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INHABITING MODERNISM: PERNES, PORTALS,  
AND YEATS'S TRANSITIVE FORCE

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Marco Abel

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2010

INHABITING MODERNISM: PERNES, PORTALS,  
AND YEATS'S TRANSITIVE FORCE

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University of Nebraska, 2010

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W.B. Yeats's tentative entry into modernist poetics is often ascribed to his residence with Pound, to the dynamism of Vorticism, and to the turbulent social upheaval in Ireland and abroad during the early decades of the twentieth century. Without denying that such events contributed to Yeats's marked stylistic shift in *Responsibilities* (1914), this thesis examines how Yeats's antithetical impulse is heavily informed by Blake and Nietzsche and has direct bearing for how we read Yeats's poetics through change and "transition." Concurrent with his passive adjustment to, and resistance against, external forces and change, Yeats's affirmation of pre-subjective forces, apocalyptic renewal, and vitalist notions of perpetual becoming informs how he effected transformation in his poetics. Poised between monumentality and movement, between the symmetrical and the sensual, Yeats's dynamic poetics complicate how we think of Modernism as a transitive field.

## Table of Contents

### *Introduction*

#### I. Toward a Romantic Modernity

**8**

#### II. Folding Symmetry: Blake, Nietzsche, and the Antithetical

**14**

#### III. Forging a System: The Labor of Los(s)

**23**

#### IV. Towering Vacillations: Becoming Political

**32**

### *Bibliography*

**48**

## Introduction

Change has come suddenly, the despair of my friends in the 'nineties part of its preparation. Nature, steel-bound or stone-built in the nineteenth century, became a flux where men drowned or swam; the moment had come for some poet to cry 'the flux is in my mind.' (195)

W.B Yeats, Introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse

Must a poet react to changing circumstances? In his long introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse in 1936, Yeats found occasion to dismiss such a notion by distancing himself from the inundating tragedies greeting the preeminent participants of the Rhymer's Club at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Ernest Dowson, the decadent pen of novels and short stories, drowning in alcoholism in 1900 at the age of thirty-two; Lionel Johnson, the talented English poet, critic, and essayist stricken by repressed homosexuality, floundering from excesses in 1902; and Arthur Symons, the scholarly versifier, critic, and editor of *Savoy*, sent adrift by a psychotic breakdown in 1909. The heightened receptivity to an altering world during the *fin de siècle* era no doubt yielded a proliferation of beautifully instinctual artworks; but when entering into his late phase as an accomplished poet, Yeats had reason to jettison the impressionistic struggle he had once glorified in images of the mythic hero Conchubar pitching battle with the tides.

Yet nostalgia pervades Yeats's recollection of the "revolt against Victorianism" (183). He recounts the Rhymer's joyous refusal to indulge in "irrelevant descriptions of nature," in Tennyson's "scientific and moral discursiveness," in Browning's psychological penetration, and in "the poetical diction of everyone" (183). Nonetheless,

when 1900 approached, “everybody got down off his stilts”<sup>1</sup>—or, perhaps more accurately, finally tottered and collapsed from staring too long and hard at Pater’s gem-like flame (185). Crucially, Yeats considers the Rhymer’s dissipation less a generational failure than the disastrous consequence following a long history of paying adherence to passive mimesis: “The mischief began at the end of the seventeenth century when man became passive before a mechanized nature”; it further gained currency when Stendhal described a masterpiece as a “mirror dawdling down a lane” (200). So much had Yeats aligned himself against passivity that he roundly dismisses from the Oxford collection any war verse, insofar as “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry” (202).

Unsurprisingly, Yeats makes some rather idiosyncratic selections and omissions when assembling the volume of all the “good” poets since Tennyson to represent modern verse (predominantly Anglo-Irish, with the notable exception of several Indian poets). Victorian and Georgian poets are indeed very much represented, as are Yeats’s personal acquaintances Margot Ruddock, with whom he was currently involved in a relationship, his close Hindu friend Shri Purohit Swami, and the polymath Oliver St. John Gogarty, who earns an unusual amount of space in both the introduction and volume. Rudyard Kipling and Ezra Pound scarcely appear, a peculiarity Yeats attributes to royalty fees.

The perplexities that abound in Yeats’s introduction to this modern verse collection—his glorifying the Rhymers while marking their failures, his celebrating modern verse even as he fails to represent it—marks the core of what I hope to explore in this thesis, namely the manner in which Yeats conceived of “transition” to be intimately

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Yeats’s reflection on his early verse in “The Circus Animal’s Desertion” published in *Last Poems* in 1939: “My circus animals were all on show/Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,/ Lion and woman and the lord knows what” (Collected 346-7).

linked to principles of contradiction. This concern immediately invokes complications related to the concept of modernity, complications Yeats foregrounds with the qualified pronouncement, “I too have tried to be modern,” upon complaining that his contemporaries lack rhythmical animation in their poems (Eliot’s poetry is “grey, cold, and dry”) (197).

In Bradbury and McFarlane’s famous essay “The Name and Nature of Modernism,” they insist that despite the overwhelming aesthetic styles under the rubric of modernism, one can fruitfully sketch several affinities that all these trajectories share: a special self-consciousness to aesthetic matters exceeding representation and humanism; the near-heroic championing of style and order out of linguistic chaos; and the strange juxtapositions of the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolic, the futuristic and the nihilistic, the rational and the irrational (46). Yet rather than resolving these various contradictions that persist in any hazardous description of modernism, Bradbury and McFarlane define the very nature of the periodization as the “explosion” of these contradictory impulses that elude resolution (48). Thus even though Yeats may not evince the formal pyrotechnics or subversive content of other notable modernists, it would seem that the contradictory ethos of his life and poetics affords him a secure place in the modernist canon. It is precisely how Yeats’s aesthetic and political contradictions inform his understanding of transition, and the degree to which these terms can even be read as mutually reciprocal, that this study aims to address.

A veritable explosion of Yeats scholarship has swept academia in the last two years, much of which has added to the already amassed number of contradictions in Yeats’s life and poetics and thereby challenging enthusiasts and newcomers alike to question even

ready assumptions about the enigmatic poet. What is most compelling is the nature of this resurgence: far from being a cohesive renaissance, recent commentary has provided remarkably varied thematic and methodological approaches. And yet much of this work also seems unfashionably orthodox. In his review of recent work by senior commentators Nicholas Grene, Ronald Schuchard, Helen Vendler, Richard J. Finneran and Warwick Gould,<sup>2</sup> George Bornstein tempers his praise of this recent scholarship with misgivings over its retrograde nature: “methodologically the works display an indifference to changes in literary study for the past three decades that leaves plenty of territory for future scholars to investigate” (“Of What is Past” 610).

R.F Foster, for instance, completed his second volume of his biography, W.B. Yeats: A Life in 2003, a grand achievement that catalogues the minutiae of Yeats’s life in his life as poet, playwright, occultist, dilettante, senator, journalist, stage-manager, and witness to and participant in the most turbulent and factional generation of Irish history. Borrowing an admonition from Michel Serres, Foster justifies his project by claiming “that one can read from the work of art its conditions, but not—or not entirely—from the conditions to the work of art” (xxvi).<sup>3</sup> In her preface to Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form, Helen Vendler implicitly opposes Foster’s historical conceptualization by ascertaining that poems “do not exist on the same plane as actual life”; they are neither “votes” nor “propositions” nor “position[s]”; they are “products of reveries” (xiv).

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<sup>2</sup> Respectively: Yeats’s Poetic Codes; The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts; Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form; The Tower (1928): Manuscript Materials, ed., with Jared Curtis and Ann Saddlemyer; “Influence and Confluence.” Yeats Annual No. 17: A Special Number.

<sup>3</sup> Further: “What is needed is this kind of biography: not another exegesis of the poetry from a biographical angle, not an analysis of development of his aesthetic theories, and especially not a study that ranges at will across the work of nearly 60 years” (xx).

Foster's "conditions" and Vendler's "reveries" are indicative of a hard-line separation between lived experience and aesthetics that would seem to entirely run against the grain of developments in literary and theoretical scholarship.

Yet it would be reductive to delimit the complexity of both these works as ancient specters clinging to an oppositional model of history and aesthetics—reductive inasmuch as it would overlook the complex differences of studies both on the close-reading, aesthetic side of writers such as Vendler and Grene and on the side of historical models such as Foster's and Schuchard's. Moreover, this strict binary dismisses the singular dynamic of interiority and exteriority that takes on a particularly inflection in its divisions within Yeats criticism. This is not altogether surprising: Richard Ellmann's pioneering biography Yeats: The Man and The Masks established a wealth of nuanced contradictions not only between the poet-as-speaker and the poet-as-public figure but also internally within the aesthetic and political engagements themselves.

Much successive work, however, has resisted relying solely on "contradictory models" not so much because these scholars hoped to conceptualize a more cohesive figure by smoothing out or glossing over such contradictions, but, paradoxically, because reading Yeats's life and work through contradictory topoi allows for his political and aesthetic engagements to be reduced to the master-narrative of a Janus-faced figure. In many ways this reservation extends beyond Yeats; too easily can contradictory principles be mobilized to explicate and to account for the sweep of turbulent events that racked Ireland during the early twentieth century: a Catholic majority valorizing its Protestant martyrs, a resistance arrogating the very same nationalist discourse inherited by their imperial subjugators, a unified cause splintering into Pro-treaty and anti-Treaty factions

and erupting in Civil War.

The critical response to such ready formulations has been vast. Where Ellmann brandishes a biographical pistol, Foster hauls a blunderbuss, describing in over twelve-hundred pages the range of complexities occurring in Yeats's day-to-day involvement that would render any over-arching narrative of contradiction egregiously presumptive. Even strictly formal matters have been dramatically expanded: Helen Vendler's study, for instance, exceeds by far any prior close-reading involvement, and the Cornell Yeats series, by consolidating for the first time in photo-facsimile layout all of Yeats's manuscripts flung worldwide in various library holdings, has made available the long and complex process of revision to which Yeats subjected nearly every poem during both his original composition and retrospectively after publication.

As exciting as this new "treasure trove" of material may seem, George Bornstein concludes his review by admonishing eager Yeatsians to make the work "available and interesting to a larger group of modernists, of literary scholars in general, and to the literary-minded public" by "both explanatory work on the value of recent advances and good judgment about how much detail is wanted or even can be tolerated" ("Of What is Past" 614). What complicates Bornstein's injunction for Yeatsians to frame their specialized discourse intelligibly to the broader current of modernism is the fact that modernist studies itself is in something of a state of crisis, in which convenient period markers such as spatial (metropolis), vertical (high/low art) and temporal (before 1922-1945) have been fruitfully loosened to account more accurately for the cultural and material realities that have hitherto been ignored by the dominance of the mythic, if convenient, Pound-Eliot nexus. In their article "The New Modernist Studies" in *PMLA*,

Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz consider this broadening as the very definition of recent advancements: “Were one seeking a single word to sum up transformations in modernist literary scholarship over the last decade or two, one could do worse than light on *expansion*” (82). What is exciting for some, however, is potentially debilitating to those concerned that modernist studies will broaden to the point of losing its coherence as a field, much as Yeats scholarship runs the risk of being led adrift by its own excess.

Yeats occupies a unique role in this expansive project, insofar as his position as a “high modernist” has been duly established, even when he is situated in a marginal, colonized position, and even though he is typified as a more conservative, traditional poet who remained staunchly rooted, monologic, and nationalist. What secures Yeats’s standing in the modernist project it would seem is not the degree to which his poetry resembled the more experimental projects surrounding him during his later stages, but the degree to which his poetry progressed or evolved during his long poetic development, roughly 1889-1943. Thus considered, Yeats would seem to trail in the wake of the modernist project as a supplemental jetsam gauging the speeds and swells surging around him while marking the contradictory voyage modernism had ostensibly embraced or even surpassed. My principle aim here is to put to task the equivalency of “transition” and “contradiction” by specifying their singular relation in Yeats’ work. By first delineating the nature of Yeats’s aesthetic transitions, I hope to further comment on how Yeats’s notion of “antithetical” force lies at the heart of this complication. This notion of antitheticality, I further argue, is part of a genealogy extending back to Friedrich Nietzsche and William Blake, whose writings profoundly influenced Yeats’s notion of this contextually unbound, pre-subjective force inflecting his thematics, figural rhetoric,

and method of composition. Finally, I will conclude by indicating how Yeats's antithetical poetics inform his conception of the nascent Irish State during its most dramatic period of transformation.

## **Chapter I. Toward a Romantic Modernity**

Although Yeats never experimented with free verse, opting instead to master traditional lyrical forms, he did gradually abandon the more conventionally poetic diction and allusive imagery of his earlier collections *Crossways* (1889), *The Rose* (1893), and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). Yeats's use of a more austere language and direct approach to his themes increasingly characterizes the poetry and plays of his middle period, comprising the poetry volumes *In the Seven Woods* (1903), *The Green Helmet* (1910), and *Responsibilities* (1914).

This stylistic shift climaxes in the concluding poem of *Responsibilities*, "A Coat," where Yeats announces that "there's more enterprise/In walking naked" than being garbed with "embroideries/Out of old mythologies" (Collected 127). Yeats's claim to divestment signals his aesthetic break from his early plaintive sonorities cloaked with lulling fairies, frustrated loves and quests, Fenian cycles, and enigmatic roses; and this break further inaugurates his entry into a terser style and sparer imagery characteristic of modernist poetics. Significantly, Ezra Pound was instrumental in arranging for many of the poems in *Responsibilities*, including "A Coat," to be published in the first and fourth volumes of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, a small magazine in Chicago at the forefront of international modernism. This would mark Yeats's first publication outside Irish print.

Beginning in 1913, Yeats had taken on Ezra Pound as a nominal secretary for three winters at Stone Cottage in rural Sussex. There, they would compose poetry, squabble over the finer points of Swedenborg and Noh drama, and hone their fencing skills in the gardens and forests of Ashdown, all the while solidifying the generational link between the established Rhymer and the budding Imagist twenty years the former's junior. Yet the notion that Pound sped Yeats into modernity is misleading. Although Pound did collaborate with Yeats on his composition of *Responsibilities* and encouraged his new style, Yeats sourly dismissed many of Pound's minor corrections as "misprints" in a letter confided to Lady Gregory (Letters 287). In fact, Pound did not initially consider Yeats so much as malleable potential for the future as a crucial link to an elite artistic past. However much he mocked Yeats for his aristocratic pretensions by dubbing him "The Eagle," Pound esteemed Yeats as an incarnation of the venerable Renaissance artist, whose company he sought for access to private circles and premier versifiers, not to mention shelter from the undiscerning masses. James Logenbach observes that not until Pound abandoned his poetry of "shadows and dreams" did he begin to approve of Yeats's newer style; in fact, "the actual turns of influence reveal Yeats as the dominant force" (17, 19).<sup>4</sup>

When Pound's poetry became increasingly filled with what Yeats considered to be

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<sup>4</sup> Logenbach further details how Yeats's fascination with Irish folk legends and his systematic study of magical studies in the Golden Hermetic Order Dawn encouraged, if not initiated, Pound's corresponding study into eastern legends and traditions, notably Noh drama, which both poets studied with increasing zeal (48). Further, although their life at Stone Cottage remained isolated, George Moore's open mocking of Yeats's occult studies, and his caricaturing of Yeats for defending aristocratic sensibilities, intensified Pound's distrust of the public, even if he, unlike Yeats, held on to the belief that art contributed to a society's health (64). Pound's stimulated investment in aristocratic culture and occult studies contributed to his esoteric ideal of the Image that excluded the uninitiated masses: at Stone Cottage "an apparently apolitical discussion of symbolism nurtured the social attitudes of the secret society of modernism" (77).

aggressive clamor and political bombast, their friendship began to cool; by 1938, in his second version of A Vision, Yeats would characterize Ezra Pound as one fixated on “all sorts of temporary ambitions” that one defends with “superficial intellectual action, the pamphlet, the violent speech, the sword of the swashbuckler” (214). It would seem that Yeats’s investment in Irish folktales and myth, in the occult, and in national interests rendered him incapable of participating in the brand of modernism that Pound professed. Despite Pound’s praise for the lean, precise images and in some instances a loosened meter in *Responsibilities*, many of these poems are nonetheless bogged down in the morass of nationalist concerns. When, for instance, Yeats declares in “September 1913” that “romantic Ireland is dead and gone/It’s with O’Leary in the ground,” he is ascribing the loss of Irish heroes and patriotism to the rise of the mercenary materialism he felt was rampant in Ireland (Collected 119). As such, Yeats attacks the ruthless employers who locked out their workers in the General Strike of 1913 and the commercial entrepreneurs who refused his appeal for funds to house Hugh Lane’s collection of French Impressionist painters. Yeats’s aspersions against those who “fumble in a greasy till” strike a chord with Pound’s scathing satire of cultural dross in “Portrait d’une Femme”; but, crucially, where Pound lambasts the drivel espoused by women patrons for discouraging robust invention, Yeats accuses modernity’s coarse expediency of trammeling on the delicacy of the Irish past.

What bears closer investigation, however, is less the degree to which Yeats did or did not transition into a modern responsiveness or style than the way in which Yeats’s understanding of transition itself differed from Pound’s mantra to “make it new.” Pound was not merely exhorting novelty, but heralding the transmutation of antiquated

materials, styles, and forms through changing circumstances: to make it *anew*. In contradistinction, Yeats's understanding of transformation did not necessarily entail a prior object or style that subsequently underwent transition or change; rather he considered the purely differential element of transformation itself to always precede, and indeed produce, the changing circumstances of an object, period, or form, along with the subject that delineated them. In other words, Yeats did not consider transformation as occurring from without, or as effected by the mediation of a poet, but as always necessarily prior to the necessarily retrospective perception or act of creation. For Yeats, change was the condition, not the effect.

This is not to deny the import of external influences in Yeats's aesthetic and political development. Along with Pound's influence, and with his hardening take on the tragic fate of the Rhymer's stated above, one might ascribe a swath of turbulent personal and social events contributing to Yeats's impetus to "put some salt" in his poetics: his lifelong love interest Maud Gonne had married the abusive lush John MacBride in 1903; his Fenian political mentor John O'Leary died in 1907; his Uncle George Pollexfen in 1910; not to mention the outbreak of the First World War, the Easter Uprising of 1916, and the brutal Civil War following treaty debates in 1922. Yet as important as these *external* forces and influences impinging upon Yeats and eliciting his shift in poetics was how Yeats affirmed the *pre-subjective* forces through and against which the contingencies of his life and aesthetic were ordered and disordered. By pre-subjective I mean the antithetical impulse, informed by Blake and Nietzsche, which traverses Yeats's poetics irrespective of the circumstances or vagaries that beset him during his long poetic career.

This "antithetical impulse" is best defined as Yeats's refusal to resolve or synthesize

the various contradictions of his life and aesthetic. As earlier noted, Ellmann's seminal biography suggests that the organizing principle of Yeats's life was his sense of a divided self; locked in contradictory impulses, Yeats's private dreams, mysticism, and poetic and sexual urges were in combat with his public commitment to neo-Fenian politics and serving Ireland (70-85). While Yeats certainly expressed such a struggle, what is somewhat misleading is Ellmann's conclusion that the young Yeats, who is "dreamy, poetic and self-conscious, and therefore unable to act with the spontaneity of the man of action," develops during his later years into a unified consciousness that has hardened into rational self-assuredness (80).

More accurately, Yeats's sense of a bifurcated self persisted through his life rather than solidifying in to the sobering personage Ellmann envisions. If in "Among School Children" (1928), Yeats considered himself a "sixty-year old smiling public man," he would also ten years later emulate the "wild old wicked man" who finds solace from the threats of divine power and death in Tantric desire: "I choose the second-best, / I forget it all awhile / Upon a woman's breast" (Collected 216, 311). And if Yeats chose to doff his embroidered cloak in "A Coat," he will also admit in "The Circus Animal's Desertion" (1938) that when composing "Wanderings of Oisín" (1899) he was "starved for the bosom of his fairy bride," who similarly wears a white vesture of "many a figured embroidery" (347, 355). What is important to note is that Yeats's life and poetry did not follow a simple trajectory from crooning enthusiast of Irish myth and fairyland to statesman and philosopher, or from a romantic effusion to a hardened, modernist

sensibility.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, one of Yeats's most sustained contradictions was his complex understanding of Romanticism. During his long career Yeats never relinquished his identification as a belated Romantic, a sentiment he confirmed in "Coole and Bayllee, 1931":

We were the last romantics—chose for theme  
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;  
Whatever's written in what poets name  
The book of the people; whatever most can bless  
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme (Collected 245)

Even though Yeats considered himself in line with the canonical literary Romantics, notably Blake, Shelley, and Keats, he also considered this lineage transcending historical epochs and nations, insofar as it encompassed the poetic quality of intensified vision emulated by Spenser and Dante. Paradoxically, Yeats's universal Romanticism also decisively became one "of the people"—that is, a de-Anglicized and nationalist aesthetic informed by his Fenian mentor John O'Leary—that led Yeats to conclude that "there is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature" (L. New Island 12).<sup>6</sup> For Yeats, Irish politics and poetry became inextricably intertwined, a fact at

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<sup>5</sup> As Foster indicates, Yeats was not the timid, dreamy young man as he is often portrayed. Just as Yeats infused his politics with his artistic vision, so too did his dealings with the occult hone his political skills. Yeats rose rapidly in rank in every society and club to which he belonged, and his ardor and temperament often let him dictate the terms and direction of those organizations. When Yeats was only twenty-five, he was attacking moderate nationalists such as Gavan Duffy and Thomas Rolleston who remained aloof from Yeats's mentor John O'Leary. Yeats's poise and audacity is evident in his panegyrics appearing in *United Ireland*, his battle for editorship in Ireland's literary chronicles, and his equivocal and strategic dealings with the Irish Republic Brotherhood (112-134).

<sup>6</sup> At Yeats's Nobel Prize reception speech at the Royal Academy of Sweden, he urged cultural nationalism as an alternative to parliamentary politics: "The modern literature of Ireland and indeed all that stir of thought which prepared for the Anglo-Irish war, began when Parnell fell from power in 1891" (Autobiographies 410). Controversies over Synge's The Playboy of the

times overlooked in order to link Yeats to an Anglo-norm of literary modernism.

Commenting on the reception politics surrounding Yeats, Edna Longley argues that the poet is not so much considered a modernist in Ireland as in North America, where “his primary inclusion and exclusion” protects the “investment in the poetics of Pound and Eliot” (162).

Rather than make a case for whether Yeats should be included or excluded from the modernist project, I am interested in how his refusal to synthesize the various contradictions of his life and aesthetic nuances his conception of transition, a conception that paradoxically has little to do with the degree to which he or his poetics underwent modification. That is, Yeats affirmed the labor of antithesis to such a febrile repetition that the process of change, rather than its resolution or representation, generated the possibilities for transformation. This understanding, I argue, can not be reductively reduced to Yeats’s retroactive stance against modernity, but neither can it be employed to alter his image as one who was drawn its allure. To better understand what kind of transformation this antithetical approach is capable of accomplishing, and why Yeats employed it with such rhetorical force, we must first look back to two of Yeats’s most important predecessors.

## **Chapter II. Folding Symmetry: Blake, Nietzsche, and the Antithetical**

If Yeats oscillated between the past and the present, between the Platonic and the sensual, and between the conversational idiom of his poetry and the esoteric minutiae of

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Western World and the strike and lockout of 1913 further necessitated Yeats taking a more overtly political stance in his poems and plays (Bornstein “Yeats and Romanticism” 23).

his occult dealings, he could follow Blake in locating value in the movement between such contradictions.<sup>7</sup> As he would do during his later enchantment with Nietzsche, Yeats colored Blake with a pre-Raphaelite and Paterian hue; indeed, Arthur Symons, whose The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899) introduced the French symbolists to Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, encouraged readers of his 1907 edition of *William Blake* to read the prophet-poet in light of Nietzsche's philosophy. In the 1890s, when Yeats was immersed in fusing fin de siècle art with its romantic predecessors, he collaborated with Edwin Ellis to produce the three-volume Works of William Blake: Poetics, Symbolic, and Critical, to which he contributed the majority of commentary on several important works, notably the "Island in the Moon."

Yeats especially admired Nietzsche and Blake for their mutual insistence of locating value within the vitality and movement of thought and experience. In the section entitled "The Necessity of Symbolism," Yeats distinguishes between the "materialistic thinker [who] sees 'continuous'" from the poet who "should see [in] 'discrete degrees'," which entails not only considering the mind "as companioning but as actually one with the physical organism" (Works of Blake 236). Yeats discovered in Nietzsche and Blake important precedents for the antinaturalism of the Symbolist poets, whose poetics sought freedom from the representation of determined content, and whose refined sensibilities and delight in rituals countered what Yeats considered the incapacitating moral and

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<sup>7</sup> "Without Contraries is no progression/Attraction and/ Repulsion, reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are/necessary to Human existence./ From these contraries spring what the religious call/Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason./ Evil is the active springing from Energy./Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell" (MHH, Complete 66-7). Compare:"I have never put the conflict in logical form, never thought like Hegel that the two ends of the see-saw are one another's negation, nor that the spring vegetables were refuted when over" (A Vision 73).

utilitarian ethos of Victorianism. The force of creative activity that Yeats admired in the French Symbolists, and further located in Nietzsche's "Will to Power" and Blake's "Imagination," is a far remove from the objectified aesthetic of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce that elicited Yeats's fascination and disdain. In the introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, Yeats emphasizes his dislike for mimetic or naturalistic poetics:

It has sometimes seemed of late years [...] as if the poet could at any moment write a poem by recording the fortuitous scene or thought, perhaps it might be enough to put into some fashionable rhythm—"I am sitting in a chair, there are three dead flies on a corner of the ceiling."  
(xxvii)

To counter such illimitable naturalism, what Blake disparaged as "Vegetable Glass," (Complete 384) Yeats in part sought subjectivity in Berkeley, Zen Buddhism, Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn; yet, in his contradictory fashion, those very inward turnings more often than not conflated with his political and social dealings. Yeats followed Nietzsche and Blake's efforts to theorize a dynamic subject that could transcend conventional dualistic thought and thereby transcend the conventional morality, philosophy, and aesthetics predicated upon that thought. Progression is only borne from conflict: active "evil" is always preferable to passive "good."<sup>8</sup> More specifically, for both Nietzsche and Blake, it is not that either

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<sup>8</sup> Although Nietzsche exults in warfare, and Blake, with his usual flair for hyperbole, claims he would "sooner murder an infant in the cradle than nurse unacted desires" (Complete 34), it is important to note that their willing of conflict has little to do with encouraging violence. Indeed, for Blake, "energy" connotes all the beneficial and productive associations that the word "good" usually suggests, and Nietzsche explicitly states that brute force is a debased expression of the will to power. Similarly, if Yeats finds "terrible beauty" in the struggle of the Easter Uprising (1916), he bemoans in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" the atrocities committed by certain members of the Auxiliaries and the Black and Tans during the pre-Treaty insurrection: "a drunken soldiery/Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,/To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free" (Collected 108, 207). What is important to note is that for Blake, Nietzsche, and Yeats

“evil” or “good” should gain priority, but that the artificial dichotomy is itself inimical to the health of society. Thus Yeats praised Nietzsche’s acerbic rhetoric that, like Blake’s salutary corrosives, dissolves the timid and perverting conscience of a stabilized subjectivity. This radical collapse of subject and object, whether willed by the divine or impersonal, however variable in tonality, influence, and degree, characterizes an intellectual genealogy that leads up to the point of Yeats’s famous inquiry: “Who can tell the dancer from the dance?”

As Nietzsche demonstrates in his Genealogy of Morals, the righteous, the ascetic, and the oppressed resent evil for being “the expression of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man...But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming” (481). Nietzsche’s destabilizing of the subject effects two principal results: 1) to demonstrate the futility of applying evaluative categories on active processes incapable of cohering in a unified subject; 2) to rethink judgment, meritorious acts, volition, and the subject as themselves constructs of self-preservation, assertion, and will to power—not constructed in the sense of being determined by social or cultural contexts, but of being shot through by expressive, pre-subjective forces.

Commenting on how Nietzsche’s philosophy mediates through moments of sensibility, the late philosopher Gilles Deleuze argues that the *becoming* of Nietzsche’s forces undergo a struggle between active forces that affirm and reactive forces that negate, and whose qualities therefore can not be abstracted from their unfolding: the

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progressive conflict does not manifest in physical violence but in a spiritual and mental adjustment of consciousness whereby man surpasses himself.

“becoming of force must not be confused with the qualities of force... [they] can be no more extracted from their becoming than force itself can be separated from the will to power” (63-4). In other words, Nietzsche is not simply advocating dominant and aggressive forces that overpower their weaker counterparts; rather, he is locating the differential element, or will to power, that necessarily precedes all expression of force. The will to power, then, only manifests within evaluation, and so everything hinges on how the interpreter or symptomologist affirms or negates this purely differential element from which all distributions of power unfold through their becoming. What Nietzsche’s “Wille zur Macht” should not be confused with is Schopenhauer’s “will to live,” which is posited as more of a primordial impetus for survival, insofar as Nietzsche’s drive to power exceeds the value of life (thus asceticism as a jockeying for power).<sup>9</sup> More importantly, as an impersonal force, a “doer without a deed,” it exceeds subjectivity and objectivity and is instead a qualitative encounter between forces.

In A Vision, Yeats will identify Blake and Nietzsche as the pre-eminent pair who attempted to “establish, in the midst of our ever more abundant primary information, antithetical wisdom” (48). Yeats distinguishes between objective *primary* forces “stress[ing]...that which is external to mind” and subjective *antithetical* forces affirming “our inner world of desire and imagination” (73). The antithetical mode, however, is not presented as an inward retreat from the strife of the outside world; quite the contrary, Yeats considers antithetical history as “an age of freedom, fiction, evil, kindred, art, aristocracy, particularity, war,” while the primary is an age of “necessity, truth, goodness,

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<sup>9</sup> “Even the body within which individuals treat each other as equals ... will have to be an incarnate will to power, it will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant—not from any morality or immorality but because it is living and because life simply is will to power” (Beyond Good and Evil sec. 259).

mechanism, science, democracy, abstraction, peace” (52).

More importantly than the abstract oppositions Yeats delineates in A Vision and elsewhere is the underlying principle that the primary stagnates into unity, sameness, and concord, whereas the antithetical expresses differentiation and discord—the sort of pure differentiation that Nietzsche and Blake advocated. Far from being a mutually static opposition, the primary and the antithetical inextricably whirl through interlocking gyres, wherein the apex of one touches the center of the other and thereby effects a perpetual cycle of contraction and becoming. Following Nietzsche and Blake, Yeats identifies consciousness with “conflict, not with knowledge” (A Vision 24), and in his poetry the conflict between his soul and self, between his self and anti-self, undergoes a perpetual surpassing, incited by the struggle of his will against the limits of the world. Blake’s Adam is at the “Limit of Contraction,” or the farthest man can fall while still retaining a shred of Imagination in the “Mundane Shell” of the fallen earth; but Albion can cease roaming his dens and creating categorical divisions once he celebrates the fiery, active energy that unites creature with creator. Nietzsche’s mythological Übermensch, or Overman, bounds above man in Thus Spoke Zarathustra as over a bridge and is beyond our scope of consciousness when he learns to fully express the will power that laughs at and dances above the nausea of nihilism, affirming life without seeking it in some afterworld (310). Blake and Nietzsche, then, not only offer a prophylactic measure against the resentment of man and his repression but also tap prophetic energy in order to transform force into joyful creativity rather than watching it twist in anguish against itself.

Identities coalesce when guilt and reflection stifle energy and activity, as when

Albion, Blake's primeval man, concentrates on his passive shame or Selfhood and is thereby fallen and divided by abstract thoughts, or Specters. In *Responsibilities*, preceding the triumphant three-beat "A Coat," Yeats experiences a recurring vision ("Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye") of the frustrated Magi, whose dissatisfaction and "stiff painted clothes" resemble a frigid crèche, and whose faces "appearing and reappearing in the washed sky" resemble "rain-beaten stones" (Collected 126). Just as Albion's face blanches as he lacks the imagination to free himself from the "fetters of ice shrinking together," the Magi are unsatisfied with "Calvary's turbulence" and wait eagerly for "the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor" (126). It seems that they cannot summon the horrible dispensation of the "rough beast" who "slouches towards Bethlehem" in "The Second Coming," insofar as their eyes are transfixed to the sky as they await a transcendent apocalypse to be delivered from without. What they lack is the fiery forge of Los hammering blood and fury through their hearts in order to progress to another conscious state, whereby Orc can be borne into the world with creative passion, inner vision, and energy to turn the Mundane Shell inside out.

For Blake, art is revelation, and its purpose is not to emulate nature or to refract it with vague impressions but to recreate it by channeling energy into form. Yeats, however much a visionary, battled tooth and claw for the privileged moment, straining to master his metrics and choosing to revise many of his poems multiple times: "Metrical composition is always very difficult to me, nothing is done upon the first day, not one rhyme is in its place; and when at last the rhymes begin to come, the first rough draft of a six-line stanza takes the whole day" (Autobiographies 135). C.K. Stead admires Yeats's ability to complete a coherent body of work, in contradistinction to Pound's disintegrated

vision in the unfinished Cantos; but Stead qualifies his praise by further claiming that Yeats's "prodigious efforts to make colloquial modern speech fit the conventional line and rhyme patterns" resulted in "supreme eloquence, but as often the labour showed, and the eloquent and merely laboured appeared side by side in the same poem" (229).

If Yeats's verse had a habit of showing at the seams, "the stitching and unstitching" of his drudging efforts effect an ongoing process of willing and overcoming that is fundamental to his poetics. Far before meeting Pound, Yeats had been striving to dissociate his image as a curious survivor of the Rhymer's Club, whose notable members of the 1890s had begun to die from their excesses—or, in Arthur Symons's case, to become mad—and consequently earning from Yeats the retrospective designation as the "Tragic Generation." Indeed, Yeats's stylistic shift is already conspicuous in the first of his so-called middling poetry collections, *In the Seven Woods* (1903). In residence at the Coole Estate with lifetime friend and patron Lady Gregory during its composition, Yeats sought momentary respite from his personal sadness, from the loss of ancient Celtic Ireland, and from his disgust over the recent ascension of Edward VII.

In the eponymous poem, Yeats admonishes his previous anguishing over his ineffectual attempts to consummate with his lifetime love pursuit Maude Gonne and accordingly pledges to "put away/The unavailing outcries and the old bitterness/That empty the heart" (Collected 77). Much of the drama of the poem, and indeed the entire collection, owes to Yeats's eschewing of his pre-Raphaelite predilections and his imagery that he has come to associate with his impotent protestations. Even if Yeats could tentatively marry Aestheticism with Symbolism, he became increasingly critical of what he considered Lionel Johnson's and Arthur Symons's commitment to a passive and

impressionistic subjectivity. Accordingly, at the start of the twentieth century his poetry moves away from Pater's aesthetic idealism to a close-knit vitality of body, imagination, and mind that could accommodate a more robust poetics by placing heavier demands on a subject that creates rather than one that parrots back experience.<sup>10</sup>

Paradoxically, Yeats considered the creative act both empowering and enervating. A year before Maud Gonne announced her marriage to John MacBride, Yeats composed "Adam's Curse," in which he sustains his most accomplished meditation on labor and spontaneity. William Wenthe observes that in *The Wind and the Reeds* Yeats contrasts the labor of verse with the idle and ideal world of beauty; but that by 1902, Yeats considers both composition and beauty to be in fallen states and are therefore in need of labor to realize them (32). As Yeats the speaker insists, "It's certain that no fine thing/Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring" (81). Yeats is in part demonstrating how the naturalness and grace of the completed form can only be achieved by laboring over metrical and aural nuances. Further, he is expressing Castiglione's *sprezzatura*, the necessary calculation behind the mask of spontaneous nonchalance. Indeed, the poem's construction tenuously balances form and its relaxation: the first two stanzas are presented in quasi-sonnets whose rigidity of heroic couplets is loosened by their slant rhymes (i.e.: "summer's end | clergymen...trade enough | name of love"). Such are the complications with which Yeats wrestled when pursuing Maud Gonne: How can one express love as the fruit of much labor? And how can that labor, in turn, retain its heat of

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<sup>10</sup> In 1906, Yeats wrote that "we should ascend out of common interests, the thoughts of the newspapers, of the market-place, of men of science, but only so far as we carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole" (*Essays & Intrd.* 272). Significantly, for Blake perception is not sensory but mental, which is synonymous with the imaginative.

spontaneity and naturalness?

At the poem's end, Yeats evokes Shelley's eternal moon, which shines resplendent through the "dying embers of evening" but also necessarily "hollow" and "worn" from being "washed by time's waters" (Collected 81). Yeats's distrust with platonic idealism not only suggests fallen labor as an alternative but also signals his association with the artistic "martyrs" who create in opposition to the "noisy set/Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen" who would consider him an "idler" (80). The active spontaneity of life has been divided into a passive division between labor and beauty, naturalness and form, poetry and industry, Yeats and Maud Gonne. "Our fallen world," Yeats laments, "has separated subject and object" (Explorations 306). Rather than ascend to ideal forms, or descend in to the mire of the laborious act, Yeats simultaneously defends art and beauty from being a facile enterprise while lamenting their tarnished subjection to time and toil. However much Yeats celebrates the laborious cycles of Los to forge a perfect form, he equally aches for the divine vision that will deliver him from the grinding process into Jerusalem. And it is precisely this point of strain between Nietzsche and Blake—that is, the antithesis besetting itself— that will intensify Yeats's poetics to a degree of frenetic transformation.

### **Chapter III. Forging a System: The Labor of Los(s)**

The crucial difference between Blake's and Nietzsche's philosophy is that the former hoped to *restore* man via the collapse of perspectives in to the true knowledge of vision, whereas the latter hoped to *surpass* man by dramatizing the perspective play of truth and

untruth through their unwinding. Nietzsche bluntly states: “The will to a system is a lack of integrity’ (Twilight Idols 25). Blake’s Los proclaims: “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans” (Jer. Complete 10/153). Los’s declaration, of course, places due emphasis on the verb and the private forging of that system (the next line follows: “I will not Reason and Compare: my business is to Create”). Nonetheless, I consider Blake’s and Nietzsche’s opposing views on system-building to have had significant consequences for Yeats when he began to formulate his own all-encompassing system in A Vision. Containing geometrical, astrological, psychological, metaphysical, and historical components, A Vision is Yeats’s tour de force, in which he and his wife, George Hyde Lees, are visited by “instructors,” whose enigmatic comments are communicated through Lees’s gift for automatic writing. As he works to translate these instructions, Yeats introduces his interlocking gyres and the four faculties revolving around the twenty-eight lunar phases through which personalities incarnate.

In part, Yeats’s construction of a totalizing system stemmed from his anxieties of the communist and fascist debates on the continent, of which he became increasingly aware while serving as Senator in 1922, the moment he began the book’s conception. Miranda Hickman suggests that Yeats’s fear of “Jacobin excesses of the times” lead him to structure a system that could “restore balance and moderation” (210). Yet she further notes that if Yeats found solace in acting as a medium for his instructors, he “energized [this] passivity with a visionary power and the Vorticist precision of geometry” (188). Vorticist art resonated with Yeats’s earlier geometrical shapes and symbols he found in Mathers’s Order of the Golden Dawn and other Theosophy clubs, but the crucial difference is that Vorticism enabled Yeats with a more aggressive and precise stance than

serving as a vessel for the visitation of spirits.<sup>11</sup> If Yeats were to construct an antithetical system, it would need to have the vibrancy and exactness of Blake's.

Interestingly, among the several prefaces to A Vision, Yeats includes "A Packet for Ezra Pound," in which he details his relaxed exile with Pound in Rapallo. Following Blake's opposition to friendship, and Nietzsche's suspicion of it, Yeats marks Pound as his spiritual antagonist. In one of the various scenes relating their interaction, Yeats recalls Pound's explanation of how he composed the Cantos, thematically, yet arranged them randomly. Despite his rebuff that "Pound's aesthetic is in direct opposition of mine," Yeats admits his fascination with what he calls the "mathesis," a Renaissance form wherein numbers and geometrical forms are employed mathematically in order to structure symmetrical images, yet like a fugue also blends "seemingly irrelevant details...when taken up into [the] imagination" (5). Although Yeats hopes to emulate the incisiveness of Pound's system, he nonetheless wants to leave room for "odd corner[s]" and "botch[es] of tone and colour" (5).

Hazard Adams argues that A Vision does not complete a systematization of poetic symbols, nor is that the project's goal; rather, Yeats dramatizes how his struggle to formulate a system of creation, personality, life, death, and history is a necessary failure, because in the end Yeats is not in a communal relationship with his instructors but in an antithetical strife (Contrary Vision 43). Indeed, the instructors continually argue with

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<sup>11</sup> In his provocative conclusion to the "Introduction" to A Vision, Yeats remains indecisive as to whether he is actively formulating his system or passively mediating it: "Some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon... To such a question I can but answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all must be when in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi. They have helped me to hold together in a single thought reality and justice" (24-5).

Yeats, with one another, and oftentimes appear confused and frustrated. Much absurdity abounds as George dreams she were a cat lapping milk, and Yeats attempts to “drive it away by making the sound one makes when playing at being a dog to amuse a child” (10). However much irony and self-debasement Yeats includes, there is nonetheless something sinister about the instructors, especially when they warn Yeats that they will try to deceive him and threaten violence. Once completed, Yeats’s system seems to hold a dogmatic authority over the images of his poems, the primary impulse; but it soon becomes clear that the antithetical impulse, fueled by the instructors, is perpetually undermining the primary one. The instructors are closely related to what in Per Amica Silentia Lunae Yeats calls Daimons: indifferent, superhuman passions that express themselves to one another and that the individual often confuses for his or her own.

Yeats oftentimes identifies the antithetical with the image, but every time the primary attempts to concretize these images *via* abstract thought, Yeats seems to perform the same theatrical treachery of the instructors (or Frustrators, as he occasionally calls them). Information is withheld, rapid shifts in thought accompany any tentative explanation of symbolic order, and every mapping of gyres and tinctures is maddeningly complicated: Yeats introduces larger wheels of gyres; principles that in turn govern the faculties; a solar wheel that interpenetrates the lunar one; a vague overview of the Sphere and the soul in transit; and a system of world history that divides historical periods into phases and personalities. Yeats undergoes an antithetical quest, one in which the poet learns that primary experience will always be by itself insufficient. Yeats must accept that the Will (desiring faculty of being) will always remain antithetical to the Mask, which connotes for him both the object of desire and the consciously theatrical style

accompanying the pursuit of that object.

Like Blake and Nietzsche, Yeats's employment of theatrical gestures dramatizes a movement of thought. Where Nietzsche celebrated Wagner's operatic and mythic performances, and Blake piped songs and hymns complemented his visual plates, Yeats's rhythms and psaltery resonated through the movements and the images of other poems as he constantly reconsidered them from different viewpoints and states of mind.<sup>12</sup> Yeats's system, then, is itself an anti-system, or more precisely a dramatic staging of the momentary reification of thought and that thought being caught up and washed away in its own movement. Calvin Bedient concludes that an abundance of form "riled and stifled the Beast in [Yeats]" while an excess of "Sensation frightened even the madmen in him"; fluctuating between sensation and form, "his art pings with the comprehensiveness of his magnificent indecision" (142). In the "Double Vision of Michael Robartes," Yeats succinctly captures what Joyce called *chaosmos*, or Blake the vortex, the movement within the monumental: "Mind moved yet seemed to stop/As 'twere a spinning top" (87).

Nowhere does Yeats dramatize the struggle between symmetry and its antithesis so vibrantly as in "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927). Here, the aged poet feels rejected from the temporal world of love and "sensual music" and therefore resolves to turn toward "monuments of unageing intellect" (123). To elevate his soul into the "artifice of eternity," however, hardly seems a suitable alternative, for once his heart and desire are consumed away, the poet is reduced to yet another emblem impressed in the golden

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<sup>12</sup> For an account of how Yeats, the prolific actress Florence Farr, the Bengalese poet Tagore, and others pressured the Imagists to never let them "substitute a visual for an aural paradigm," see Scuchard (esp. 256-83). Pound, Hulme, and notable imagists such as Aldington, H.D., Fletcher, Lawrence, and Flint retained the quality of rhythm and cadence within their poetry and criticism that Yeats impressed upon them so fervently.

mosaic of the Hagia Sophia among a litany of venerable yet impotent men. The speaker's attitude toward the natural cycle, however, is immediately ambivalent: "the young/In one another's arms," and the "salmon-falls" and "mackerel-crowded seas," phrases that ring lushness through their entrancing elongated vowels, are offset by a more detached, almost scientific observance, of "fish, flesh, fowl," that is "begotten, born, and dies," whose staccato monosyllables and alliterations convey a tone of disgust. Helen Vendler, who considers Yeats struggling between "spiritual excitement and sexual torture and the knowledge that they are somehow inseparable," astutely observes that the poem unfolds in four numeric stations, each of which offering a modulation of song, the first two stanzas sublimating horizontally to the cathedral, the last two moving vertically to the palace (48). The rapid shift in tonality in location between each station, the spatio-temporal crisis, is monitored by the ottava rima stanzas of regular rhyme scheme (abababcc). Ostensibly, Yeats favors the trappings of time and the sensuality of the drowsy emperor in lieu of gilded eternity.

In Blake's *America, Europe* and the *Song of Los*, he couples his persistent theme of attaining liberty through revolutionary action with an equally potent theme of man's apocalyptic resurrection. Man is trapped in the natural world, whose cycle parallels the perpetual mental strife between the imprisoned Orc spasmodically overthrowing the tyrannical thundergod of moral power and rational distribution, Urizen. Yet because Orc and Urizen share a corrupted view of space, time, and life as cyclical, they both accordingly fail to pierce these cumbrous wheels with the imaginative vision that can only accompany the eighth eye of the calamitous but redemptive descent of the

Messiah.<sup>13</sup> Yeats's crucial departure from Blake, Harold Bloom argues, owes to Yeats's misinterpretation of the covering cherub, far from a means of redemption for Blake, as the mask of the created form from which the uncreated spirit manifests (see *esp.* 69-74). Yeats's refusal to enter Byzantium—Blake's Golgoonooza—attests to how Yeats conceived the poet as creating through Beulah. This is to say that Yeats may have very well inherited the dialectical structure of Blake's cosmos; but far from desiring to unite with his shadow, Yeats found its elusive chase to be fruitful, whereas Blake considered the Spectre vainly pursuing its Emanation to be a fallen state of natural religion (i.e. Deism) that he so vehemently denounced. For Blake, the creation of the physical world is paradoxically enough man's fall, insofar as man no longer perceives as God but perceives as an organism in an environment; this division between subject and object is what Blake calls the world of Generation (Ulro, Hell).

Unlike Blake, whose prophetic Eyes of God ensure a process through and out of time into the inner vision of dynamic eternity, Yeats can only attain momentary glimpses of apocalypse and the eternal before he is, as in "The Isle of Innisfree," jolted back to the material reality of the "pavement grey." Yeats can never access the city of eternal vision but can only strive toward it, remaining trapped in the false eternal wheel of human creation and the regenerative world, what Blake deemed Beulah. Yeats's tower and winding stair, roughly analogous to Blake's Golgoonooza, aims to transcend the earthly province but necessarily remains rooted in its aspiration: if the tower evokes the ancient towers of astronomy and human enlightenment achieved by closer proximity to the

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<sup>13</sup> Northrop Frye provides the best account of the "Orc Cycle," through which Orc enacts the dual-role of the Promethean revolutionary spirit and the cyclical rebirth of Adonis (210). See also Rachel Billigheimer's Wheels of Eternity, *esp.* 98-104.

mythical progenitors of the sun and moon, it also suggests the confusion and dispersal of articulation wrought by the Tower of Babel.

Yeats's decline into the gilded eternity of Jerusalem in the fourth stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium" is complicated by his song's incarnation into a mechanical bird, forged by Los's "hammered gold and gold enameling" in the Emperor's palace. The emperor, whose drowsiness is sensualized by the mechanized bird, is somewhat tamed by the unsexualized "lords and ladies of Byzantium" that keep his court. Yeats's concession that "Once out of nature I shall never take/My bodily from any natural thing" is fraught with ambiguity. First, does this suggest the possibility of active appropriation of a form that is no longer attainable? Or the passive willingness (in the sense of "to take on") of an acceptance that has been denied? This is further complicated by the "nature" under scrutiny. Is Yeats suggesting the nature in the sense of the material, natural elements and cycles, or "nature" in the sense of the poet's habit or deliberation?

If in "Sailing Byzantium," Yeats tenuously synthesizes Blake's golden song with Nietzsche's imperious court, he will repeat his approach in his diptych-response "Byzantium," not to enter in the "glory of changeless metal" that the "moon [has] embittered, but to remain at the rush of its portal, in the "blood and mire" of complexities (249). And if in "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats becomes the golden bird representing the eventual destiny of his soul, he now meditates on an image of Hades' bobbin wheel suffocating his body in "mummy cloth." The poem hinges on whether the speaker will repudiate his afterlife visions, or consent to the furnace of spiritual agony where his dance will consume the complexities of fire and blood.

Poised between the monumental fashioned into permeable gold and the terrible,

sensual tumult of “fury and mire of human veins,” between laboring and transcendence, Yeats’s own antithetical impulse undergoes its own climax. Los has returned with a vengeance: “The smithies break the flood, /The golden smithies of the Emperor!” But the speaker’s dance does not free him from the booming forge; like Nietzsche’s (and indeed Mallarmé’s) dance, the speaker affirms the whirling movement of insoluble contraries, from whose movement “fresh images beget” rather than solidifying in to a mosaic, or in to the pure Image that Pound advocated. Yeats refuses to negate the flux of discord or to synthesize its frenzy into concord; rather he wills the antithetical to undergo its own perpetual antitheticality that generates—and indeed is the condition for—transformation.

When Pound sought Yeats’s company, he praised the soft cadences of the *Celtic Twilight* as “Naught but the wind that flutters in the leaves.” But Yeats’s Gaelic word for wind, “Sidhe,” also connotes otherworldly beings whose mad gusts Yeats associates with dance of the daughters of Herodias, and who disturb the mummy-wheat over the cairn hill and the burial mound. Like Shelley’s wind, Yeats’s Sidhe is at once a balmy and destructive whirl through the concordant and discordant faculties. In his *Pisan Cantos*, Pound would recall the older poet incanting “The Peacock”:

“...So that I recalled the noise in the chimney  
as it were the wind in the chimney  
but was in reality Uncle William  
that had made a great Peeeeeacock  
in the proide ov his oiye  
had mad a great Peeeeeeeeacock in the...”

If Yeats’s disembodied voice haunts Pound, not to mention Eliot and Auden, it is not simply because his chanting is an old and mellow breeze from the past but because his

cadences and rhythms whisper in their ears a forceful antitheticality that inhabits, before surging through, pre-existing monuments.

#### **Chapter IV. Towering Vacillations: Becoming Political**

Yeats held that Blake was convinced

That the things his opponents held white were indeed black, and the things they held black were white [...] that all busy with government are men of darkness and ‘something other than human life.’ One is reminded of Shelley, who was the next to take up the cry, though with a less abundant philosophic faculty, but still more of Nietzsche, whose thought flows always, though with an even more violent current, in the bed Blake’s thought has worn. (*Essays* 68)

We have seen how Yeats employed an antithetical mode in his aesthetics in order to effect the highest pitch of concentration and transformation; skimming along the rush of Nietzsche and Blake, and setting even these predecessors on one another, Yeats harnessed the transformative potential of negation and tore asunder the golden mosaic wall that would petrify his movement in a hagiographic representation. What remains to be discussed, however, is the degree to which this contradictory principle, brimming with potential through his poetry, translates to his political and social involvement that, however much relegated in his essays as secondary to his poetry, remained a focal point throughout the course of his life. Even when dwelling on the nature of Irish poets in the introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* Yeats will conclude: “We are what we are because almost without exception we have some part in public life in a country where public life is simple and exciting” (189). In closing, I would like to point to several contradictions within Yeats’s nationalist efforts and suggest how his understanding of “antithetical” transition inflects these complications.

We are immediately greeted with two dangerous consequences: 1) that Yeats's concept of antitheticality led to beautiful transformative effects in his poetry but is ultimately ineffectual in political life, as it runs a platform of non-committal vacillation 2) or, more consequentially that this hyper-negation, when applied to the social realm, leads one to the worst interpretation of "will to power," whereby the masses are eschewed for the noble and the upright—the path of social Darwinism that arises from aligning with elitist art and leads directly to fascist Irish ascendancy. These consequences themselves point to an ongoing contradiction within the modernist enterprise itself: if one were to follow Frank Kermode and Georg Lukács in condemning modernist art for failing to represent the reality of material and class struggle, the inevitable problem persists as to how an artist could be disparaged for being both aesthetically insular, what Astradur Eysteinnsson calls the "rage of order" whereby the artist shapes the vicissitudes of life and history into the timeless unity of mythic representation and aesthetic that New Criticism and Russian Formalism would find so attractive, while simultaneously defining this type of aesthetic as subverting some sort of social normative even as it seems to withdraw from it altogether (42).

One way out of this dilemma is to refuse to reduce the literary movement modernism to being synonymous with the social, cultural, and technological shifts that better fall under the rubric of modernization. So where critics such as Lukács complain that modernism distorts reality and introduces chaos when representing the world, Eysteinnsson argues that this is precisely the point: rather than read in terms of extreme subjectivity or in terms of impersonal aesthetics, modernism expresses a crisis of the subject relating or representing the outside world; to ignore this is to think that

modernism and modernization are but mutually reinforcing phenomena when in fact the former oftentimes functioned as a blockage to or a critique of the latter in the form of a revolt against capitalist-bourgeois teleology and the failed project of unfettered liberalism (67).

In short, a withdrawal into aesthetics does not necessarily entail aloofness from a privileged vantage: this applies above all to Yeats, whose Neo-Fenian brand of politics called for a nationalist literature that could not be reduced to proselytizing (thus his reservations with some of Pound's work and with many of the popular Irish nationalist poets such as Gavan Duffy), for such a response is too easily commercialized and too readily turned to fodder when inspiring foolish decisions. Although Yeats came to sympathize with Patrick Pearse and the others executed during the failed uprising of 1916, he nevertheless would harbor guilt, admittedly overly scrupulous, over the possible sedition aroused by his more pointedly nationalist works: "Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?" (Collected 227).

Before commenting with more detail on how Yeats's concept of antitheticality informs his political encounters, it might be useful for me to frame this issue around Theodor Adorno's concept of the interrelation of art and society, one that offers an explicit critique of the development of high liberal capitalism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and one that offers the most rigorous account of art operating through autonomous negativity. For although, like Lukács, Adorno does not consider the autonomy of aesthetics to have any functional value, intriguingly for Adorno this very uselessness itself serves a type of function: forming a negative image of an over-determining impulse of rationalist, capitalist society. Certainly in Adorno's lifetime he witnessed society being dominated

by exchange value, but it is crucial to note that he did not consider this as a recent phenomenon: rather, the beginning of human history put society on a trajectory toward the reduction of all experiential qualities to quantitative equivalences. This is because the drive toward self-preservation, which began as the desire to dominate nature, began to pervade all spheres of social life as an increasingly insidious form of instrumental reason.

Together with Horkheimer, Adorno argues in Dialectic of Enlightenment that although the concept of reason strives to uphold “the idea of a free, human, social life,” it nonetheless is committed to the “ratio of capital” that strives for the most effective means to manipulate and exploit nature (18). Thus, a dynamic of social power is put in place *a priori* whereby instrumental reason prevails, a reason “which adjusts the world for the ends of self-preservation and recognizes no function other than the preparation of the object from mere sensory material in order to make it that material of subjugation” (64). All relations, as quantifiable, accordingly take on a standardizing function that strives to reduce everything to the same universal principle: *equivalence*. Here is Adorno’s alleged pessimism toward the culture industry and toward any hope of unmediated agency, for the individual is not in a position of relative freedom against the backdrop of some social context but part of a general subject whose historical dialectics already sweep one up in a project of quantified domination.

Thus Adorno follows the Hegelian axiom that art shares a relation with social totality, but the crucial difference is that Adorno does not consider art to reflect on or communicate with society, a process that would enable both terms to undergo sublation; instead Adorno figures art as perpetual negation that resists society and its ossified forms of language and homogeneity. Indeed, the very indeterminateness of art reflects social

conditions through its negative performance, causing the logic and rationality of an objectively reified world to reflect its irrationality. Thus in order to express the negativity of a determinate subjective experience, the artist must construct a form of radical subjectivity rather than one with the shape of a “rationalized” objective (which would house an arche-subjectivity even as it claimed to eschew it).

What I have delineated thus far is but a simplified sketch of Adorno’s highly complex critique, but this excursus nonetheless has enabled an inflection of our original question involving transition and transformation. Following Adorno’s model of negative dialectics, and Yeats’s model of antithetical poetics, our central concern becomes less about the transition between two constituent terms (x becoming y) than the nature of the *becoming* that circulates through the entire series. Put differently, our concern is less about identifying or representing an ethos or artifact that transgresses, subverts, or outright opposes a preceding norm or habitual methodology than tracing the rhythms and contours resonating through the process of the overcoming itself. If dialectics is the repetitious movement of change, one can not simply move beyond it, for to do so would be to participate in that which is ostensibly dismissed. But, following Deleuze, whose account of Nietzsche’s symptomology I traced earlier, one might locate a distinct or singular rhythm of movement that, if not entirely different from negation, is nevertheless irreducible to it.<sup>14</sup>

To make this more concrete, consider Yeats’s celebrated “Leda and the Swan”:

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<sup>14</sup> For a longer discussion, see the “Introduction: Rhizome” from *A Thousand Plateaus*, where Deleuze and Guattari conclude: “Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle” (25).

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?  
 And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
 And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,

So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

Where the “Second Coming” introduces the flight of hawk to signify the whirling ascent to apocalypse, “Leda and the Swan” recounts a nascent descent, namely the beginning of epic history. Leda, being raped by Zeus in the disguise of a swan, lays eggs that will hatch into Clytemnestra and Helen and the war-gods Castor and Polydeuces, thereby leading to the Trojan War and its aftermath (“The broken wall, the burning roof and tower/ And Agamemnon dead”). This myth, not surprisingly, plays a role in the larger historical cycles that Yeats traces in A Vision, but what is more conspicuous than the mythical or historical momentousness of this gestation is the sheer violence and sensual imagery it invokes. Ostensibly, a perfect antithesis is before us: Zeus appears in all his “feathered glory,” with “great wings” and “brute blood,” while Leda is but a “helpless breast” “staggering” before the assault,” her only defense being “terrified vague fingers” (Collected 237).

But in this Petrarchan sonnet a strange reversal occurs after Zeus's ejaculation ("shudder in the loins") completes the octave. In the concluding sestet, the speaker asks if Leda "put on his knowledge with his power" before she was ignobly dropped (237). This final rhetorical question, like the ones concluding "A Second Coming" or "Among School Children," expresses far more wonder and unaffected confusion than the rhetorical questions preceding it, which seem imperative, even conveying outrage: "How can those terrified vague fingers push/ The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?" A common reading of the poem holds that Zeus descending on Leda is analogous to the rush of modernity befalling mankind, an exhilarating, if degrading, experience that one can only contain or master by immortalizing the violent movement within art. But this would only attribute the force of the encounter to Zeus, when in fact it becomes increasingly apparent that poem moves toward a more complex commingling of power that is caught up in the "white rush." Within the dialectical struggle between Zeus and Leda, aggressor and victim, violation and sublimation, the encounter itself so vividly captured here seems to sweep up both characters in its own event, or even as the becoming undergone is decoded, as it fails to resolve the situation or to sublimate Leda (she is dropped to begin the conflict anew). The "becoming" of this encounter, as we noted with Nietzsche's "deeds without doers" and Blake's imaginative imperative, is a singular expression that can only parse out a subject or object when the dynamic is congealed and the movement or 'singular rhythm' is altogether subtracted.

What originally seems like a purely aesthetic concern, however, takes on particular import and inflection when traced through Yeats's political involvement with Ireland's struggle for independence and its nascent Free State. For in its singular transitory

development it essentially grappled with two contradictory trajectories: the abstract notion of liberalism that secured individual and natural right and the effort to construct a notion of Irish citizenship with a traceable historical and cultural identity. Yeats's nationalism advocated that Ireland paradoxically become a modern state that would simultaneously maintain its singularity. As Michael North notes, in his seminal The Political Aesthetics of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot, Yeats was a "Victorian and still something of the nineteenth-century liberal he loved to hate, [and] Yeats suffered these conflicts as a personal quarrel, an internal contest between individualism and nationalism, right and duty, freedom and history" (13).

In this sense, Yeats pursued the imaginary ideal of an Ireland that would achieve the impossible Hegelian resolution that realizes the coincidence of personal uniqueness and social harmony. Additionally, Yeats advocated nationalism from a colonial vantage point, one where he was in danger of either embracing the enlightened progress of British imperialistic modernization or of retreating into an authentic Celtic voice that can only speak as nativist.<sup>15</sup> But given the vacillations within Yeats's political life, as within his aesthetics, this project would never find resolution and would instead lead him through tumultuous participation in nearly the entire range of possible political alignments at his disposal. As Yeats aptly stated, "Nobody can force a movement of any kind to take any pre-arranged pattern to any very great extent" (Letters, 89).

If one were to locate a consistent thread in Yeats's politics, it would be his commitment to the school of John O'Leary, however much it took on protean hues

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<sup>15</sup> For more on Yeats's stance on colonialism, see Rob Dogget's Deep Rooted Things. There, he reads Yeats's plays and poems as "seemingly retreat[ing] from the material fact of colonization into essential notions of Irish identity, a form of strategic negation, a manifestation of subaltern consciousness that registers empire's co-dependent logic but that does not fetishize the subaltern as heroic victim" (87).

through his different political affiliations. Essentially, the school of O' Leary was strictly libertarian and individualist; unlike Arthur Griffith's nationalism that demanded subordination to the Irish state, Yeats followed the old nationalism in the footsteps of Henry Grattan, Wolf Tone, and Thomas Davis. Indeed, O'Leary was far more invested in achieving national liberty than in realizing social equality: this points to why O'Leary departed from the Republican model of constitutional reform as a viable path to an independent, democratic Republic. Following suit, Yeats consistently praises the martyrs, poets, and failed revolutionaries over constitutional politicians, whom he deemed well-intentioned but ultimately ineffectual. Yet it is important to further note that Yeats considered the Irish struggle less in terms of racial identification than with economic egalitarianism, and so he considered nationalism as a movement against the uniformity of modern materialist civilization espoused by the middle classes.

Yeats's early involvement with socialism had deep lasting effects on all his later political involvements. Rather than joining the mainstream labor movement, Yeats was especially drawn to the social criticism of Carlyle and Ruskin that William Morris married to Marxism and was accordingly able to blame the inhumanity of social relationships for the decline of art. The model of the ancient Irish bard offered Yeats a suitable alternative: both legislator and prophet, the bard shared the qualities of his great predecessors—Blake, Nietzsche, and Shelley—as a rebel against authoritarian government and social institutions. Yet Yeats's zeal for unfettered liberalism was compromised on one point: although he feared the growing authority of the state to restrict the state of an individual, he nonetheless supported State action to support the

condition of the wretched. In sum, Yeats initially hoped to follow Morris in balancing individual purpose with social concern.

This uneasy synthesis, however, would become increasingly strained during Yeats's double appointments to the Irish Senate in 1922 and in 1925 (he retired in 1928). Early in his office, Yeats took a hard-line libertarian, and decidedly Protestant-minority, approach against the Catholic ethos that would ban divorce. Yeats predicted that such a motion would isolate the Protestant minority and thereby decisively cut off Northern Ireland through partition. His response was brutal: in a series of speeches, Yeats likened the government and clergy's campaign tactics to "medieval Spain" and willfully offended many of the wary legislators. In what Foster calls one of "WBY's supreme public moments," he called upon the "language of religious confrontation, rather than the more tactful rhetoric of pluralism" (Vol II, 294). But his divisive politics were tempered by his position as the spokes of Fine Arts; after his initial confrontations, he remained committed to improving the conditions of secondary schools and was especially set on introducing arts and crafts to an otherwise strictly utilitarian education. In 1924 he chaired a coinage committee with the intent to select a set of designs for the nation's currency; in control of the symbolic power of young nation's means of exchange, Yeats opted a form that was "elegant, racy of the soil, and utterly unpolitical" (333). It was as though Yeats sought to battle the utilitarian exchange-economy of Ireland by stamping on its currency a mythic link.

During this time Yeats witnesses a Marxism that retained none of its mythical ambience he found in Morris: the Red Terror. Yeats found an immediate parallel to the Irish Civil War in the Bolshevik Revolution, and although Yeats's sympathy for the

proletariat had not faded since his supporting them in the Dublin Lockout of 1913, he did become increasingly fearful that the nationalists would unite with the socialists in Ireland and usher in dictatorship.

Caught between the undesirable poles of tyrannical communism and the anarchy of Ireland's war-torn Republic, Yeats turned to conservatism and began advocating hierarchy and aristocracy as the only suitable alternative. In the summer of 1928, when Yeats had left the Senate exhausted from protesting mob Catholicism, he was anxious for a strong leader to take decisive action, and he found this role fulfilled by de Valera's meteoric rise.

Thus followed Yeats's most regrettable foray into politics, namely with the fascist and militaristic Blueshirts. Elizabeth Cullingford qualifies Yeats's involvement in fascism by noting that it ultimately stemmed from his anti-capitalist impulse under Morris, and that "Irish fascism was always more Irish than fascist" (118). Indeed, the Blueshirts initially ran as the Army Comrades Association (ACA) that drew together ex-members of the Free State Army: given that the IRA positioned itself as communist, the ACA, being Treatyite, identified with fascism. Yeats remained wary of the Blueshirts, but he did speak his support for the group on the occasion of the IRA bringing off a successful coup against de Valera. It would seem that Yeats could be pardoned for such a foolish allegiance, in that he had legitimate concerns for his newfound nation being torn asunder yet again by civil disorder and economic breakdown. But nonetheless the worst of Yeats's aristocratic sensibilities came to bear during his brief involvement with the Blueshirts that ended in the summer months of 1933. Yeats found de Valera analogous to the authority of Hitler and Mussolini, the latter impressed upon him by Pound, and, most

damning, his long interest in his Ascendancy genealogy intensified to the point of him joining the Eugenics Society in the late '30s.

Yeats's interest in the Blueshirts was short-lived. Originally considering O'Duffy to be his antithetical hero, within a few months time he found him to be an uneducated lunatic and later expressed his regret for his temporary outburst of fanaticism. In his final years Yeats would revert back to the school of O'Leary, finding faith only in the qualities of individual men and in the singular achievement of aesthetics—a position that he took up again with such vigor that it almost pushed him toward anarchism. Where Yeats formerly thought fascism was a means to turn away from primary thought, he came to realize that it was in fact the essence of it:

The antithetical is creative, painful—personal—the Primary imitative, happy, general. It is the imitativeness in which there is always happiness, that makes the Movements of our time attract the young. The art and politics of an antithetical age expressed a long and maturing tradition and were best practiced by old men. That age has ended in the old political jugglers of liberal democracy. I insist upon that paradox, that the old age of our civilization begins with young men marching in step, with the shirts and songs that gave our politics an air of sport ("Michael Robartes" 222)

Many commentators have considered Yeats's last stance toward individualism as a triumphal overcoming of the dark side of his political investments. But we must pay heed to Yeats's admonition: "every movement, in feeling or in thought, prepares in the dark by its own increasing clarity and confidence its own executioner" (Letters 418). For Yeats, transition persisted at every corner during his long career, and his aesthetics enabled a hyper-negativity that sought to mark a singular flow unencumbered by the blockages before it. If transition was the case, contradiction became the means for shaping the contours of its flux, a mode of negation that did not seek resolution, for to do

so would be to submit to the tides. One might argue that such a stance would restrict Yeats from locating the essence of Ireland. But this is precisely the point: Yeats sought an Ireland that affirmed its own becoming rather than submitted to a homogenous rate, an Ireland that refused to harden into self-reflexivity, an Ireland that had yet-to-come:

"When the new era comes ...I imagine new races, as it were, seeking domination..."

(Vision 43).

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