dialectical movement—that I want to explore here as a chief characteristic of Yeats's modernism. But in order to do so, I will have to pose the question in a way that will account for Yeats's Revivalism, an aspect of the poet's career that stymies most critics who attempt to account for his modernism.

2 Revival and Recognition

Like so many other critics, Bedient rather dismissively puts Revival into quarantine. He sees it primarily as *a* movement, one that by 1914 had "begun to exhaust its first enthusiasms" (26) and had ceased to interest the Irish poet who was turning more and more toward Europe. To be sure, like John M. Synge and Lady Augusta Gregory, his partners in the Abbey Theatre, Yeats was sometimes accused (largely by nationalists, including his close friend Maud Gonne) of co-opting Irish cultural identity in order to create a modern literature for a metropolitan audience.⁶ This way of putting the case for Revival fails to account for certain key continuities in Yeats's work, particularly the poet's attitudes toward time, temporality, memory and history, and grants authority implicitly to a view of Revival as a form of colonialist cultural appropriation.

Irish Revival was the product of a metrocolony with a sophisticated media environment, including many newspapers devoted to special interests across the political spectrum; a fairly open market for broadsheets, pamphlets and other “ephemera”; theatres and theatre groups; literary and political societies with their own publishing outlets; schools and universities. Access to advanced media technology, and the tight-knit, interdisciplinary media *habitus* that it energized, provided Revival groups with a host of possibilities for promoting their ideas and disseminating their message. My claim about Yeats’s modernism depends on first acknowledging that Revival is (and was historically) an *attitude* toward culture and its temporalities that more often than not challenged the very regressive political positions it is sometimes held to have taken, and that it was by no means a single or monolithic movement concerned with the retrieval or preservation of *the* pre-colonial past.⁷ A wide assortment of intellectuals, artists, poets, scholars, journalists, editors, and academics adopted a Revival attitude toward Ireland’s recent and “pre-historic” past during a time of decolonization when such a stance inevitably took on a nationalist dimension. What united them, even when they diverged ideologically, was the desire to re-introduce the nonmodern into the modern by way of its inclusion in new historical accounts.⁸ In this way Revival writers tactically redeployed rhetorical tropes and figures—for example, the peasant, the “bonny colleen,” the ballad singer, Cuchulainn, the women of the *Sidhe*—in ways that did not revive the past so much as mediate it anew, offer new ways of thinking about Ireland, Irish identity and Irish time.⁹ David Lloyd speaks of “an alternative conception of historical time” in Ireland in which “the temporality of modernization” is “rifted with formations that live on as the altered shape of practices which, rendered unviable by the inroads of colonial capitalist

rationalization, find new and resistant ways to persist” (*Irish Times* 4). Revival, I’m suggesting, is just such a “resistant way to persist.”

Yeats poetry models a persistent engagement with the Irish past that both corrects misrepresentations and, in the process, generates new errors that are themselves (re)generative.¹⁰ A theme the poet announces again and again is the violence that tears “all things” asunder and the tragic gaiety and “shaping joy” (“Poetry” 187) that motivate “those that build them again” (*Lapis Lazuli* 36). Revival estranges time, not because nostalgia has falsified an authentic relation to the past, but because Revival is, at bottom, a production of time, not a critique of the past but an alternative to it that can be known only “in the dim coming times.”

I cast my heart into my rhymes,
That you, in the dim coming times,
May know how my heart went with them
After the red-rose-bordered hem.

(“To Ireland in the Coming Times” 45-8)

Yeats’s poetry challenges the past to be what he says it will be when it is taken up in coming times, where he will have already cast his rhymes, filled with his heart, so that his future readers (“you”) will know them, recognize them, sanctified by their *having been* proximate to the “red-rose-bordered-hem.”

The temporal dynamic of the early Revival poems—a recursive responsibility within time: *It will have been done*, in coming times, if we *only do it right now*—tends to conform to a modernist poetics of history that sees the past in terms of cyclical or recursive temporal patterns. In many ways, Revival anticipated T. S. Eliot’s “mythic

method” and his belief that the historical sense “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.”¹¹ Yeats’s technique of recursive or nested verb tenses— “tensed temporalities” —also looks forward to Ezra Pound’s method of structuring temporality in *The Cantos*: “Ply over ply / The shallow eddying fluid, / beneath the knees of the gods” (IV:79-81). The Irish poet differs from his American, English and European counterparts in that his historical sense was conditioned by the experience of imperialism, anti-colonialism and revolutionary nationalism.¹² It was also conditioned by an occult understanding of time—for example, the phases of the moon and historical gyres of *A Vision* (1925, 1937) —which posits multiple points of intersection of the present and the past, as well as multiple possible “futural” states.¹³ But like other modernists, he tended to reframe historical themes in terms of aesthetic solutions, like dialectical images that bring process and discovery, misprision and the corrective gaze into a kind of vibrant and sculptural presence—in short, they bring temporality to form. In the dialectical image, writes Walter Benjamin, “what has been comes together in a flash with the now [“now time,” *Jetztzeit*] to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill” (463). The poet casts a corrective gaze on the past, on Irish culture and on the ideals in which he believed and on the works that challenged that belief in the very struggle to represent it. It is a gaze that *disorients* and *redistributes* symbolic power, “the sweetness that all longed for night and day,” and that devours all of time in the standstill of dialectics: the “abounding glittering jet” (“Meditations” I: 20, 12).¹⁴

Reading Yeats’s poetry in the context of Revival presents us with an intriguing instance of the *hermeneutical circle*, which for Heidegger involved a movement back and

forth from part to whole, from work to historical tradition. “We are compelled to follow the circle,” Heidegger writes. “Not only is the main step from work to art a circle like a step from art to work, but every separate step that we attempt circles in this circle” (18). Paul Ricoeur writes of a related phenomenon, the “hermeneutical arc,” moving “between a naïve and a critical interpretation, between a surface and a depth interpretation.” The hermeneutical arc is a unique site for explanation and interpretation, which both find their place along what is, in essence, a *temporal* arc. It makes possible the integration of “the opposed attitudes of explanation and understanding within an overall conception of reading as the recovery of meaning” (161). The logic of misrecognition that characterizes Yeats’s Revivalism presupposes this two-step process of understanding, that moves from naïve to more canny interpretations, but it temporalizes it in recursive and repetitive ways. For in building up intertwining loops of recursive time, his poetry is always in communication with other, earlier works. Multiple standpoints present each work in transit or in transmission within an *œuvre* and across a career, creating multiple opportunities for analysis and interpretation, along progressive and regressive arcs, and at higher levels of understanding.

To large degree, hermeneutics is about recognition; we try to recognize the truth, the authenticity of a voice that comes to us from afar, communicated in an *other* text that we must train ourselves to recognize. Yeats’s Revivalism trained him well in this practice and the inevitable, but also inevitably pedagogical and formative, *mis*recognitions that contribute so much of what is substantial to his work (and, I might add, to the practice of recognition as such). His *œuvre* is steeped in a self-conscious engagement with his own history and poetic production (his redistribution of the symbolic¹⁵), so that each volume

rectifies and overcomes the preceding one. This hermeneutical vocation, one that recognizes the value of misrecognition, brings symbolism into modernism.

3 Symbolism and Temporality

In the dedication to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), Arthur Symons called Yeats “the chief representative of [the Symbolist] movement in our country” (v-vi), a poet who creates “beautiful things,” as part of a general “revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition” (10). Yeats realized, by the late 1890s, that he could only pose the question of the existence of eternal Beauty (which for him was tantamount to Being) in the midst of the materiality of the *now*, the *true-real*, which Julia Kristeva identifies as “an area of risk and salvation for the speaking being” (217). At this time, Yeats would have concurred with Symons’s laconic summation, that Symbolism leads “through beautiful things to the eternal beauty” (9). He understood that eternal Beauty was accessible only through the dynamic and historical process of making beautiful things: “We must labour to be beautiful,” the poet writes in “Adam’s Curse” (20). The labor of which he speaks is spent in the reproduction of symbolic power, whether in a line of poetry or the face of a “beautiful mild woman” (15). In “The Symbolism of Poetry” (1900), in part a response to Symons’s book, Yeats makes a case for his own poetry along lines that resonate with Symons’s critical overview of the movement.¹⁶ Speaking of how a symbol like Time can “evoke an emotion which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms,” Yeats argues that metaphors are not strong enough to make sense of these arrangements, these transitory evocations. They require “symbolical writing,” he declares,

because metaphors are not profound enough to be moving, when they are not symbols, and when they are symbols, they are the most perfect of all, because the more subtle, outside of pure sound, and through them one can best find out what symbols are.

(“The Symbolism of Poetry” 115)

Yeats notes that the Symbolist poet Gérard de Nerval, “like all who are preoccupied with intellectual symbols in our time [was] a foreshadower of the new sacred book, of which all arts, as somebody has said, are beginning to dream” (“Symbolism” 119-20).

Influenced by Blake and Shelley, whose visionary poetics sought to abolish the tyranny of *chrono-logos*, Yeats calls for a poetry of “wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty” (120).

Yeats’s Symbolism desires a *break with time* and the interminable dialectics of love and hate that inscribes a temporality in which beauty fades and love transforms into hatefilled regret about the past.¹⁷ But it also *pledges itself to time* insofar as Yeats is himself a “foreshadower,” one who pitches the “sacred book” of art toward a future that will alone recognize it and be able to read it and, it follows, overcome all past misrecognitions.¹⁸

If Symbolism brought Yeats the conception of eternity outside of time, Revival helped him express that paradox to which Symbolism inevitably led him, that is, the paradox of conceiving eternity while living *in time*. The *otherworld* of the *Sídhe* and the legendary world of the Iron Age warrior Cuchulainn both offered Yeats models of this paradox, for the queer temporalities and geographies of legend and faery are coeval with normative historical time and the official maps of empire. In the *otherworld*,

Fergus rules the brazen cars,
 And rules the shadows of the wood,
 And the white breast of the dim sea
 And all dishevelled wandering stars.

(“Who Goes With Fergus” 9-12)

The folkloric and occult unities (inevitably “dim” and “dishevelled”) that Yeats invoked in his early love and faery poems did not provide a dialectical solution to “love’s bitter mystery” (8), but rather offered up, through images and symbols, “befitting emblems of adversity” (“Meditations” II: 30).

In Yeats’s poetry, idealism is always breaking with itself, asserting a dialectical will to unity at the same time that it asserts a will to break with all dialectics, for the idea of a break has the greater hope of aesthetic achievement than any idealized totality. As Rob Doggett notes, Yeats developed a “relentlessly dialectical poetics,” a negative dialectics that “continually evokes unity only to return to disunity” (10, 125). Anne Fogarty makes a similar point about Yeats’s “fresh aesthetic,” a dialectical solution to the problem of antinomies that let him capture “the disjunctions and dissonance of the modern world while not renouncing a unity of structure” (132). We see this double movement of breaking and refounding, building continuities out of discontinuities, at every stage of the poet’s career. In “Rose of the World,” from his second volume of poems *The Rose* (1893), the poet begins by asking “Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?” A “lovely face” lives on beneath “passing stars” and the “foam of the sky,” bringing into the quotidian world the symbol of eternal Beauty (1, 9). The dialectic of the earthly and the eternal culminates, unresolved, in an image of motion: “He made the

world to be a grassy road / Before her wandering feet” (14-15). The “red lips” on this lovely face, “with all their mournful pride” (2), serve the function of a symbol (the rose of the world) that is in turn the symbol of Helen, who embodied for the poet the qualities of heroism, beauty, creativity and intellect possessed by women like Maud Gonne, “[b]eing high and solitary and most stern” (“No Second Troy” 10). This double displacement is rendered as a dream within a dream that dimly refigures a time before time, when the “grassy road” of the world was laid ready for the “wandering feet” of Beauty.¹⁹ The untimely world of a dreams, as Symons notes, present us with “a more fortunate atmosphere than that in which we live” (50). In this case, it is more fortunate because dreams revive the beauty that passes by identifying it with life itself, and with time’s passage.

Throughout *Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), the poet reveals his increased willingness to make accommodations with time that would enable him to accept the earthly and material as worthy of symbolic value. But his ironic and gradual demotion of the Rose as a symbol of eternal verities like Beauty, signals a new direction. He urges his beloved to

Crumple the rose in your hair;
And cover your lips with odorous twilight and say,
‘O Hearts of wind-blown flame!
O Winds, older than changing of night and day.

(“The Lover asks Forgiveness because of his Many Moods” 4-7)

Timeless winds from “marble cities” in “dove-grey faery lands” (9-10) propel time into every created thing, “murmuring and longing” (8).²⁰ As in so many of the love poems,

lover and beloved are free-floating allegorical figures whose primary purpose is to register the temporal dynamics of the memorial moment in a dialectical image: the “Hearts of wind-blown flame.” The lover brings to his beloved, who is already displaced into a faery temporality, a “heart more old than the horn / That is brimmed from the pale fire of time” (“A Poet to his Beloved” 1, 5-6). The dialectical instability of contraries is captured in the image of the lover, who comes *from* time but is not *of* time, whose human heart antedates the “brimmed” horn emerging from the “pale fire of time.”

“The Secret Rose,” a grand Revival gesture in something like the mature style, dramatizes this instability that signifies the continued existence of the primeval. Though it enfolds Magi and kings, dreamer and believer, the rose is associated with secrecy (*sub rosa*) and a time-annihilating dialectic:

I, too, await
The hour of thy great wind of love and hate.
When shall the stars be blown about the sky,
Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?”

(“Secret Rose” 27-30).

Yeats anticipates here the apocalyptic message of “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz,” in which symbols of innocence and beauty – “[t]wo girls in silk kimonos, both / Beautiful, one a gazelle,” who “have no enemy but time” (19-20, 25) – are placed at the mercy of the poet’s annihilating power:

Arise and bid me strike a match
And strike another till time catch;
Should the conflagration climb,

Run till all the sages know.
 We the great gazebo built,
 They convicted us of guilt;
 Bid me strike a match and blow. (26-32)

The elegy consoles through refusing to console; the poet barter the inviolate gazebo and the idealized image of “[t]wo girls in silk kimonos” (“In Memory” 19) for a cessation of the “filthy modern tide” (“The Statues” 29). This signature trope of Yeats’s modernism – the allure of an annihilation that is in itself the promise of a futural state that cancels all annihilations – is a direct development from Symbolism. “There is such a thing,” Symons drolly notes, “as perfecting form that form may be annihilated” (9).

The idea of perfecting form for annihilation that Symons describes was, for Yeats, both the apex of Symbolist practice and a turning point in his own development, for he found in *personality* the “befitting emblem” of the primal and interminable adversities, the “great wind of love and hate” that had buffeted him from the start. By 1907, he was thinking less of a unified and eternal Beauty than of the perfect expression of personality, which brings time into prominence as an image, a mask alive with eternity. Like T. S. Eliot’s “depersonalized” poet and James Joyce’s “God of the creation,” who “remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork” (*P* 189), the Yeatsian personality is a mythic mask, a “befitting emblem” of the ontological diversity and uncertainty that the mask enables.²¹ In “Poetry and Tradition” (1907), Yeats speaks of style and the “freedom of self-delight,” the “shaping joy” not of symbols but of the “perfection of personality” (186). Personality “has kept the sorrow pure, as it had kept it were the emotion love or hate, for the nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow,

the extremity of joy, perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender, overflowing turbulent energy, and marmorean stillness.” The tension between an overflowing energy and the stillness of a statue crystallizes the poetic personality at a halting point, a poised dialectic, a gyre pyrring but still, like a top at the edge of a table. No longer the emblem of eternal Beauty, the “red rose” of this shaping joy opens “at the trysting-place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity” (186).

Consider “Brown Penny,” which closes *The Green Helmet* (1910), a slight but fine example of how Yeats redistributes symbolic power: “O love is the crooked thing, / There is nobody wise enough / To find out all that is in it” (9-11). Love is bound up with contingency and chance, it must go the way of the penny thrown; it must surrender itself to a labyrinthine fate, “‘looped in the loops of her hair, / Till the loops of time had run’ ” (13-14). The simple brown penny takes on the symbolic power that might otherwise have attached to Love, and distributes that power along entirely different libidinal and temporal cathexes, “trysting-places” and the endless looping of a dream within a dream.

This idea of a falling away from Romantic idealism and its universalizing temporality is the presupposition rather than the effect of Yeats’s “conversion” to (or, as Fogarty puts it, self-induction into) modernism. To be sure, Yeats learned a great deal from Ezra Pound at Stone Cottage (in the summers of 1911-13; see Longenbach, *Stone Cottage*), mostly about Japanese Noh drama, and he absorbed a generally bracing, manly classicism that was the ethos of the “men of 1914,” the Anglo-American modernism that began as a form of avant-garde rebellion against Victorian and Edwardian conventions. Pound led him in this direction, but he could not lead him further than the stripped down cadences of *Responsibilities* (1916), which seem spitefully to reject a grand Romantic

vision that lay in ruins in every line. The Revival trope of the peasant, which once had a privileged position in Yeats's symbolic lexicon, was, by 1916, thoroughly de-idealized, stripped of earlier misprisions, and depicted in a style of satiric realism. And while the poet may be indignant at "the obscure spite / Of our old paudeen in his shop" ("Paudeen" 1-2), he is well aware that he is misrecognizing him yet again, using Paudeen, as he had the man in "grey Connemara clothes" ("The Fisherman" 4), as the vehicle for the poet's dispirited revolt against any restraint on his personality.

Responsibilities recalibrates not only the poet's investment in idealism ("Romantic Ireland"), but also the immanence it opposes ("a greasy till") ("September 1913" 2, 7). If Bedient is right, this is a false opposition, and the poet, in locating transcendence in only one place – a place beyond all places – misrecognizes as immanent what is really "the transcendent everywhere."²² What he misses or underestimates is Yeats's tactical appropriation of transcendence as a trope in the creation of an immanent standpoint for his corrective gaze, the "cold eye" that he casts on his life and his own productions in time.

4 Personality and Poetics

If we see a turn towards elegy and commemoration in the poetry after *Responsibilities*, we can attribute it to the same Revival impulse that led Yeats to adapt the disjunctive and recursive temporal dynamics of the *otherworld* to the expression of regret and desire in the love poems. In the later poetry, we see the same temporal dynamics adapted to a new cause: establishing the greatness of an aristocratic imagination on a ground high enough to survive the "filthy modern tide" ("The Statues"

29) that will inevitably engulf the aristocratic world he half-created in Coole Park and had left in flames: “all that great glory spent” (“Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931” 39). The temporality of ancestral spaces, where “life overflows without ambitious pains” (“Meditations” I: 3), was close to timeless, a retreat at least from time’s ravages, where the poet could forget about “Tara uprooted, and new commonness / Upon the throne and crying about the streets” (“In the Seven Woods” 5-7). This impulse in Yeats created monuments to modernism of the sort that Michael North has described, in which the poet “uses the ambiguous nature of sculpture itself and the contradictory traditions behind the word ‘repose’ to place the ‘statue of solitude’ at the center of collective life” (385).²³ The monumentality of “Meditations” and other major sequences in the late 1920s and ’30s is determined as much by their formal integrity as by the vital personality they realize.

By achieving personality, the poet substitutes mask for essence; and with a mask, the poet forms new aesthetic relations, of the sort pioneered by Wilde and Nietzsche:

The aesthetically sensitive man [Nietzsche writes] stands in the same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence; he is a close and willing observer, for these images afford him an interpretation of life, and by reflecting on these processes he trains himself for life.

(*The Birth of Tragedy* 34)

The archetypal Yeatsian hero, the playwright John M. Synge, is just this sort of “aesthetically sensitive man,” whose aspiration toward *Bildung* is shaped not by the dream of harmonious self-unity but by embracing the elemental struggle of aspiration itself, “all that has edge . . . all that heightens the emotions by contest” (“John M. Synge” 236). Yeats could say of him what he said of Robert Gregory, that he consumes “the

entire combustible world in one small room / As though dried straw” (“In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” 82-3).

“I am certain,” Yeats writes in “John M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time” (1910), published a year after Synge’s death, “that my friend’s noble art, so full of passion and heroic beauty, is the victory of a man who in poverty and sickness created from the delight of expression” (233). Synge “train[ed] himself for life,” and his example led Yeats to a momentous discovery: “that purification from insincerity, vanity, malignity, arrogance, which is the discovery of style” (319). Yeats saw in Synge’s connection to the Aran Islands “a correspondence between a lasting mood of the soul and this life that shares the harshness of rocks and wind” (237). This same heroic achievement of “correspondence” (not, it should be noted, the absolute achievement of Hegelian “coincidence”) marks the Irish airman who decouples himself from the world-historical dialectic – “Nor law, nor duty bade me fight / Nor public men, nor cheering crowds” (“An Irish Airman Foresees his Death” 9-10) – and thereby opens himself up to an excess of time: “The years to come seemed waste of breath” (14). Yeats uses the language of exhausted, uncertain time (it only *seems* a waste) to blow time away, in a dramatic instance of “dialectics at a standstill,” in which the fruit of negativity (all those “nors”) constellates into an image of personality untethered to time: “a lonely impulse of delight” (11).

In “A Prayer for my Daughter,” this same pursuit of self-delight is bequeathed to the next generation, the poet’s daughter, who should, he advises, resist the brute realities of historical time and tether herself to the mythic ground of transformation: “a flourishing hidden tree” that has rooted itself “in one dear perpetual place” (41, 48). She should be

ready to take on the combustible fury of the world, the multitude, the not-One of unthinking nature, with its “murderous innocence,” in a dialectic that cannot be closed, though it can be exploited and enjoyed aesthetically. Little wonder that the poet bargains with the “seawind scream[ing] upon the tower” at the outset of his prayer, holding what is stalwart and still against the upsurge of primal energies:

There is no obstacle
 But Gregory’s wood and one bare hill
 Whereby the haystack- and roof-levelling wind,
 Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed. (16, 10, 3-6)

This is a perennial dynamic in Yeats’s poetry, one that allows for “looped time” to gain its own coherence as a defense against “murderous innocence” – the blind time of storm that savages without prejudice, time as primeval, geological, catastrophic. Gregory’s wood, symbol of the privileged cultural space of Coole Park, can only, within rigorous forms, *stay* an ungovernable excess. The excess itself, the negative element (Kristeva’s “true-real”), evades any kind of closure (or even simple description) and permanently threatens all forms and ceremonies.

Critics like Bedient are right, I think, to show that Yeats just as often invited this “murderous innocence” into his poems, where the unconquerable surge takes the form either of an unfathomable abyss (“Buddha’s emptiness”) or of the primal temporality of matter (“formless spawning fury” of the “filthy modern tide”) (“The Statues” 24, 29-30).²⁴ His “high” modernism co-opts a primal resistance to form and sets it loose within the compass of forms, as in “The Statues” or in the sculpted anarchy of “Lapis Lazuli,”

where the timeless tragic gaiety of the “Chinamen” shares an aesthetic space with pure process:

Every discoloration of the stone,
 Every accidental crack or dent,
 Seems a water-course or an avalanche,
 Or lofty slope where it still snows. (43-6)

The fragile monument of blue stone is both an object *for* Yeats (his own “careful visual reconstruction”), an object *about* the timelessness of art (a “suspension of time”), and an object *of* time (in “the wrack of history”) (see Vendler 238). The poem becomes the material moment when eternity flares up, like a struck match, into a message for “coming times.” Yeats delivers the same message in the brutally laconic “Oil and Blood,” in which “tombs of gold and lapis lazuli” sit atop “trampled clay” where “vampires full of blood” are buried (1, 4-5). Like the Chinamen, the vampires defy historical time, but in doing so, they defy the forces of change that might temper their cold, unconquerable gaiety.

5 Accommodating Modernism

The “great wind of love and hate” that orients the Rose settles, in the late work, into a new accommodation: “abstract joy, / The half-read wisdom of daemonic images” that “[s]uffice the ageing man as once the growing boy” (*Meditations* VII: 38-40).

Yeats’s modernism cannot be fully appreciated without considering this aspiration toward accommodation with what is *unconquerable*, with what escapes grand schemes of totality and oneness. “Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement,” Crazy Jane declares, in “Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop” 15-16), and it is this love, and the

abstract hate seeking to destroy it, that Yeats's verse attempts again and again to explain: the accommodation to a mutable ontological estate, a mode of being "between extremities," a "brand, or flaming breath" or a "marble table-top" that prompts a "sudden blaze" of vision ("Vacillation" 1, 3; 39, 41). For the poet, love is an accommodation to the world that does not retreat from what it must accommodate; hate is this retreat, a disavowal of love that is the purest fury of envy, a disavowal that sadistically misrecognizes itself, seeing instead (in a paranoid manner) a repudiation on the part of the other. The poet wears the mask of an anti-self that makes him an other to himself; personality is to some degree this power of self-othering, this identity predicated on the obligation to rend: "For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent" Crazy Jane reminds us ("Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" 15-18).

The accommodation of the other is an ontological inclusiveness that permits the transcendent to coexist with what it transcends (which is not to say what Deleuze says: "the transcendent everywhere"). I would qualify (or perhaps clarify) Bedient's reading of immanence in Yeats by saying that what we find in these poems is the immanence of the dialectical image as realized in and through personality. The logic of misrecognition, the cold eye the poet casts on his life and work, constitutes the achievement, or nearly so, of a Nietzschean personality that can withstand its own biography:

I am content to live it all again
 And yet again, if it be life to pitch
 Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
 A blind man battering blind men. . . .

I am content to follow to its source
 Every event in action or in thought;
 Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!

(“Dialogue” 57-60, 65-7)

In this dream of eternal recurrence, there is certainly a delight in the primal object (“frog-spawn”), but there is also delight in the measuring and forgiving. Dionysian spawning is followed by Apollonian measurement, a dynamic that favors both poles of a dialectic, a contentment in the pure play and poetic productivity of a personality that can be lived again and “follow[ed] to its source.” What Yeats affirms when summoning the frog-spawn from the ditch, is the purely performative act of the summons itself, which calls forth what it represents, a “loop of time” created in the monumental symbolization (or halting) of the dialectical image of spawning. The negative dialectical energies in Yeats’s late works feed on a resistance to this spawning, and then they feed on the spawn itself.

This is the force of the Byzantium poems, which summon the sacred site in order to show how imagination has rent it: the “gold mosaics” in the “holy city of Byzantium,” suggest the possibility of aesthetic unity and transcendence, but they fall prey to the “fury and the mire of human veins,” the “bitter furies of complexity” (“Byzantium” 8, 37). The “mere complexities” of human being can only seem bitter and paltry from the august perspective of pure forms, the “moonlit dome” that “disdains / All that man is” (5-7). The poet who says, “I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing” (“Sailing” 25-6), contemplates, in “Byzantium,” a vampiric nonbeing: “death-in-life and life-in-death” (16). The latter poem doesn’t simply respond to “Sailing to Byzantium,” it brutally unveils its ideals and overcomes its misrecognitions. Yeats’s modernism is

rooted in this self-reflexive and recursive logic of misprision in which earlier works become implicated in later ones in a way that forcefully urges us to *reread* indeed to *revive* the early work in light of this corrective gaze. It urges us to see Sato's sword, a "changeless work of art" wrapped in a "bit of an embroidered dress ("Meditations," III: 14, 6), in an entirely different way when, in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," it comes wrapped in a "flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn / From some court-lady's dress" (in "Dialogue" 13-14). This slight historical elaboration lifts a veil on how the eternal symbol functions in time. Symbolic power is displaced, even if slightly, from the "changeless sword" (III: 2) to the "court-lady's dress."

The great poems of Yeats's maturity model the dynamics of a totality that can never take form, but whose form is discernable in the cumulative force of the *œuvre*. For within it, the poet's personality emerges as something "intended, complete," that has coexisted with a daily self, a "bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast" ("Introduction" 204). His poetry exploits the fullness of a personality defined by its brokenness: "the division of mind within itself . . . the sacrifice of a man to himself" ("John M. Synge" 321). The sacrifice of the self to an intended and complete personality and style exemplifies the aesthetic *Bildung* of modernism, one that has surrendered the fetish of "inner culture" without doing away with the aspiration toward the utopian idea of a unified subjectivity, a "unity of being." In line with modernists like Joyce, Woolf, Stein and Proust, Yeats envisioned a subject of infinite extension in the material and spiritual worlds, a personality that could embody the "correspondence between a lasting mood of the soul and this life" ("John M. Synge" 237). This vision, borne of a Revivalist desire to embrace "the loveliness / That has long faded from the

world” (“He Remembers Forgotten Beauty” 2-3), remains beholden to this desire, long after its arrival, long after brokenness and age, bitterness and rage, have revealed themselves to lie at the heart of all loveliness. Revival retains its power to bring time back into eternity, and to force eternity out of time in the production of “coming times.”

Notes

- ¹ “Do you know,” Wilde tells a reporter for the *Philadelphia Press*, “the night before I landed I was wondering how it would be – thinking of the cloud of misrepresentation that must have preceded me, and wondering whether the people would wait to know me for what I am” (*The Philadelphia Press*, 18 January 1881, 2. Clark Library. Wildeana, box 10.7B.).
- ² “Ephemera,” 24-6, from Yeats’s first volume of poetry, *Crossways* (1889). All quotations from Yeats’s poetry are from *The Poems*, vol. 1 of *Collected Works* and will be given in the text by line number.
- ³ A general consensus would put Yeats’s modernist period after 1913 and thus post-Revival. See the essays in Keown and Taaffe (eds.) *Irish Modernism*. Fogarty, whose sympathetic and clear-eyed view of Revival and her description of its ambivalence as a social institution is welcome, sees Yeats’s involvement in Revival as a different undertaking from his “self-induction” into modernism (see 129-33); her argument implies that Revival is *prior* to modernism and that modernism is an *outcome* of Revival (128). She echoes many critics in seeing the “pendant volumes” *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) “as Yeats’s key contribution to the annals of modernist poetry” (135). Wood devotes a book to a single poem from *The Tower*, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.”
- ⁴ See Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*. “In [Hegelian dialectics] there was coincidence of identity and positivity; the inclusion of all nonidentical and objective things in a subjectivity expanded and exalted into an absolute spirit was to effect the reconciliation” (141-2). Negative dialectics, by freeing the nonidentical to pursue its own destiny outside dialectical closure, frustrates the Hegelian “coincidence.”
- ⁵ The joy of motion, Bedient notes, is “not to lose the pulsion in formalities” (77).
- ⁶ According to this argument, Revival never gets beyond the stage of colonialist exoticism and ethnographic appropriation as theorized by Fanon, in *Wretched of the Earth* 158-9. On the “perils” of Revival, see Kiberd. Deane sees Revival as a totalizing impulse, using “tradition [as] an instrument for the present.” Revival, and particularly Yeats, attempted “to reconcile on the level of myth what could not be reconciled at the level of politics” (36-7). While I agree that Revivalists used (or reused) tradition, I believe their projects frequently advanced precisely by virtue of a failure of reconciliation and the opportunity for pedagogical innovation that it opens up.
- ⁷ On the multiplicity of Revival projects, see Mathews and O’Connell. My own *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* argues that Yeats and the Literary Revival engaged in a form of “emancipatory complicity” with the new discipline of anthropology and the new practice of ethnography.
- ⁸ For Lloyd, the nonmodern is a collective identity, the archaic, folkloric, faith-based, poor, rural, religious dissenters and some nationalists who repudiated mainstream nationalism (see *Ireland After History*, ch. 2). I see it in addition as the temporality of the primordial, the privileged time of the ethno-national origin. On this point, I follow Eagleton on the proximity of the nonmodern or (to use his term) archaic and the modern in Irish modernism (see *Heathcliff*, chapter seven, “The Archaic Avant-Garde”). As Doggett sees it, the problem for Yeats is not the challenge of the archaic or the tropology of the primordial but rather the commodification of aesthetic work, for in the “contexts of Irish modernity . . . the artist is compelled to produce practical art” (141).
- ⁹ For more on this conception of Revival, see my “Irish Revivalism.” See Michel de Certeau on the *tactic* as a subversive form of resignifying and redistributing elements within *strategic* institutions and structures (36-9).
- ¹⁰ I don’t mean here the process of “self-criticism” that Parkinson explored years ago and that so many have continued to do in the wake of the Cornell Yeats project. That said, the analysis of Yeats’s revisions of his poetry tends to confirm at the level of the “genetic archive” what I am claiming at the level of the *œuvre*.
- ¹¹ Eliot, “Tradition,” 38; on the mythic method, see Eliot’s “*Ulysses*, Order and Myth.”
- ¹² See Cullingford 52. Recent work on Yeats’s experience in colonial and postcolonial Ireland has revealed a complex social subjectivity. See for example, Fogarty, Lloyd, “Poetics of Politics,” Howes, and Doggett.

- ¹³ On modernist historicism and its openness to similar temporal alternatives, see Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History*, and Williams.
- ¹⁴ In the later poem “Vacillation,” Yeats links the temporality of night and day to the violence of antinomies: “From man’s blood-sodden heart are sprung / Those branches of the night and day / Where the gaudy moon is hung” (68-70; cf. “The Tower” 146-56).
- ¹⁵ I follow here Rancière, who rereads aesthetics, from a post-Marxian perspective, as “the distribution of the sensible”; see *The Politics of the Aesthetic*, especially 12-19.
- ¹⁶ Perkins notes that Yeats, especially in early essays like “Symbolism and Poetry,” was influenced by European symbolist writers and artists (369-70). McAteer, in Keown and Taaffe, traces Yeats’s connections to European Expressionist drama.
- ¹⁷ Yeats relates that in his youth, he “dreamed of enlarging Irish hate” and that he felt as if he were entering into a “great battle,” ready “to forge in Ireland a new sword on our old traditional anvil”: “All movements are held together more by what they hate than they love” (“Poetry and Tradition” 182)
- ¹⁸ Cuchulainn’s ideal of fame, which Padraic Pearse adopted as the motto of the Scoil Ereanna, was similarly pitched toward a futural perspective that alone could recognize properly what had to have happened: “I care not though I were to live but one day and one night, if only my fame and my deed live after me” (qtd in Pearse 381).
- ¹⁹ Campbell reads this differently, seeing in these lines a “lover prostrate at the feet of the beloved,” a moment of “impasse, historically as well as amorously stalled.” I prefer to see a vibrant temporal suspension of motion, but I agree with Campbell that in such poems we see Yeats “testing . . . the limits of symbolism and its means of apprehending spiritual or intellectual truth” (314).
- ²⁰ Blake, from *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “Eternity is in love with the productions of time”
- ²¹ Obviously not personality in Jean Baudrillard’s sense of “the vital illusion” (qtd. in Bedient 210).
- ²² Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 47. Qtd. in Bedient 260.
- ²³ See Howes, in “Postcolonial Yeats,” on Yeats’s negotiation of private and public spaces.
- ²⁴ See, for example, Bedient’s brilliant reading of Yeats’s “On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac” (32-47).

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