

The Great Clock Tower: Time and Narrative in the Late Works of W.B. Yeats

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Declaration

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James Scanlon

Summary

This dissertation is a study of time and narrative in the late works of W.B. Yeats. In the introduction, taking a historicist approach, I explain why the subject of time is specifically relevant to Yeats's late work. Broadly, I argue that conditions in the early twentieth century made the problem of time visible in new ways, as the nature of time, and even the reality of time, became the subject of debate among physicists and philosophers. The element of narrative is introduced by way of the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, who argues that narrative has evolved as a bridge between different perspectives on time, between physical or objective time, on the one hand, and phenomenological or subjective time, on the other hand. In his analysis of twentieth century writers, Ricoeur looked at works by Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust. This dissertation is an attempt to apply the same approach, analysis of narrative structures, to a selection of works by W.B. Yeats. I argue that Yeats was attempting to produce something like a unified theory that would apply to the small scale of the individual life and the larger scale of human history. As finally revealed, it would be a "great clock tower" that regulates human life and history.

As a study of the ways in which Yeats experimented with narrative form in his exploration of temporality. I have deliberately selected texts from different genres to consider the extent to which formal constraint and generic expectation permits or inhibits the evolution of narrative, particularly narratives that try to escape the strait-jacket of chronological order. Chapter 1 explores the evolution of historical time in *A Vision*. Accordingly, Chapter 2 is largely concerned with autobiography, Chapter 3 with lyric, and

Chapter 4 with stage drama. However, in recognition of the relative importance of lyric poetry in Yeats's work, in the chapters on autobiography and drama I use selected lyrics as a counterpoint to the principal text. The method that I follow is a simple form of structuralism, after the practical example of critics like William Empson and Frank Kermode, with theoretical support from Jonathan Culler. This approach is joined to close reading, following the example of critics like Nicholas Grene, Michael Wood, and Helen Vendler.

The selection of texts marks out a winding path, rather than a straightforward year-by-year progression. Accordingly, Chapter 1 is concerned with texts that appear in 1925 and 1937 respectively. Chapter 2 then jumps back to 1921-1922, with the publication of the *The Trembling of the Veil*. Chapter 3, which is concerned with the poetry of *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair* (1933) is largely concerned with work produced between the limiting dates of Chapter 1. Finally, Chapter 4 moves beyond the second version of *A Vision*, to the first production of *Purgatory* on 10 August 1938 at the Abbey Theatre.

For Paul Ricoeur, it is axiomatic that it is not possible to reconcile the models of time that he categorizes as physical and cosmological, on the one hand, and phenomenological and lived, on the other. I will argue that Yeats suffers a similar kind of failure in his attempt to produce a single model of time for human life (and death), on the one hand, and human history on the other. His categorization of time is different from Ricoeur's, but the effect is the same. However, I will also argue that a careful study of his narratives shows that he belongs among the company selected by Ricoeur for the "games with time" that they play.

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Finally, I want to dedicate this work to the memory of my father, Michael Scanlon, who died in 2002, and to thank him, too late, for filling our house with books.

Textual Note

All quotations from Yeats's poetry are from the second edition of *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: Volume 1: The Poems*, edited by Richard J. Finneran, Scribner, 1997.

Introduction: The Mission of the Black Eagle

On 8 October 1920, W.B. Yeats and his wife George were in Oxford, at the house on Broad Street they had found and furnished in 1919. After spending the early part of the year on a lecture tour of North America, and the summer travelling between Ireland and England, they were back at work on the system that would become *A Vision*. In March, while staying in Pasadena, they had abandoned the automatic writing practiced by George since the early days of their marriage, adopting in its stead a new method of contact with their supernatural instructors. George would communicate with the instructors while sleeping lightly, and speak their words aloud. Yeats would sit nearby, listening, and asking questions (Saddlemeyer 246-248). They shared the task of recording the results in a series of dream notebooks. Among other matters, they consulted the instructors on the best time for conception and birth of a son, variously named "Black Eagle" and "Heir" in the communications (Saddlemeyer 263).

On the night of 8 October, the sleep started badly. George started to make cat noises. This had happened before, and Yeats had found that he could chase the cat away by making dog noises. On this occasion, the cat responded badly: "there was springing back & spitting & so much agitation that I must not make that sound again" (YVP 3 53). Once back on track, they received a remarkable piece of news:

The mission of Black Eagle was to change the quality of the idea of time in men's minds. (YVP 3 53)

The instructors might have expected Michael Yeats to become a dynamic compound of Martin Heidegger and James Bond, but if he did choose to accept his mission, he guarded its secrecy. Instead, it is his father's late works that respond more directly to the suggestive communication of 8 October 1920. Some historical context will help to explain why the instructors might have thought the time was ripe for such a momentous undertaking.

Changing Times

The communication that Yeats and George received from their instructors takes for granted an important, often unacknowledged, truth: time has a history, and the human understanding of time changes. Speculation about the origins of human conceptions of time is inevitably obscured in a mist that is time's very element. This creates a difficulty in that it is difficult to separate the subject, time, from the history of the discipline in which it is being studied. There is a scientific history of time, and some monuments stand clearly out of the mist: Aristotle's *Physics* (c.330 BCE), Newton's *Principia* (1687), Einstein's *Relativity* (1916). But time also has a place in the history of philosophy, in which equivalent peaks can be identified: the fragments of Pre-Socratic thought, the eleventh book of Augustine's *Confessions* (c.397-400), Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927). And there is a social history of time: the gradual formation of constructs like work-time and play-time, which give functional categories to our experience of time. The vertical axis of these functional

categories is intersected by another, horizontal, axis, on which every life-time is divided into a series of predictable stages: childhood, adolescence, maturity, senescence.

Studies of the social experience of time put to one side the questions that perplexed Augustine and leave scientific speculation about the nature of time and space to physicists like Newton and Stephen Hawking. Although philosophers and physicists might continue to fight for the right to have the final word on the nature and meaning of time, no single model of time can be wholly insulated from what is happening in any of the others. The everyday experience of time underwent significant changes in the late nineteenth century, and those changes, coupled with new discoveries in physics and the competing claims of some philosophers, help to explain why, in 1920, it would have occurred to Yeats's instructors to come up with the mission to be entrusted to Michael Yeats.

The first significant change in the conventional understanding of time might be identified as the discovery by geologists that the earth was much older than had ever been imagined. The traditional six thousand years of human history, generated by readings of the Bible, were suddenly obsolete. "If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses," wrote John Ruskin to his friend Henry Acland in May 1851 (Hewison 201). In a similar vein, Yeats blamed the materialism of scientists Thomas Henry Huxley and John Tyndall for depriving him of "the simple-minded religion" of his childhood (CW3 115). But just as the Christian model of time was being undermined, the practical, social form of time was being transformed into something more stable and universal than it had ever been. In

1884, Washington D.C. hosted the Prime Meridian Conference, an early attempt to establish some consensus on the location of the line of longitude from which standardized time zones would be generated. In the decades that followed, as Vanessa Ogle has shown (75-98), a multiplicity of local solar times was gradually replaced by a fixed number of mean time zones, producing what is now called “Coordinated Universal Time” or “UTC”. Much like twenty-first century responses to climate change, the process was highly political, and affected by national and commercial interests. It advanced only when it suited the interests of nation-state formation, but it was the start of an irreversible process.

Ireland did not escape from this standardization of time. In its case, although the impetus for change came from a diverse grouping of enthusiastic amateurs and hard-headed business interests, the actual imposition of the new chronology was imposed politically, from Westminster. The alignment of local times with Greenwich Mean Time, the basis for UTC, took place in 1916, during the night of 30 September/1 October to coincide with the end of that year’s daylight-saving time in the rest of the United Kingdom. Advertisements in post offices and newspapers gave precise instructions on what to do, and when:

PUT BACK THE CLOCK ON SATURDAY.

—◆—

The following Order has been issued:—
 On and after Sunday, the 1st October, 1916,
 Western European time will be observed
 throughout Ireland. All clocks and watches
 should be put back 35 minutes during the night
 30th September-1st October.

The proper time to make the change is 3 a.m.
 summer time, and the correction to the nearest
 second is 34 minutes 39 seconds.

By Order of the Lord Lieutenant.
 Dublin Castle, 12th September, 1916.

Irish Times Notice, 30 September 1916.

Although the country was still coming to terms with the fall-out from the Easter Rising, the colonization of Ireland's time did not appear to prompt the kind of angry reaction that erupted in India where it was viewed "as yet another in a long series of attempts by the colonial state to meddle with local and personal affairs" (Ogle 109). Before the change, anyone travelling frequently between Ireland and England, like Yeats, and even within Ireland, would have been conscious of time difference and the need for routine time adjustment. If there was no widespread anger, there were small pockets of resistance. In an angry riposte to Herbert Samuel, the Home Secretary who proposed the Time (Ireland) Bill in the House of Commons on 1 August 1916, John Dillon, a leading member of the Irish Parliamentary Party and Member of Parliament for Mayo East, denied that the measure was, as Samuel had claimed, a benign attempt to ameliorate Ireland's geographical and temporal isolation by bringing it into the fold of "Western European time", as Samuel called it. On the contrary, Dillon said, Irish people had lived contentedly with their own time for many centuries, and even welcomed the need to adjust their watches when crossing the

Irish sea. He reminded Samuel that his constituents on the west coast of Ireland had “great experience in the difference of time”, as they regularly travelled to England for seasonal work at harvest time, and the difference in time had the salutary benefit of reminding them that they “were coming into a strange country”. However, Dillon on his own was unable to hold back the tide. Ireland was drawn into the “strange country” founded on Greenwich Mean Time, and never left it (*HC Deb 1 August 1916* vol. 85 c. 72-5).

The process was piecemeal, and slow, but time was increasingly separated from observation of natural phenomena so that it could become stable, uniform, and predictable. As German historian Jürgen Osterhammel wrote in his vast history of the nineteenth century:

No previous age had developed such uniformity in its measurement of time. At the beginning of the [nineteenth] century there were myriad times and temporal cultures specific to particular locations or milieux. By its end the order of world time had settled over this reduced, but not entirely vanished, multiplicity. (69)

The separation of time from the observation of natural phenomena had the extraordinary effect of transforming time from a fact of nature into an artifice managed and controlled by human beings. The order that extended Greenwich Mean Time to Ireland created 34 minutes and 39 seconds of new time. In this respect, the change is analogous to other instances in which reference to external reality is replaced by a consensual and collective fiction. It is as if time had shifted from a gold standard and was now operating as a virtual currency, one which had not completely detached itself from its former guarantor but was

no longer dependent on that guarantor for its value. To achieve a smooth transition to Greenwich Mean Time, 34 minutes and 39 seconds could be issued in Ireland in a temporal version of “quantitative easing”.

But the promise of stability and uniformity, replicated endlessly in the proliferation of clocks and watches, was to be radically undermined at the deeper level of physics and philosophy by the publication of Einstein’s *Relativity* in 1916. The publication, which described the theories of special relativity and general relativity for non-physicists, demonstrated the fallacy of seemingly unquestionable concepts such as simultaneity, and proposed that the conventional understanding of time was mere illusion. Einstein’s theories were validated by observations of a solar eclipse the year before the mission of the Black Eagle was revealed to Yeats¹.

Time was changing, then, from every angle. The nineteenth century had undone the comforting fiction that the universe was not much older than humanity itself. And while the origin of the universe was now lost in the obscurity of deep time, at the level of everyday life, time was becoming, in Osterhammel’s words, “simple, transparent, and devoid of magic” (76). Because of theoretical physics, however, tectonic plates were shifting under the shiny new surface of standard global time. This is the historical context in which writers, in the early decades of the twentieth century, participated in the exploration of temporal possibilities.

¹ I will return to the impact of Einstein’s theories in my conclusion.

I will be arguing that Yeats's late works are the product of his own exploration of temporality. Still, it is possible to see aspects of the history described above reflected in his earliest works, albeit without the formal experimentation of the 1920s and 1930s. *The Wanderings of Oisín*, which was published in 1889, just five years after the Prime Meridian Conference was held in Chicago, is a good example. The poem's hero, Oisín, visits three islands in turn, one of endless love, one of endless battle and one of endless rest. The poem is framed by a dialogue between Oisín and Saint Patrick. There are four different time-worlds in the poem, the time-world of each of the three islands visited by Oisín, and the time-world of the dialogue between Oisín and Patrick. The three islands do not exist in any temporal relation to each other. In the first island, there is an ever-changing present, constant novelty in a garden of delight. In the second island, the same struggle is repeated over and over, and the dominant mode of time is recurrence. In the third island, there is a withdrawal from time, in the form of sleep. The island time-zones are not contiguous. In contrast, in the world where Oisín and Patrick meet, time is co-extensive with the Christian empire. This is an age of religious observance and submission to temporal uniformity, symbolized by the bell tolling the hours. An allegorical reading suggests that the poem is, on one level at least, a lament for the end of temporal diversity – what Osterhammel called the “myriad times and temporal cultures specific to particular locations” (69) – coupled with a recognition of the coming standardization of global time. What it lacks is the sense of time as an artifice that can be made and unmade by human artists. In Yeats's late works, as we will see, Oisín would be more likely to insist on his own vision rather than submit to Patrick. In “The Tower” (1927), for example, Yeats would suggest that the cosmos, guarantor of the

gold standard of solar time before the institution of UTC, was itself nothing other than a human invention or, at the very least, was something that required humanity to be made complete: “. . . man made up the whole, / / / Aye, sun and moon and star, all” (149-152).

Conflict and Harmony: Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*

What is apparent from any reading of the history of time in this period is that the field is crowded with voices raised against each other. Time appears in different aspects to theologians, writers, philosophers, and physicists. In April 1922, Einstein and Bergson confronted one another in a debate at the *Société française de philosophie*, and Einstein floored Bergson by saying, “*Il n’y a donc pas un temps des philosophes*”, that the time of philosophers was up (Canales 3-5). For Einstein, all other disciplines were subordinate to physics.

In *Time and Narrative* (originally published as *Temps et Récit* in 1983), Paul Ricoeur attempted to reconcile some of these different attitudes to time. A philosopher in the phenomenological tradition, his work is a study of different conceptions of time, and it extends to historiography and to literary criticism. Ricoeur sets two perspectives against one another. Cosmological time is the time of physics: world time or objective time. This is “Ordinary” time. Lived time, on the other hand, is the time of human phenomenology: subjective time, the familiar experience of past, present and future. Ricoeur traces the *aporia* between these two forms of time by opposing the viewpoints articulated by suitable

representatives. Hence, he pits Aristotle (of the *Physics*, rather than the *Poetics*) against Augustine, Kant against Husserl, and the entire concept of “Ordinary” time against Heidegger. What he demonstrates is that neither perspective can ever articulate a vision of time without taking assistance from the other side, and that as one or the other side develops greater depth and complexity, the significance or cost of what it borrows from the perspective that it opposes becomes ever greater.

In describing Heidegger’s attitude to physics, Ricoeur demonstrates the distance between these mutually exclusive perspectives on time:

Heidegger . . . never tries to vie with contemporary science in its own debate over time . . . because he takes it for granted that science has nothing original to say that has not been tacitly borrowed from metaphysics, from Plato to Hegel. (*T&N3* 88)

Ricoeur uses the concept of narrative to mediate between these two approaches, and this is the point at which experiments in literary form enter the picture. Narrative, according to Ricoeur, creates a third form of time – narrated time – that mediates between the two perspectives:

Narrated time is like a bridge set over the breach speculation constantly opens between phenomenological time and cosmological time. (*T&N3* 244)

Ricoeur’s work enables an enriched approach to reading, because it illuminates the ways in which time is reconfigured by narrative structures. By reading carefully, it should be possible to see how and where different texts draw on the features that Ricoeur says

historical narratives use to inscribe human time within cosmological time (e.g., calendars, the concept of generations, physical traces) as well as the “games with time” that fictional narratives use to re-configure the time of the world of action.

For Ricoeur, then, narrative mediates between two models of time, the cosmological and the phenomenological. He allows for the possibility of evolution. As fictional narratives play “games with time”, they produce variations of the third form of time, narrated time, and, by so doing, contribute to an evolution of the “bridge” between cosmological time and phenomenological time. Frank Kermode, in *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), was also searching for a “third” time. For him, it was to be found somewhere between the eternity of divinity and the time of humanity, and he proposed the “aevum”, a time of angels that partook partly of the time of succession and partly of eternity, without being wholly of either (SE 67-89). This corresponds to Ricoeur’s “narrated time”, which, as Ricoeur admits, does not resolve the aporia between cosmological time and human time, but makes it productive.

I came to Ricoeur by way of Kermode. I had been interested in Kermode’s reading of Yeats as a writer in the tradition of apocalyptic narrative. That prompted me to think about the apocalyptic narrative in more general terms as a crisis of temporality. The apocalyptic narrative does not reveal a *fear* of the end of history so much as a *desire* for the end of history. With the narrative of apocalypse, human history meets death, giving form to the frustration that emerges from the understanding that, as individuals, we are prevented by our own deaths from ever knowing the end of the story of human history. In this conception

of apocalyptic narrative, the time of human history transcends the time of phenomenological existence and tends towards an identity with cosmological time. But Kermode's work, for all its wonderful insights, is limited by the privilege that it affords to the narrative of apocalypse. The work of Paul Ricoeur, on the other hand, escapes this limitation by seeing the apocalyptic narrative as just one narrative form among others. It is powerful and enduring, certainly, but not to the exclusion of other narrative possibilities. Ricoeur sees narrative as a mediation between the modes of time that seem to produce the crisis at heart of apocalyptic narrative: objective or cosmological time, on the one hand, and human or phenomenological time on the other. Although Kermode might be the surer literary critic, Ricoeur's work is a better guide to the relations between time and narrative. As such, as my research developed, Ricoeur took over as guide from Kermode. In looking at Yeats's work as an attempt to generate a new model of time, I have found myself continually looking back to Ricoeur's work to try to understand what Yeats is doing. The following is intended to provide an overview of Ricoeur's approach which will provide context for the various references to Ricoeur that arise in the following chapters.

Three-Fold Mimesis: A Sort of Reduplication

Ricoeur's concept of mimesis is fundamental to an understanding of the way in which writers, readers and storytellers together constitute a kind of army building and maintaining this bridge between the cosmos and humanity, which is why I will summarize

his model of mimesis before explaining in more detail where this study fits into Yeats criticism, why the study focuses on Yeats's late works, and what criteria of selection guide the choice of texts in each chapter.

In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur sees the process of narrative emplotment or mimesis as an activity that organizes what would otherwise be a chaotic mess of circumstance and represents it in a form that reflects and synthesizes the familiar phenomenological categories of past, present and future. Our ability to create narratives and to follow them in their telling engenders a form of temporal stability that allows us to make sense of the categories of past, present, and future. Furthermore, by its mediation of our personal experience of time with the cosmological form of time, it deepens this sense of stability in time, even the form of deep time discovered in the nineteenth century. These are bold assertions but the mechanics of mimesis are relatively simple. For guidance, Ricoeur turns to Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Ricoeur explores Aristotle's theory of mimesis as a process rather than a static relation between a text and the action that it "imitates". In what follows, it is possible to see similarities between the path that Ricoeur takes and the path described by Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*. For Shelley, art begins in imitation:

In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order. (511-512)

Poets approximate more closely than others the secret harmonies of rhythm or order in the objects of imitation. First, they perceive rhythm or order. Next, they represent it in forms of

their own making. Finally, in the third stage, this is transmitted to others, gathering force in the process:

. . . the pleasure resulting from the manner in which they [poets] express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds, communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community. (512)

Mimesis₁

Ricoeur starts in the same place as Shelley. What is the nature of the order that must precede the act of composition?

Whatever the innovative force of poetic composition within the field of our temporal experience may be, the composition of the plot is grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character. (*T&N1* 54)

This initial stage of mimesis, the “pre-understanding of the world of action” has itself three separate elements. The first element is competence in understanding the conceptual network of action. The second element is the availability of symbolic resources in the practical field. Ricoeur is careful to restrict his use of the term “symbolic”:

If, in fact, human action can be narrated, it is because it is always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms. It is always already symbolically mediated. . . . The word

“symbol” in this work is taken in what we might call a middle sense, halfway between its being identified with a simple notation . . . and its being identified with double-meaning expressions following the model of metaphor, or even hidden meanings, accessible only to esoteric knowledge. (*T&N1* 57)

The third element of the “pre-understanding of the world of action” is that which “concerns the temporal elements onto which narrative time grafts its considerations”:

The understanding of action, in effect, is not limited to a familiarity with the conceptual network of action and with its symbolic mediations. It goes so far as to recognize in action temporal structures that call for narration. At this level, the equation between narrative and time remains implicit. (*T&N1* 59)

In his consideration of the temporal elements that belong to a “pre-understanding of action”, Ricoeur takes a phenomenological approach to time. He emphasizes that this apprehension of temporal elements is something other than the apprehension of an unending sequence of instants. He begins with Augustine’s conception of time as a three-fold division of the present in which the future and the past have no independent existence but are rather aspects of a reformulated present. This comprises a present of the present (an untenable “now”), a present of the past (the presence of memory) and a present of the future (the presence of anticipation). He contrasts this approach with that taken by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, in which the emphasis bestowed on the concept of “Care” adjusts the weight away from the present towards the future, with its end-limit at death:

The advantage of his [Heidegger's] analysis of within-time-ness lies . . . in the break this analysis makes with the linear representation of time, understood as a simple succession of nows. (*T&N1* 63)

Ricoeur concludes the first stage of mimesis:

To imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality. Upon this preunderstanding, common to both poets and their readers, emplotment is constructed and, with it, textual and literary mimetics. . . . literature would be incomprehensible if it did not give a configuration to what was already a figure in human action. (*T&N1* 64)

Mimesis₂

Taking Aristotle's *Poetics* as its starting point, the second part of Ricoeur's model of mimesis concerns the "kingdom of the *as if*" (*T&N1* 64, emphasis in the original). Essentially, this is the "configuring activity" (*T&N1* 64) that mediates between the first and third stages of mimesis. For Ricoeur, this operation has a dynamic character, and he uses the term "emplotment" in preference to "plot" in order to attend fully to its character as activity. Emplotment has a mediating function in at least three ways. Firstly, it may be said either that it "draws a meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents (Aristotle's

pragmata) or that it transforms the events or incidents into a story". In so doing, "emplotment is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession" (*T&N1* 65). Secondly, emplotment "brings together factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results", and, by further extending the concept of "plot" to include "pitiabile and fearful incidents, sudden reversals, recognitions, and violent effects within the complex plot, Aristotle equates plot with the configuring we have characterized as concordant discordance" (*T&N1* 65-66). Finally, plot mediates by means of its temporal characteristics. To give the operation of emplotment its full significance, Ricoeur asserts:

. . . we may say of the operation of emplotment both that it reflects the Augustinian paradox of time and that it resolves it, not in a speculative but rather in a poetic mode. (*T&N1* 66)

The resolution is achieved by the mediation effected between two temporal orders, one of which is chronological time, and the other of which is narrative time. The "episodic dimension of a narrative draws narrative time in the direction of the linear representation of time" but the "configurational dimension, in its turn, presents temporal features directly opposed to those of the episodic dimension" (*T&N1* 67). First, the configurational arrangement (the "*retrospective arrangement*" of Joyce's *Ulysses* (75)) "transforms the succession of events into one meaningful whole" that has a point or theme, and:

. . . we would be completely mistaken if we took such a point as atemporal. The time of the "fable and theme," to use Northrop Frye's expression, is the narrative time

that mediates between the episodic aspect and the configurational aspect. (*T&N1* 67)

Ricoeur articulates the nature of this new temporal quality with the help of Frank

Kermode's terminology:

Second, the configuration of the plot imposes the "sense of an ending" (to use the title of Frank Kermode's well-known book) on the indefinite succession of incidents. . . . it is in the act of retelling rather than in that of telling that this structural function of closure can be discerned. As soon as a story is well known . . . to follow the story is . . . to apprehend the episodes which are themselves well known as leading to this end. A new quality of time emerges with this understanding.

Finally, the repetition of a story, governed as a whole by its way of ending, constitutes an alternative to the representation of time as flowing from the past toward to the future, following the well-known metaphor of the "arrow of time". It is as though recollection inverted the so-called "natural" order of time. In reading the ending in the beginning and the beginning in the ending, we also learn to read time backwards, as the recapitulation of the initial course conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences.

In short, the act of narrating, reflected in the act of following a story, makes productive the paradoxes that disquieted Augustine to the point of reducing him to silence. (*T&N1* 67-68)

Mimesis₃

Ricoeur then turns his attention to the final part of his three-fold division of mimesis. In the final part, he considers the way in which the text relates to the world of action and explores its capacity to reconfigure the world of action. He addresses two possible objections head-on.

First, he rejects the suggestion that narrative is some form of dishonest concordance stretched over the unformed mass of temporal experience and held in place by our need for an order that “consoles us in the face of death” (T&N1 72). We are not necessarily closer to some greater truth in accepting “radically unformed temporal experience” (T&N1 72) as just that. He proposes instead a genuine dialectic between experience and narrative, that experience is not all discordance and that narrative is not all concordance, but rather that each is sustained by the tension between discordance and concordance.

Second, he confronts the possibility that the pre-understanding of the world of action that he attributes to the first stage of mimesis is simply a “meaning effect” (T&N1 74) of the final stage of mimesis, and that we can read the semantics of action in the first place only because we are enabled to do so by the capacity fostered in us by the works produced in the second stage of mimesis. In other words, we go looking in life, in action, for the plots that literary texts have trained us to see. The “reduplication” of Shelley’s terminology, if it is to be worth anything, must be more than a restoration of the *status quo ante*. Ricoeur

believes that it is, and argues that “action is in quest of narrative”, citing examples of “untold” or “inchoate” stories that are brought to actuality such as the stories of personal identity constructed in the psychoanalytic process or the “untold story” that a judge attempts to read, or make, in the accumulated drift of evidence presented to a court. (T&N1 74).

Having established that the passage from the first part of mimesis to the third, by way of the second, does not just leave the reader where he or she started, Ricoeur considers the ability of narrative to reconfigure the world of action in its temporal aspects.

First, he considers the act of reading, stressing its dynamic character. He credits the reader with an implicit capacity to apprehend structures in texts:

On the one hand, the received paradigms structure readers’ expectations and aid them in recognizing the formal rule, the genre, or the type exemplified by the narrated story. They furnish guidelines for the encounter between a text and its readers. In short, they govern the story’s capacity to be followed. On the other hand, it is the act of reading that accompanies the narrative’s configuration and actualizes its capacity to be followed. To follow a story is to actualize it by reading it. (T&N1 76)

The reader will continue this task even in the face of an apparent relapse of the text into the condition of unformed experience:

. . . it is the reader who completes the work inasmuch as . . . the written work is a sketch for reading. Indeed, it consists of holes, lacunae, zones of indetermination,

which, as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, challenge the reader's capacity to configure what the author seems to take malign delight in defiguring. In such an extreme case, it is the reader, almost abandoned by the work, who carries the burden of emplotment.

(*T&N1* 77)

The next part of his analysis is prompted by this foregrounding of the act of reading:

"An aesthetic of reception cannot take up the problem of communication without also taking up that of reference" (*T&N1* 77). Ricoeur is emphatic in his assertion of the ways in which literary works refer to the world and advances in three stages of increasing specificity: (1) acts of discourse in general, (2) literary works among these works of discourse, and (3) narratives among these works of discourse.

With acts of discourse in general, Ricoeur takes the sentence as the basic unit of discourse so that he can find a path out of language and back to the world, escaping the self-enclosed world of language proposed by structuralist linguistics and semiotics:

With the sentence, language is oriented beyond itself. It says something *about* something. . . . language does not constitute a world for itself. It is not even a world. . . . What a reader receives is not just the sense of the work, but, through its sense, its reference, that is, the experience it brings to language, and, in the last analysis, the world and the temporality it unfolds in the face of this experience. (*T&N1* 78-79, emphasis in the original)

With literary texts, Ricoeur asserts that they, too, "bring an experience to language and thus come into the world, just as all discourse does" (*T&N1* 79). He notes that the

dominant theory of contemporary poetics, as he then saw it, “rejects any taking into account of reference, something it regards as extralinguistic, in the name of the strict immanence of literary language with respect to itself” (*T&N1* 79). Any allegations concerning the world are parried by this poetics with its recourse to the “referential illusion”. However, Ricoeur argues that this is not an answer to the question of reference so much as a setting aside of the question:

We might try to deny the problem, and take the question of the impact of literature on everyday experience as not pertinent. But then we paradoxically ratify the positivism we generally fight against, namely, the prejudice that only a datum that is given in such a way that it can be empirically observed and scientifically described is real. We also enclose literature within a world of its own and break off the subversive point it turns against the moral and social orders. (*T&N1* 79)

Here, Ricoeur cites his work in *The Rule of Metaphor* in order to ground a deeper understanding of the nature of reference:

I tried to demonstrate in *The Rule of Metaphor* that language’s capacity for reference was not exhausted by descriptive discourse and that poetic works referred to the world in their own specific way, that of metaphorical reference. This thesis covers every nondescriptive use of language, and therefore every poetic text, whether it be lyrical or narrative. It implies that poetic texts, too, speak *of* the world, even though they may not do so in a descriptive fashion. (*T&N1* 80, emphasis in the original)

The act of reading, once understood in its dynamic character, engages the reader in a re-description of the world by proposing new worlds and new horizons that intersect with those of the reader, whether that re-description is grounded in language that is either descriptive or metaphorical:

To take up again one of my earlier statements, I will say that, for me, the world is the whole set of references opened by every sort of descriptive or poetic text I have read, interpreted, and loved. (*T&N1* 80)

Ricoeur then takes up the relation, and the distinction, between poetry and narrative with respect to the question of reference:

In *The Rule of Metaphor*, I held that poetry, through its muthos, redescrines the world. In the same way . . . I will say that making a narrative . . . resignifies the world in its temporal dimension, to the extent that narrating, telling, reciting is to remake action following the poem's invitation. (*T&N1* 81)

If both poetry and narrative share the property of re-description, they are distinguished, for Ricoeur, by the angle from which they apprehend the world, and, in his view, this makes narrative simpler than lyric poetry in one respect and more complicated than lyric poetry in another respect.

More simple, because the world, here [i.e., in narrative], is apprehended from the angle of human praxis rather than from that of cosmic pathos. What is resignified by narrative is what was already presignified at the level of human action. (*T&N1* 81).

The problem posed by narrative, “with respect to its referential intention and its truth claim” (*T&N1* 81) is more complicated than that posed by lyric poetry because of the existence of “two large classes of narrative discourse” (*T&N1* 81) – fictional and historical narrative. Much of the work that follows in *Time and Narrative* concerns the relation between these two classes of discourse. As with cosmological time and phenomenological time, Ricoeur argues that historical and fictional narrative borrow from each other what they need for their own integrity, even if they occupy different fields of reference, historical narratives insisting, unlike fictional narratives, that the events they describe “really” happened.

Time and Narrative in Yeats Criticism

I apply Ricoeur’s approach to reading to my own reading of Yeats’s late works. Each chapter is primarily oriented towards a specific genre, acknowledging that “the received paradigms structure readers’ expectations and aid them in recognizing the formal rule, the genre, or the type exemplified by the narrated story” (*T&N1* 76). While the study is mainly concerned with the extent to which Yeats articulates a coherent vision of time in his work, it proceeds by examination of the extent to which the use of different genres contributes to the development of that vision. For that reason, each chapter is primarily concerned with a distinct genre and each text is approached as “a sketch for reading”. Where any text consists of significant “holes, lacunae, zones of indetermination, which, as in Joyce’s

Ulysses, challenge the reader's capacity to configure what the author seems to take malign delight in defiguring", the object will be to see how far "the reader, almost abandoned by the work" will be able to shoulder "the burden of emplotment" (T&N1 77).

The study of narrative structure in Yeats's work has had limited attention. As I have mentioned, the question of narrative structure and its relation to eschatological models of time was taken up by Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending*. Kermode was in no doubt as to the centrality of the apocalyptic narrative to Yeats:

Yeats is certainly an apocalyptic poet, . . . we can find in Yeats all the elements of the apocalyptic paradigm that concern us. There are the Terrors; the clerkly scepticism proper to a learned aristocrat confronted by these images of horror; a deep conviction of decadence and a prophetic confidence of renovation; and all this involved in the belief that his moment was the moment of supreme crisis, when one age turned into another . . . (SE 98-99).

Kermode identified a kind of schismatic modernism, no longer attached to past or future, but existing in a realm of perpetual transition. Its severance of its ties to past and future left its proponents in a sterile limbo. Yeats was not included among these schismatics, because of his enduring adherence to literary tradition and to traditional forms, but Kermode read his works, in this text at least, with exclusive reference to the apocalyptic narrative. And he sees, in the apocalyptic narrative, a form of temporality that shapes narrative forms.

Ricoeur takes a wider view, because, unlike Kermode, he does not take the apocalyptic model as an exclusive paradigm. In the theory of mimesis described above,

which recognizes that writers play “games with time”, he is more interested in the way that texts configure non-linear models of time. Kermode’s book was based on a short series of lectures, and is remarkable for its scope and insight. However, Ricoeur’s work is more extensive and more rigorous. *Time and Narrative* addresses and incorporates elements of what he calls Kermode’s “magisterial work” (*T&N2* 21). For his part, Kermode acknowledged that his theories “received learned development from Paul Ricoeur in his long study of time and narrative” (*SE* 191).

It is not hard to see why Kermode would have read Yeats in the way he did. Yeats’s work consistently makes use of apocalyptic imagery and he believed, as Kermode notes, that he was living on the cusp of great historical change. But exclusive attention to the apocalyptic imagery obscures the deeper consideration that he had given to the nature of time, which, as we will see, no longer looked to Yeats like a mono-rail on which the millennium-bound train of history was supposedly riding to its wreckage.

Kermode’s subject was the paradigmatic structure of the apocalyptic narrative and its relation to modernist literature, and he located Yeats just at the point where one intersected with the other. Largely because of its scope, his study stands apart from the main currents of Yeats criticism. Although any attempt at a comprehensive description of the vast body of critical writing devoted to Yeats will be reductive, it is still possible, by comparing a representative selection of surveys of that criticism, to discern the principal directions that it has taken.

In “Yeats and Criticism”, a study published in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats* (2006), what Declan Kiberd calls the “heroic phase” of Yeats criticism was, in his view, “dominated by attentively descriptive close readers: Richard Ellmann, A. Norman Jeffares, T.R. Henn, Helen Vendler, and Thomas Whitaker.” (126). If those writers are representative of that phase of criticism, the dominant mode of criticism was biographical. Three of the five (Ellmann, Jeffares and Henn) produced markedly biographical works (*Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (1948) and *The Identity of Yeats* (1954), *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet* (1949), and *The Lonely Tower* (1950), respectively) and Whitaker’s *Swan and Shadow: Yeats’s Dialogue with History* (1964) is effectively structured as a portrait of Yeats’s imagination. Without taking the form of chronological narrative, it draws on all of Yeats’s writings, published and unpublished, to construct a portrait of Yeats’s imaginative life.

If that first wave of criticism is largely concerned with biography, it is supplemented by criticism concerned with appropriate contexts in which to read Yeats’s work. In a survey produced for *W.B. Yeats in Context* (2010), Edna Longley notes that the form taken by criticism was partly guided by the concerns of the relevant academy. In the United States, the New Criticism informed approaches to poetry and Yeats’s own writings on symbolism volunteered him as standard-bearer: “It is indeed under the banner of symbolism (‘modernism’ did not arrive until later) that Yeats dominates New Critical theory and practice” (390). This was further refined by work that traced the genealogy of individual symbols, such as Kermode’s *Romantic Image* (1957). In Ireland, however, according to Longley, the first fact about Yeats was that he was Irish, with unsurprising consequences:

“Whether by accident or design, Irish criticism of the mid-twentieth century attaches Yeats’s poetry to Irish contexts” (390).

The history of criticism presented by both Kiberd and Longley can be cross-referenced to a work produced in Yeats’s centenary year. In 1965, Jeffares co-edited *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats 1865-1939* with K.G.W. Cross. Suitably, it looks back to Kiberd’s “heroic phase” of biographically-inspired criticism with “W.B. Yeats: A Dublin Portrait” (1-13), a light-hearted fiction by W.R. Rodgers in which some of Yeats’s contemporaries swap stories about him. But it looks forward to a more democratic phase of criticism in Conor Cruise O’Brien’s “Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W.B Yeats” (207-278), the longest piece in the book, and an uncompromising examination of Yeats’s relation to fascism. Wonderfully out of place in a volume devoted to excited reverie, it symbolically inaugurates a new phase of criticism, in which Yeats’s relation to a variety of contexts is addressed in more contentious terms.

The democratic phase of Yeats criticism is inflected by wider critical discourse. Faced with the intimidating task of summarizing this output under the heading “Critical Debate, 1970-2006”, Rob Doggett limits himself to visiting “four specific locations of critical debate: politics, postcolonial theory, gender studies, and . . . ‘textual production’, works which address the material features of Yeats’s texts and the socio-historical conditions that influenced their publication” (396). In Yeatsian vocabulary, this is starting to look like a phase of dispersal. The unity of the first phase of criticism, sustained by the centripetal force of biography, is followed by a more fragmented and specialized form of criticism.

However, these new angles of criticism do not preclude the useful resuscitation of older methods, as evidenced by the renewal of the tradition of critical biography in *The Life of W.B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* by Terence Brown (1999), and the return (or survival, simply) of Kiberd's "attentively descriptive close readers" in Nicholas Grene's *Yeats's Poetic Codes* (2008) and Helen Vendler's *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (2007).

Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* is situated at an angle to Yeats criticism. It is deeply concerned with questions of time and literary form. But its preoccupation with apocalyptic narrative over-shadowed its theoretical insights. That, coupled with the availability of competing contexts, might suggest one reason why the theme he developed was not pursued more actively in Yeats criticism. Still, he permits himself a note of regret when he remarks that he thought his treatment of the *aevum*, an order of temporality situated between eternity and the lived time of humanity, could have been taken up and developed by others (SE 197).

In terms of methodology, Kermode's work, in its consideration of the ways in which readers seek out paradigmatic fictions in the act of reading, is close to structuralism, albeit a lower-case proto-structuralism of the kind that Jonathan Culler ascribes to William Empson:

William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is a work from a non-structuralist tradition which shows considerable awareness of the problems of literary competence and illustrates just how close one comes to a structuralist formation if one begins to reflect on them. (*Structuralist Poetics* 145)

However, as Culler notes, structuralism and lyric poetry maintain an uneasy distance:

Structuralists have done relatively little work on poetry. . . . One is therefore bound to take from structuralism a theoretical framework and to fill it in by drawing on the writings of critics from other traditions who have worked to greater purpose on the lyric. (*Structuralist Poetics* 220)²

If, therefore, Kermode's analysis (later expanded by Ricoeur) opens lines of inquiry that have not been fully explored, that outcome may be attributed to a combination of factors: the developing criticism adopted other priorities; the subject (narrative structure) is more obviously suited to literary forms, particularly the novel, that were an insignificant part of Yeats's output; finally, the method (proto-structuralism) was not an easy fit for lyric poetry and Kermode himself had no room, in *The Sense of an Ending*, for anything approaching a close reading of any of Yeats's poetry. During the period when much of the work discussed in this study was being published, however, it would not have surprised readers to see a study devoted to the question of time. Wyndham Lewis's *Time and Western Man*, which contains much criticism of writers such as James Joyce, was published in 1927. The book of essays that Joyce commissioned to help explain his new work (which was to become *Finnegans Wake*) to readers and which was published in 1929 as *Our Exagmination round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* contained one essay, by Marcel Brion, simply titled "The Idea of Time in the Work of James Joyce". This study is situated in that vein, joining the kind of proto-structuralism practiced by William

² Culler himself has since attempted to address this perceived gap in the critical landscape with the publication of *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard UP, 2015).

Empson and Frank Kermode to the close reading strategies of Helen Vendler, Nicholas Grene and Michael Wood.

Yeats's Late Works

Time has its own secret history in Yeats's writings, and whether one accepts the allegorical reading of *The Wanderings of Oisín* proposed above or not, we have Yeats's own words to take the measure of his evolving conceptions of time and history. The younger Yeats subscribes deeply to the kind of linear chronology that supports teleological approaches to human history. Writing in December 1895, from the lodgings he shared with Arthur Symonds in the Temple, London, he asked Florence Farr: "Has the magical armageddon begun at last?" He had been reading reports about the possible escalation to war of a dispute between England and the United States over the border between Venezuela and British Guiana:

The war would fulfil the prophets and especially a prophetic vision I had long ago with the Mathers's, and so far be for the glory of God, but what a dusk of the nations it would be! for surely it would drag in half the world.

As it happened, he was out by almost twenty years, and the breezy tone of his letter – "Could you come and see me on Monday and have tea and perhaps divine for

Armageddon?" – suggests more the excitement of occultism, sustained here by his friendship with Farr, than any deeper eschatological anxiety (*CL1* 477).

Armageddon, according to the Book of Revelation, is where the kings of the earth will gather before the fall of Babylon. Yeats uses it as simple shorthand for the entire apocalyptic narrative. In that narrative, the terrors that accompanied the fall of Babylon would be followed by the millennium, a thousand years of peace. If he was excited by the prospect of apocalypse in the years preceding the end of the century, Yeats would not always be so optimistic that the prophetic vision would be fulfilled to the letter. Thirty-five years later, he saw no place in the apocalyptic narrative for the promised millennium of peace:

But I am no believer in Millenniums. I but foresee another moment of plasticity and disquiet like that which was at and before the commencement of our era, re-shaped by the moral impulse preserved in the Gospels, and that other present . . . in Virgil.

(Explorations 336)

There is considerable distance, in time and in tone, between these allusions to the narrative of apocalypse. Much had happened in the interim – a genuine dusk of the nations - and Yeats's reading in that time had immeasurably broadened his perspective on time and history. There are two important changes.

First, Yeats is no longer in thrall to received narratives of time and history; he is not trying to force an eschatological narrative of linear chronology on the mess of living history. He has assumed the right to substitute his own philosophy for "the simple-minded religion"

of his childhood (*CW3* 115). In this respect, his ambition and assurance reflect the development described above, time no longer a fact of nature, now a human artifice. Second, having assumed the right to re-write models of time and history, he has eliminated from the apocalyptic narrative the ending that would be delivered by linear chronology. The geologists of the nineteenth century had opened the prospect of deep time, looking backwards into the past. Yeats's new faith does the same thing, but in the opposite direction: the future is no longer seen as leading to any moment of culmination or conclusion.

It is possible to trace a similar change in the language of Yeats's poetry, which provides evidence of his growing mistrust of received definitions of time. In his early poems, as an abstract noun, with or without a capital "T", the word "time" appears quite frequently, in a conventional poetic mode. But this changes as Yeats matures. Using the

Collected Poems for a survey³, I count just one appearance of “time” in *Crossways*⁴, but then nine in *The Rose*⁵, ten in *The Wind among the Reeds*⁶, before dropping back to one in *In the*

³ Whenever I refer to “*Collected Poems*”, I am referring to the Scribner edition of Yeats’s collected poems (*The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats. Vol. 1. The Poems.* 2nd Ed. Edited by Richard J. Finneran. Simon & Schuster-Scribner, 1997). For this survey of Yeats’s usage of the word “time”, I am excluding casual references of the “when I have time, I will . . .” or “when it was time to go . . .” type, and usage intended to signify the future generally, as in “time to come” or “coming times”. I include usage in titles of poems. When the word is capitalized, I have added (C) in the relevant footnote. When it appears more than once in the same poem, I have indicated the number of times except that I have not counted repetition in refrain.

⁴ “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” (which uses Chronos rather than “time” or “Time”).

⁵ “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time” (C), “The White Birds” (C), “The Man who dreamed of Faeryland” (C), “The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner” (C) (3), “To Ireland in the Coming Times” (C) (3).

⁶ “The Everlasting Voices” (C), “The Moods” (C), “Into the Twilight”, “The Song of Wandering Aengus”, “He mourns for the Change that has come upon Him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World” (C), “A Poet to his Beloved”, “He tells of the Perfect Beauty”, “The Blessed”, “The Lover pleads with his Friend for Old Friends”, “The Fiddler of Dooney”.

*Seven Woods*⁷, two in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems*⁸, just one again in each of *Responsibilities*⁹ and *The Wild Swans at Coole*¹⁰, a complete absence in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, one again in *The Tower*¹¹ before a slight resurgence in *The Winding Stair* (three)¹², none in *Parnell's Funeral and Other Poems*, one again in *New Poems*¹³ and just two in *Last Poems*¹⁴. Judging by the number of times that Yeats uses the word in his poetry, Yeats appears to be more time-obsessed in the earlier work than in the later, but I would argue that the reverse is true. When Yeats uses the word in his early poetry, he often does so in a conventional sense. References to the end of time are the poetic correlate to the kind of language that he uses in the letter to Florence Farr, and the high-water mark is reached with the *The Wind in the Reeds*, which contains some of his most traditionally apocalyptic poetry. It is hard to mistake a title such as "He mourns for the Change that has come upon Him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World". This longing for the

⁷ "Adam's Curse".

⁸ "Peace" (C), "Brown Penny".

⁹ "That the Night come".

¹⁰ "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes".

¹¹ "The New Faces" (C).

¹² "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz", "Coole Park, 1929", "Mohini Chatterjee" (2).

¹³ "Roger Casement" (C).

¹⁴ "Three Songs to the One Burden", "Three Marching Songs".

end of the world is an example of the desire for the end of human history mentioned above. In his later work, when the word “time” appears, it is deployed with more circumspection; the number of times it is used in the 1890s, alone, exceeds the total for the following four decades. And, as will be seen, Yeats becomes more conscious of time as something in which human creation has a part to play. Accordingly, in the relative poverty of its usage in the late poetry, I would prefer to adopt the argument that Michael Wood uses in relation to the words “violent” and “violence” (an argument I will rely on again, later):

Perhaps Yeats doesn't name violence much because for him it is everywhere. Or shall we say he doesn't name it more often because for him it is not usually a concept but a practice that has many names and shapes and above all many instances, and it is the instances that matter? (*Violence* 8)

Lyric and Narrative

As mentioned, an important aspect of the study of the idea of time in Yeats's work is the extent to which he used different genres to develop his vision of time. The question of genre is important, and leads to the further question of text selection. Each chapter takes as its primary focus a different form: the *sui generis* text of *A Vision* (Chapter 1), the autobiography in *The Trembling of the Veil* (Chapter 2), the lyric in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* (Chapter 3), and the stage play in *Purgatory* (Chapter 4).

Chapter 1 is devoted to a close reading of *A Vision* (1925 and 1937). *A Vision* is important for many reasons. Most fundamentally, it addresses the subject of time explicitly. But it is also one of Yeats's longest and most painstakingly structured works. The differences between the first and second versions are significant, constituting clear evidence of the importance he attached to the work and of his desire to correct what he perceived to be his earlier mistakes. *A Vision* is a highly complex narrative and I will argue that the development of historical time as a quasi-character is the subject of its plot. But I will also argue that, in the second version of *A Vision*, Yeats uses form to generate a sense of coherence that masks unresolved difficulties within the system itself. The ideas that Yeats develops in *A Vision* constitute a kind of reference-point against which the other texts can be read but without necessarily becoming an authoritative source of interpretation. I try to read *A Vision* as a literary text as much as, or even more than, a text-book governing the meaning of Yeats's other works.

The Trembling of the Veil (1921-1922) is the subject of Chapter 2. Understandably, in biographical criticism, approaches to this text are concerned with its accuracy as a record of Yeats's life. I am more concerned with the distinction between the biographical and autobiographical strategies, the way in which Yeats "fixes" each of the other characters who appear in its pages and tries to keep his own character fluid and mobile. In view of the concern shared by Kermode and Ricoeur with lived time, as opposed to historical time, this text is a complement to the exploration of *A Vision*, which is more obviously concerned with the latter (as will be seen, Yeats tends to conflate cosmological and historical time). I will

use *The Trembling of the Veil* and some of his more autobiographical poems to establish the ambiguity with which Yeats approached the idea of continuous personal identity in time.

Chapter 3 is concerned with *The Tower* (1928), and, by extension, with *The Winding Stair* (1933), and explores the temporality manifested in Yeats's sophisticated arrangements of poetic sequence. In a close reading of the four-poem sequence that opens *The Tower*, this chapter argues that a reader is projected by the form of the sequence as a necessary element in the transposition of temporal structures from *A Vision*. If the first two chapters are primarily concerned with the second mode of Ricoeur's tripartite scheme of mimesis, the activity of emplotment, this chapter is more concerned with the third mode, in which the text encounters a reader, and with the reader's negotiation of the text, taking the text as Ricoeur does, as a "sketch for reading".

Finally, in a study of *Purgatory* (1939), Chapter 4 shifts the focus from the individual reader to the theatre audience, and explores the extent to which the play is a representation of Yeats's difficulties in uniting the different model of times that he has developed in his other works: historical time (again, as grafted on to cosmological time) and lived time (in its dual aspect of time between birth and death and time between death and birth). The chapter looks at *Purgatory* in the light of Shakespeare's treatment of time in *Macbeth*, and in the context of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Chapter 3 is the only chapter which has lyric as its primary subject. However, even those chapters which are not primarily concerned with Yeats's lyrics will use the poetry as a kind of counterpoint to show more clearly how Yeats used non-lyric forms. In view of the

fundamental importance of the lyric to the study, it is necessary to address Ricoeur's distinction between lyric and narrative form. The difficulty lies in the fact, mentioned already, that lyric is generally excluded from Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of time and narrative, which I have taken as a guide to the ways in which literary texts generate and re-shape narrative time. In Ricoeur's philosophy, narrative structures produce stories that are capable of being followed. Every story is produced by the activity of emplotment, which mediates between two temporal orders, one of which is chronological time, and the other of which is narrative time. The "episodic dimension of a narrative draws narrative time in the direction of the linear representation of time" but the "configurational dimension, in its turn, presents temporal features directly opposed to those of the episodic dimension" (*T&N1* 67). First, the configurational activity "transforms the succession of events into one meaningful whole" that has a point or theme. Second, the "configuration of the plot" imposes the sense of an ending on the "indefinite succession of incidents". The litmus test for narrative, derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*, is whether there is a story that has a recognizable beginning, middle and end, so that, in the act of retelling, the story can be followed and a listener, at any point in the story, will be able to apprehend the position of each episode in relation to the whole, knowing how far the story is from its beginning and how far from its end, reading its ending in its beginning and *vice versa* (*T&N1* 67-68).

A pure lyric should fail Ricoeur's test. The success of a lyric, as a lyric, might even be measured by the extent to which it fails this test. A lyric does not concern itself with a succession of events. Even if it does concern itself with past events, it does not normally attempt to configure those events into a story. And even if the elements of a story are

present or recognizable, a pure lyric does not normally give an ending to the story. If it concerns itself with events, it is more likely to be as the pretext for some personal reflection on the part of the poet.

It is this apparent lack of concern with story-making that leads Ricoeur to exclude lyric from his philosophy of time. He treats lyric as an aspect of his theory of metaphor and denies it the power to re-describe temporality: “poetry . . . redescribes the world. In the same way, . . . making a narrative . . . resignifies the world in its temporal dimension, to the extent that narrating, telling, reciting is to remake action following the poem’s invitation” (*T&N1* 81). If pure lyrics, lyrics without some minimum quantum of narrative, are to be allowed to participate in the games that narrative plays with time, they must re-signify temporal dimensions in some less recognizable way.

In Chapter 2, I compare *The Trembling of the Veil* to a specific group of Yeats’s poems, following Charles Armstrong and Helen Vendler in seeing those poems as belonging to an identifiable sub-genre in Yeats’s poetry. This sets the scene for a close reading of two of those poems, “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” and “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited”. This raises the question of generic difference between a lyric poem and a prose text. If this were a study only of Yeats’s thoughts on the idea of time, I could put off the issue of genre indefinitely. But because this study explores the ways in which generic choices generate different possibilities of representation, the place of lyric at the centre of this study needs some justification.

Jonathan Culler's recent book on the theory of lyric supports aspects of Ricoeur's philosophy. In historical terms, Culler reminds us that lyric has gradually extended its rule over the entire domain of poetry, occupying territories abandoned by epic and drama, as "epic has become novel and drama has migrated from verse to prose" (*Lyric* 76). He describes how Aristotle's relative neglect of lyric in the *Poetics* explains its later exclusion from theories of mimesis, which helps to explain why Ricoeur addresses lyric in *The Rule of Metaphor* rather than in the Aristotelian framework of *Time and Narrative*. On the specific question of temporality, Culler notes that lyric is predominantly concerned with presentness, that lyrics are frequently present tense utterances and that even past tense statements are designed as pretext for an ultimate return to the present. This approach tends to support the view that lyrics do not participate in the general re-signification of relations between temporal dimensions.

Culler avoids easy classifications and never underestimates the complexity of his subject. But he asserts that mimesis re-colonized the field of lyric largely as the combined result of twentieth-century critical and pedagogical practices, the New Criticism as classroom convenience. He objects to the twentieth-century orthodoxy of treating lyrics as mimetic, as representing the fictional speech-act of a fictional "poet" or "speaker". He prefers to treat lyric as an event-in-itself rather than the representation of an event-outside-itself, the specific utterance of this man or woman, an utterance re-iterated and re-created by subsequent readers and reciters. In so doing, he pays more attention to the ritual aspects of lyric, reflected in its use of rhythm, refrain and rhyme. He wants to rescue lyric from a criticism that submits too easily to the attractions of mimesis, and this approach

would seem to align him with Ricoeur's approach. The rule of lyric might be reduced to a simple injunction: no representation of action.

To justify the presence of lyric in this study, I will put forward three responses to the questions raised by Ricoeur and Culler, two practical and one theoretical.

First, we can accept Ricoeur's exclusion and say that pure lyrics have little to say about time, but proceed on the basis that the poems that are discussed are not pure lyrics and retain elements of narrative. This is the kind of approach that Culler wants to curb, because it generates questions that are often unanswerable: who is speaking, what is their situation, who are they speaking to, and so on. Culler doesn't want to outlaw this approach, only to recognize its limits. Caution is necessary, because there is always a temptation to reconstruct just a little too much, to give the re-imagined "story of the poem" an ending not warranted by the poem itself. The poems discussed in Chapter 2, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" and "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited", seem to have sufficient quanta of narrative to allow them to be read in narrative terms, even taking account of Culler's objections. The Gregory elegy can be imagined as the representation of an event: Yeats speaking to George, telling her about the dead friends she will never welcome to Ballylee, before comparing them with Robert Gregory, and examining the nature of his own grief over Gregory's death. It can be argued that an imagined conversation between Yeats and his wife is the object of the poem's mimesis of events. Similarly, "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited" allows the reader to picture Yeats walking through the gallery on Parnell Square, responding to some paintings' depictions of Irish history, before sitting down to steady

himself, and finally moving on to examine the portraits of Lady Gregory and John Synge.

Neither scenario would generate nail-biting suspense, but so long as it is possible to recreate a possible scenario in which a unit of action, as small as a conversation or monologue, unfolds in time, I would argue that there is the necessary minimum quantum of narrative. It may be harder to propose this solution for the lyrics discussed in Chapter 3. In that chapter, I will consider the danger identified by Culler by opposing the reading strategies of Helen Vendler and Michael Wood.

However, even if this first approach fails, it is possible to argue that lyrics can play games with time, even if they do not ultimately satisfy the story-telling test, which is to say that they can project temporal relations even if the content of an individual poem cannot be shaped into a story that has a beginning, middle and end. This approach takes account of elements which may not be present in an individual lyric but are brought into focus by reading that lyric in the context of other lyrics to which it can be justifiably related. This account takes account of linguistic relations and of spatial relations. By spatial relations, I mean the use of sequence and the position of individual lyrics within volumes of poetry. This approach is partially justified by Culler's theory of the lyric, in which he cites intertextual echoes as one of the distinctive aspects of lyric (*Lyric* 118-119). And, in fact, this second approach may be more productive than the first because, as Culler puts it, "it is deadly to try to compete with narrative on terrain where narrative has obvious advantages" (*Lyric* 118). This is the approach that I adopt in Chapter 3, for the poems of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*.

The third response to Ricoeur does not have practical implications: it is more in the nature of a provisional objection lodged against the total severance of the domain of lyric from the domain of narrative in his philosophy of time and narrative. Even if we agree that lyrics do not remake the world of action, that they do not draw a plot out of a mere succession of events, it must also be recognized that there is a considerable gap between the theoretical justification for the privilege of narrative, its configurational activity, and the practical function that is supposed to follow this activity.

For Ricoeur, narrative relates to time on two levels. First, it resolves the problem of understanding the relations between past, present and future, not speculatively, but in what he calls a “poetic mode” (*T&N1* 66). All narratives participate in this work, whether they know it or not. Second, some narratives play “games with time” (*T&N2* 61-99) by experimenting with form in the space opened by the narrator between the time of narrating and the narrated time, and the evolution of models of temporality can be traced in these forms. The first level is dependent, conceptually, on the memorability of the story, on its “recollection” and “repetition” (*T&N1* 67). And this is a weakness in relation to the practice of narrative form – the erosion of memorability as an aspect of narrative as novels grow in length and complexity. None of Ricoeur’s exemplary narratives – Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1924), Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (1924), and Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-1927), all of which play wonderful “games with time” and are chosen by Ricoeur for that reason – are the kind of bed-time story a parent might read to the sleepy child who will never tire of hearing the story night after night, the kind of scenario at the heart of Ricoeur’s philosophy.

When narrative left poetry for prose, it left behind many of the elements that, in addition to brevity, lyric uses to achieve memorability: rhythm, rhyme, refrain. Moreover, unlike most novels, lyrics have memorability as a specific aim:

The lyric, by its formal patterning and mode of address, asks to be learned by heart, even if that seldom happens; its efficacy depends upon its success in making its words memorable, having them remembered. (Culler *Lyric* 130)

One justification, then, for keeping lyric within touching distance of the theory of time and narrative is that it makes more effort to keep alive the formal techniques whereby memorable utterance continues to be generated.

About Time: Text Selection

I have explained why this study is concerned with Yeats's late works. Of those works, I have selected examples from different genres to see not just how Yeats developed his vision of time, which could conceivably be traced within a single genre or even a single text such as *A Vision*, but to see how he resisted, evaded or transformed generic limits that were incompatible with the evolution of his thought. *A Vision* is central, both for its content and for its form. However, within his lyric poetry, it is necessary to exercise criteria of selection. It is not possible to include every poem. But it is not necessary either. Not every poem is concerned with questions of time and time's relation to personality and to history. Some

are more important than others. In this respect, Yeats's poetry can be classified in a way analogous to the distinction made above between the philosophy of time and the practical world of time. Paul Ricoeur frames this distinction in terms of narrative. All stories, he says, are stories *of* time insofar as they describe structural transformations that take time, but some are stories *about* time, in that "it is the very experience of time that is at stake" in them (*T&N2* 101). Accordingly, where I have selected poems for inclusion in the following chapters, it is because "it is the very experience of time that is at stake" in them.

To show how this process works in practice, the four poems that Yeats wrote in the wake of Robert Gregory's death in 1918 will serve as an example. I would say that two of them, "Shepherd and Goatherd" (1919) and "Reprisals" (first published in 1948, written in 1920) are "*of* time", whereas the other two, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" (1918) and "An Irish Airman foresees his Death" (1919) are "*about* time". The first of these four poems, "Shepherd and Goatherd", even though it describes the theory that emerges in *A Vision*, is more concerned with the most appropriate way to respond to a mother's grief, and to honour her dead son, than with questions of time. It contains an exposition of the model of personality that Yeats will describe more fully in *A Vision*, but it lacks the kind of formal or linguistic invention that characterizes more significant works. Similarly, "Reprisals" is dominated by political questions and is strikingly effective in those terms precisely because it does not use its subject as the pretext for an exploration of philosophical

questions¹⁵. “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”, in contrast, uses the death of Robert Gregory largely as a pretext to explore philosophical questions that are fully absorbed into the form of the poem rather extraneous to it, as they are in “Shepherd and Goatherd”. The poem is “about time” to the extent that it is thematically and formally engaged with temporality. But these distinctions are not absolute. And of the two poems that I do examine, I would say that “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” is more deeply concerned with questions of time, for reasons explained in Chapter 2, than “An Irish Airman foresees his Death”. The first of these poems is critical to the argument in Chapter 2, whereas the second contributes to the argument in Chapter 3, but is not essential to it. Ultimately, the selection of any poem will be justified by the extent to which it can be made productive in critical terms.

It will become clear that one of the central arguments of this study is that Yeats was trying to articulate a vision of time that could accommodate all aspects of his thought on questions of personality and history, and that this initiated a search for formal means by which he could bring multiple perspectives on time into a single focus. Yeats wants to develop a unified model of time, and, in this respect, he differs from Ricoeur, for whom it is axiomatic that the two perspectives on time with which he is concerned, cosmological time and phenomenological time, can never be merged into a single form of time, but can only

¹⁵ On the question of mimesis, incidentally, “Shepherd and Goatherd” clearly has a higher quantum of narrative – a conversation between two men somewhere close to Coole Park – than “Reprisals” – an address to the shade of Robert Gregory.

be knit together by narrative, without which they would fall apart again. There are two principal models of time that we will encounter in Yeats work. The first is historical time. This is the subject of Chapter 1. The second is lived time. This is the subject of Chapter 2. Because Yeats takes re-incarnation as *a priori*, lived time is divided into two aspects, the time between birth and death, and the time between death and birth. I will argue that Yeats tries to mesh historical time with lived time (in both of its aspects), generating a single coherent system. From a textual perspective, then, this is manifested in a search for forms that can generate a coherence that Yeats might have been unable to explain in purely discursive texts. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the extent to which the related volumes of poetry, *The Tower and The Winding Stair*, and *Purgatory*, respectively, are part of this search for new forms of temporality. I will argue that *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* are marked by a sense that this achievement was still possible and within reach, and that, following the publication of the second version of *A Vision* in 1937, *Purgatory* dramatizes the recognition that such achievement was *impossible*, and that it is an exemplary “late” work of the kind categorized by Edward Said, “artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction” (7).

Chapter 1. Innumerable Dials: Narrating Historical Time in *A Vision*

Living History

For all the time that Yeats spent in Italy, from his first journey with Lady Gregory and Robert Gregory in 1907, taking in Florence, Urbino, Ravenna, and Venice, to his late residency in Rapallo, with Ezra Pound and other expatriates, he left behind little record of his travels and stays. There is no tour diary of the kind produced by Goethe, Dickens, or Henry James. We can only guess at the impressions made on him: of places visited, of churches and galleries, the difficulties of travel, the habits of the local people. Of the 1907 trip, Roy Foster says that “little record is left of his first visit to a country, and a culture, which would inspire his imagination from this time on” (*Life* 1367). Goethe visited Venice more than a century before Yeats. When he arrived in the city, he was overcome: “It was written, then, on my page in the Book of Fate that at five in the afternoon of the twenty-eighth of September in the year 1786, I should see Venice for the first time. . . . So now, thank God, Venice is no longer a mere word to me . . .” (74). Three days later: “Today was Sunday, and as I walked about I was struck by the uncleanliness of the streets. This set me thinking” (80). Goethe’s imagination, prepared in advance by his reading, absorbed the impressions of the contemporary city, and was modified by it. And he recognizes how the

city itself changes in time: “Venice, like everything else which has a phenomenal existence, is subject to Time” (79). In 1907, Yeats had a perfect opportunity to witness the truth of Goethe’s observation.

For the final stop on the mini-Grand Tour of 1907, it is likely that Yeats’s imagination had been prepared in advance by John Ruskin, whose work and opinions were the subject of an early, and violent row, between him and his father (*Memoirs* 19). Rather than approach Venice from the mainland, across what Ruskin described as the “dismal arches” (*Venice I* 347) of the railway bridge completed in 1846, the travellers embarked by ship from Ravenna so that they could enter the city from the Adriatic (Kelly 111). While in Venice, Yeats was preoccupied with Abbey Theatre problems, he left no record of his stay, and he left sooner than anticipated, returning to England to deal with licensing issues which had arisen in relation to *The Playboy of the Western World*.

Foster remarks that this first exposure to Italy and its artistic treasures “would feed into the personalized imagery of his overwhelming imagination” (*Life I* 369). We can only speculate on how Yeats spent his days in the city. It is a reasonable conjecture that he did not share Goethe’s interest in the precise details of Venetian waste disposal. He must have visited the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari (only a few minutes’ walk from *Ca Capello*, home of Lady Gregory’s friends, the Layards, with whom they were staying) to see Titian’s *Assumption*. He hardly missed the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, just around the corner from the Frari, where he could see Tintoretto’s *Crucifixion*, just about the only painting that could reduce Ruskin to silence: “I must leave this picture to work its will on the

spectator; for it is beyond all analysis, and above all praise" (*Venice III* 343). I will be arguing that Ruskin's great work, *The Stones of Venice*, provides a useful model for thinking about the structure of Yeats's second version of *A Vision*. And as Yeats walked the city, he may have read it in Ruskinian terms, but the only firm image that we have of Yeats in Venice is a brief note in one of Lady Gregory's diaries:

We came . . . not to the jangle and uproar of the railway station, but to the heart of the city's beauty, to [the] piazza of St. Mark – And as I left him there . . . he was as if entranced by the rich colouring, the strange beauty of the joyous Venetian night.

(Gregory 315 n28)

What Lady Gregory does not mention is that Yeats would have had an extraordinary sight in front of him. It was not the Ducal Palace – even if it was "the central building of the world" according to Ruskin (*Venice I* 17). And it was not the Basilica di San Marco, with its domes and shimmering Byzantine mosaics. Yeats would have been looking at a construction site, because, on 14 July 1902, the Campanile, which had combined functions of watch-tower and bell-tower for centuries, collapsed in a "smoking pile of bricks and mortar" (Bosworth 52). In the aftermath of this civic disaster, the city authorities made an immediate decision. Ignoring the voices murmuring that the piazza looked even grander without the tower in the way, and the learned suggestions that it should be rebuilt, yes, but on another part of the piazza, because the Romans never rebuilt the same building in the same place, they decided it would be rebuilt where it had stood and in the exact same form. They forged a slogan to foster civic pride: "*com'era e dov'era*", or "as it was, and where it

was". The rebuilt Campanile was finally inaugurated on 25 April 1912 (Bosworth 53-54). On the side of the piazza that leads to the Rialto, Yeats would have seen the Torre D'Orologio, another clock tower, dating from 1499, once the "most complex astronomical clock in existence"; it displayed "the signs of the zodiac and their constellations and the phases of the moon" and stood as "a technological counterpoint to the medieval marking of time from the Campanile" (Fenlon 58). The Torre D'Orologio was a symbol of progress, even if it was four hundred years old, and more in keeping with the twentieth century obsession with accurate time than the Campanile, but what Yeats (a future restorer of towers) would have seen in the construction works was the symbolic collapse and rebuilding of a civilisation, the continual renewal of history that he was going to describe in *A Vision*, a subject that appears in much of his late work:

All things fall and are built again

And those that build them again are gay.

("Lapis Lazuli" (1938), 35-36)

The names of some of the places in Italy visited by Yeats in later years are embedded in *A Vision*: Syracuse, Capri, Rapallo. Capri and Syracuse might have been deployed for their historical associations, reminders of the Greek world in Sicily and the tyranny of Dionysius, and of the Roman world in the Bay of Naples, with Tiberius as the embodiment of decadence and debauchery. Yeats uses these place-names to establish a suitable horizon against which the text should be read. His own reading of Ruskin and his experience of

Venice would have taught Yeats much about the subject, but he would find a new way to describe the evolution of historical time.

Reading *A Vision*

This chapter takes the idea of historical time as one of the primary subjects of *A Vision*, and looks at the way in which the story of time is narrated. All stories, Paul Ricoeur says, are stories *of* time insofar as they describe structural transformations that take time, but some are stories *about* time, in that “it is the very experience of time that is at stake” in them (*T&N2* 101). I will argue that *A Vision* is a radical example of these stories about time insofar as it goes beyond the attempt to offer a new way of describing the experience of time, striving instead to shape a new model of time. Although critical approaches tend to focus on interpretation of the system, what Northrop Frye once said of the Bible is equally true of *A Vision*: it is “a work of literature as long as it is being examined by a literary critic” (*Anatomy* 315). In describing the model of time constructed in *A Vision*, I look at the ways in which narrative form contributes to the development of that model. Although I refer to the 1925 version of *A Vision* (*AVA*), I am mostly concerned, for reasons I shall explain, with the 1937 version (*AVB*).

If *AVB* is to be defended against charges of strangeness and eccentricity, readings that explore Yeats’s occult interests and the genetic history of the text must be continually augmented with attempts to find theoretical approaches adequate to its complexity and

ambition. My emphasis is on the latter, and I am not concerned with belief systems, occult or otherwise. There are many valuable and indispensable studies in this field¹⁶. First, I will consider genre, partly to show how one of the central problems in criticism is the question of what generic expectations to bring to the text. My intention is to demonstrate that *A Vision* (more specifically, Books I-V of *AVB*) is a narrative and that the theory of mimesis can be applied to it. A consequent aim is to identify examples of comparable texts in the field of historiography that help to illuminate the structure of *AVB*. I look closely at narrative in Books I-V of *AVB*, my aim being to show, in detail, how *AVB* constructs its narrative of time. Finally, I consider the coherence of the world that *AVB* projects.

Genre, and the Sense of an Ending

Criticism of *AVB* often begins with an attempt at generic classification, but its simultaneous occupation of several generic fields, and its use of multiple literary and non-literary forms, enables it to repel these critical assaults, perpetuating a self-made myth of

¹⁶ Apart from the pioneering work of George Mills Harper, two recent volumes of essays, *W. B. Yeats's "A Vision": Explications and Contexts* (Clemson University Digital Press, 2012), edited by Neil Mann with Matthew Gibson and Claire Nally and, more recently, *Yeats, Philosophy, and the Occult* (Clemson University Press, 2016), edited by Matthew Gibson and Neil Mann, address a range of occult and other subjects.

mystery and difficulty. In his pioneering study, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, which includes a lengthy explication of the content of *AVB*, Richard Ellmann seems to be on safe ground in referring to it as a “prose book” (237), although even that fails to take account of its poems, diagrams, tables, and illustrations. More recently, for Charles Armstrong, its extraordinary capaciousness eludes any single classification:

A Vision is one of Yeats’s strangest texts. This mystical tract combines poetry, history, art history, astrology, psychology and philosophy in a peculiar way, and presents a tough challenge to interpreters also because its second edition – published in 1937 – includes significant departures from the original, 1925 edition.

(51)

Others write about *AVB* without worrying too much about generic classification, simply recording the circumstances and manner of its production and describing its contents.

Nicholas Allen’s analysis is typical of this approach:

The product of research in *séance* and spiritualism, much of Yeats’s material came from his wife’s automatic writing, Yeats’s belief that broad patterns of developing consciousness were revealed to him through George Yeats’s mediations of the beyond. This sense of *A Vision* as occult has obscured elements of the book’s cultural dynamic, particularly shading its production during a period of constant upheaval.

(66)

If Allen avoids the question of genre, he is right to emphasize the extent to which the text’s apparent claim to a place in the occult tradition has deflected readers from a consideration

of its “cultural dynamic”. However, the question of genre is part of this problem, creating an obstacle to the type of critical appreciation proposed by Allen. It is difficult to select the most suitable hermeneutical strategies when the object of criticism seems intent on keeping its generic identity a secret from its readers, and even more difficult when the most suitable hermeneutical approach may implicate in the reader or critic in beliefs that he or she has no desire to share.

Two critics, at least, are forthright in their assessment of the text’s generic properties. Harold Bloom writes:

A Vision is technically an apocalypse; that seems to me its actual genre, rather than cosmology or anatomy or aesthetic treatise. Whether Yeats generates the moral authority to match his undoubted rhetorical authority is problematic, but *A Vision* does try to pass a Last Judgment on its own age, and its own poet. (216)

Bloom’s recourse here to “technically” does suggest some hesitation as to whether *A Vision* properly belongs to the genre, a hesitation reinforced by what is, for Bloom, an uncharacteristic admission of doubt: “that seems to me its actual genre”. It is not clear whether this momentary wobble should be put down to doubts about the nature of the genre or of *AVB*. However, a few pages later, Bloom puts doubt aside and continues with his customary *brio*:

A Vision is an apocalypse, and the purpose of an apocalypse is to reveal the truth, and so help stimulate a restoration of men to an unfallen state. The Gnostic poet enters the shadow in order to gain knowledge that will hasten the Judgment. (219)

Bloom is supported in his classification, if not its implications, by Graham Hough, writing in *The Mystery Religion of W.B. Yeats*. Hough supplements his assessment with a useful catalogue of some of the typical features of apocalyptic literature:

A Vision is in an established literary mode. It is an apocalypse, a revelation, with most of the characteristics that belong to such literature – riddling or fictional or visionary introductions; claims to universality which go uneasily with fragmentariness and incompleteness; a gnomic and authoritative manner; strange or baffling assertions put down without argument or support; symbolism that partly belongs to the common cultural stock, but suddenly becomes enigmatic or incomprehensible. The type for our literature is the biblical Apocalypse, so overwhelming that it seems to stand alone. (63-64)

Bloom assigns an instrumental purpose to *AVB* (it will “reveal”, “stimulate”, “hasten” (219)) but Hough makes clear that the element of revelation belongs to the mode of production. It precedes the production of the text that represents the substance of a prior revelation. This is an important distinction because one reading orients the text towards future action whereas the other orients it towards representation of a past event.

Margaret Mills Harper has teased out the differences between *AVA* and *AVB* in a way that reconciles these contradictory ways of reading the texts. She reads *AVA* as a text born of revelation and angled towards the future, using rhetorical strategies to create a community of believers (*A Vision in Time* 193-201). This is close to Bloom’s reading – of *AVB*. Reading with more subtlety than Bloom, she sees *AVB* very differently, as a text that is

oriented towards the past, intended to be retrospective in multiple ways. Bloom's reading is an example of the critical tendency to ignore the differences between *AVA* and *AVB*, or to refer to *AVB* as if it were the only version of the text. Harper considers the changes made by Yeats and those forced on the text by its own systematization of historical phases. When published, both *AVA* and *AVB* enter the history that they purport to write, and, as Harper notes, "the historical moment for the arrival of the 'system' of *A Vision* [*AVA*] was Phase 22" (*A Vision in Time* 192), a phase of balance. This historical moment is embalmed in *AVB*. On the diagram of historical phases, the line that represents the "present moment" is still fixed at "May 1925" (*CW14* 193). However, the tenor and meaning of the two books is very different. For Harper, *AVA* was firmly oriented towards the future:

The collective readership suggested by *AVA* is aligned also in temporal orientation.

Like any other spiritual group, the receivers of this doctrine are on a path that projects itself toward a future goal. Rhetorically speaking, *AVA* looks forward. (*A Vision in Time* 196)

By the time *AVB* was approaching publication, Yeats was more than ten years older, had experienced severe health problems, and the channel of revelation that transmitted at full strength in the early years of his marriage to George had been switched off. Harper argues that *AVB* is a much more solitary affair, and that the energy of George's involvement is absent. In the place of fascinating spirit guides, there are hours in the study and argumentative correspondence with T. Sturge Moore. Furthermore, she notes that *AVB* was

intended to be the last volume in a projected collected works. It was to provide the sense of an ending. The temporal orientation of *AVB* is directed backwards, to the past:

In 1925, a witnessed moment of revelation propels itself forward; in 1937, back, from the same point. (*A Vision in Time* 206)

The implication is that, in the movement from *AVA* to *AVB*, the text is transformed and completed; where *AVA* looked forward to an end beyond itself, *AVB* wraps up everything within itself, it has beginning, middle, and end.¹⁷ This distinction helps to bring *AVB* into the field of mimesis, whether in Aristotle's terms – "A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end" (*Poetics* 13, emphasis in the original) – or in Paul Ricoeur's, where a conclusion "gives the story an 'end point' which, in turn, furnishes the point of view from which the story can be perceived as forming a whole" (*T&N1* 66-67). In his own introduction to *AVB*, Yeats implies that the text has been so transformed, when he says that in *AVA* he had misinterpreted the geometry and, because of his ignorance of philosophy, had "failed to understand distinctions upon which *the coherence of the whole* depended" (*CW14* 15, my emphasis).

In all the ways described by Harper, Yeats closes what had once been open, producing a text that submits more readily to an Aristotelian reading in which there is a

¹⁷ There is a more detailed explanation of the movement from *AVA* to *AVB* in Harper's *Wisdom of Two: The Spiritual and Literary Collaboration of George and W.B. Yeats*, Oxford UP, 2006, pp. 72-93.

beginning, middle, and end. But this brings *AVB* only half-way into the field of mimesis.

Aristotle also requires that there be imitation of an action, a plot. And this presents a bigger challenge. Is there a coherent plot to *AVB*? Can the central books be treated as more than a series of essays which can be shuffled and read in any order? Margaret Mills Harper warns of the dangers of attempting to impose a narrative on *A Vision*:

In that it reconceptualizes the linearity of time and questions the finality of birth and death, those quintessential beginnings and endings of narratives, and in that it does not begin with its own beginning (as any reader of *Per Amica* knows) or end with its ending (extending well past *WBY*'s death, among other things), it spells trouble for the imposition of a regular plot. (*Wisdom of Two*, 103).

However, I will argue that *AVB*, at least, does benefit from a reading that follows the text from "beginning" to "end", even if those terms are ultimately undermined by the world projected by the text itself. I will argue that there is narrative significance in the order of books. However, it is first necessary to negotiate the prefatory materials that Yeats throws up like so many obstacles in front of the reader. I will argue that these paratexts generate a fluidity in generic expectations, situating Books I-V of *AVB* between fictional and historiographical discourses.

Prefaces and Introductions

The categorisation of different types of introduction in Gérard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* offers a useful statement of what it is that prefaces and introductions are supposed to do. For example, in his classification, the section of *AVB* called "Introduction to "A Vision"" is, if we allow *AVB* to be an original text, rather than a revision of *AVA*, an "original assumptive authorial preface" (*Paratexts* 197), i.e., an introductory text that accompanies the main text when it is first published, is written by the author of that text and explicitly identifies the author of the introduction as author of the main text. Such a preface, says Genette, "has as its chief function *to ensure that the text is read properly*" (*Paratexts* 197, emphasis in the original). If the convention of authorial modesty is properly observed, the author will not claim greatness for the work, so much as significance. To bolster this claim of significance, the author will also claim truthfulness:

The only aspect of treatment that an author can give himself credit for in the preface, undoubtedly because conscience rather than talent is involved, is truthfulness or, at the very least, sincerity – that is, the effort to achieve truthfulness. (*Paratexts* 206)

The preface can be used for more specific purposes. For example, it can be used "to account for the title, something that is all the more necessary when the title, long or short, is

allusive, indeed, enigmatic" (*Paratexts* 213). It can offer the author's own "interpretation of the text or . . . his statement of intent" (*Paratexts* 221) and, as an extension of this function, it can identify the genre to which the work belongs:

This concern with genre identification does not show up much in areas that are well marked out and codified . . . rather, it appears in the undefined fringes where some degree of innovation is practiced, and particularly during "transitional" periods . . . when writers seek to define such deviations in relation to an earlier norm whose authority still carries weight. (*Paratexts* 224)

The 1937 Introduction is unusual in forming only one part of a series of texts. It is situated between "Rapallo", in which Yeats muses on the question of coherence as it affects another large-scale, long-drawn-out production, Pound's *Cantos*, and "To Ezra Pound", a letter that introduces the 1937 Introduction to Pound himself. The 1937 Introduction does not offer any commentary on the title of the work. It offers no explicit guidance on the question of genre, whether in respect of the title or otherwise. Of all the claims that are made for *AVB* in the 1937 Introduction, the most important is the truthfulness claim, addressed in the final, widely-quoted paragraph:

Some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon. Those that include, now all recorded time in one circuit, now what Blake called "the pulsation of an artery", are plainly symbolical, but what of those fixed, like a butterfly upon a pin, to our central date, the first day of our Era, divide actual history into periods of equal length? To such a question I can but answer that if

sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all men 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 in a single thought reality and justice. (CW14 19)

Rather than address the truthfulness question head-on, however, this suggests that the form in which the truthfulness question is put necessarily defines and limits the scope of any possible response. The imagined question is put in terms of “belief” in “actual existence”. The imagined answer avoids simple affirmation or denial of belief (“I can but answer . . .”). It is futile, the text implies, to put such questions to one “overwhelmed by miracle . . . when in the midst of it”. In that condition, there is insufficient distance from the experience to objectify it in terms of belief, and it is too late to ask the question afterwards, when the moment of miracle has passed. Yeats would have learned this lesson from Plotinus: “. . . as long as they see, they cannot tell themselves they have had the vision; such reminiscence is for souls that have lost it” (*Enneads* IV.4.7 291).

The 1937 Introduction is augmented by the retention of what, in Genette’s classification, might be described as “the *fictive allographic* preface” (*Paratexts* 188-189, emphasis in the original). This is a preface in which a fictional character writes the introduction. Genette cites the preface written by “Richard Sympson” for *Gulliver’s Travels* as a typical example. In *AVB*, the position is far more complicated. There is an extract from a

record kept by one fictional character, “John Duddon”, a pupil of “Michael Robartes”, accompanied by a letter addressed to “Mr. Yeats” by another fictional character, “John Aherne”, brother of “Owen Aherne”. Neither “John Duddon” nor “John Aherne” feature in Books I-V of *AVB*, although the latter’s brother, “Owen Aherne”, is one of the three characters (along with Michael Robartes and the unnamed tower-dweller from whom the “Yeats” name is withheld) in “The Phases of the Moon”, the poem that divides the prefatory materials from Books I-V, and all have a further life in Yeats’s poetry. (As we will see, Robartes and Aherne seem to be haunting Yeats in the section of *AVB* called “The End of the Cycle”.)

Unlike *AVA*, the fictional characters of *AVB* do not claim authorship of a text that “Mr. Yeats” then re-wrote for publication. However, they do claim the existence of other materials, “a record made by Robartes’ pupils in London that contains his diagrams and their explanations . . .” (*CW14* 38), that embody substantially the same material. In his letter to “Mr. Yeats”, “John Aherne” says that he has compared “what you sent of your unpublished book” (like later critics, he ignores *AVA*) with those materials and finds “no essential difference” (*CW14* 39). Thus, both paratexts position Books I-V as a record of, and interpretation of, a prior revelation. Furthermore, in a parallel fictional universe, there are other materials covering the same subject.

The fictional origin myth may seem ludicrous, and in the 1937 Introduction Yeats claims that it was written only to disguise George’s involvement in the production of *AVA*. This type of obfuscation is a recurring feature of occult literature in which texts often have

murky origins. The denial of authorship places the text in a zone beyond critical interrogation, and the claim that the text simply reproduces the contents of a found manuscript gives its revelations an aura of instant antiquity. In *AVB*, the fiction is displaced from the book in the reader's hands onto the material available to "John Aherne".

However, there is another important aspect to this textual hall of mirrors. It forces on the reader the understanding that there are many ways in which the material presented in Books I-V could have been obtained and presented. Those books, the 1937 Introduction says, constitute a record of the revelations manifested in the automatic communications, and questions of truth and belief are evaded with rhetorical sleight of hand. Those books, "John Aherne" says, certainly record a revelation, the substance of which has been made available to others and is recorded in other documents. Yeats's work has been peer-reviewed, by "John Aherne" himself, who finds "no essential difference" with the other records available to him. Excluding *AVA*, then, we are given at least four possible repositories of the information: (1) Books I-V of *AVB*, (2) the records of Robartes' pupils, (3) "what was lost in the *Speculum [Angolorum et Hominum]* of Giraldus", and (4) "what survives in the inaccessible encampments of the Judwalis . . ." (*CW14* 39). This can be extended by at least one more version if we remember that in *AVA* "Owen Aherne" claimed to have written "eighty or ninety pages of exposition", dismissed by Michael Robartes for being too concerned with "*primary* character to use the terms of the philosophy" (*CW13* lxii, emphasis in the original). In *AVA*, "Owen Aherne" mentions in passing that Yeats's version, as recorded in *AVA*, goes too far in the other direction (*CW13* lxiv). Which reminds

us, of course, that we are to be made familiar only with the *lunar-angled* version of the system, and that a *solar-angled* version might have been written differently.

The overall effect is dizzying, leaving the reader unsure exactly how to take what follows. In one important sense, though, Yeats is simply borrowing techniques and procedures of historiography to build a frame for the central books of *AVB*. Just as a history of, for example, the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century must refer to archives and documents shared with other historians, and just as separate histories must be comparable and verifiable *inter se*, even if there will always be latitude for individual interpretation, so *AVB* claims to be based on archival material, in the form of the automatic scripts and the sleep notebooks, but also claims to be just one record among many possible others, based on other archival material, with which it is comparable and verifiable. In these terms, *AVB* uses fictional discourse, the “*fictive allographic preface*” (Genette *Paratexts* 188-189, emphasis in the original), to give its central books an imprimatur of historiographical method.

Returning to those central books with the understanding that Yeats has framed them as one possible version of a story that is capable of independent verification, tilting generic expectation towards the sense that historiography might offer useful hermeneutical strategies, we can take up the question of mimesis, having left it where we established that *AVB* is coherent at least insofar as it has a beginning, middle, and end, and that its temporal orientation is towards past events. A further objection to the application of any poetics of mimesis to *AVB* is that the work is a technical exposition of a system, and that, conceptually,

mimesis does not apply, no more than it would to the instruction manual for a washing machine, because neither has a plot. To answer this objection, I am going to rely, for the moment, on Paul Ricoeur's fruitful reading of Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949).

In the relevant section of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur describes how the *Annales* school of historiography, to which Braudel belongs, had tried to eliminate narrative from history. History should not be written as a sequence of events - battles, conquests, regime changes and so on - conducted by human actors. History-writing should focus instead on the long-term environmental features (geographies and economies, for example) that structure historical development. Ricoeur demonstrates that even Braudel, the great exponent of the *Annales* school, does not, or cannot, eliminate narrative from his work. In a forensic reading of Braudel's *magnum opus*, Ricoeur sees, in a kind of textual x-ray, the clear shape of an over-arching narrative:

A plot has to include not only an intelligible order but a magnitude that cannot be too vast, or it will be unable to be embraced by our eye, as Aristotle stresses in the *Poetics*. What frames the plot of the Mediterranean? We may say without hesitation: the decline of the Mediterranean as a collective hero on the stage of world history. The end of the plot, in this regard, is not the death of Philip II. It is the end of the conflict between the two political leviathans [Turkey and Spain] and the shift of history towards the Atlantic and Northern Europe. (*T&N1* 215)

Ricoeur reached this conclusion by developing the notion of a quasi-plot (an extension, by analogy, of the concept of plot to the attempt, in historiography, to trace events to their causes, however remote from the event), with quasi-characters (nations and empires, for example) and quasi-events (elegantly described by Ricoeur as “the slow changes that [history] foreshortens in its memory by an effect similar to that of a speeded-up film” (*T&N1* 109)). I will argue that a similar approach allows us to read Books I-V of AVB in terms of plot. However, before moving on, there is another illuminating aspect to Braudel’s work and to Ricoeur’s reading of it.

Braudel’s history of the Mediterranean is divided into three sections: (1) the role of the environment, (2) collective destinies and general trends, and (3) events, politics and people. He begins with what he describes as permanent structures:

The intention of this first book has been to concentrate on the constant and stable features, the well-known regular statistics, the recurrent phenomena, the infrastructure of Mediterranean life, its clay foundations and peaceful waters . . . (*I* 352).

This can extend to human personality:

In the pursuit of a history that changes little or not at all with the passing of time, I have not hesitated to step outside the chronological limits of a study devoted in theory to the latter half of the sixteenth century. I have taken evidence from witnesses of every period, up to and including the present day. Victor Bérard discovered the landscapes of the *Odyssey* in the Mediterranean under his own eyes.

But often, as well as Corfu, the islands of the Phaeacians, or Djerba, the island of the Lotus-Eaters, one can find Ulysses himself, man unchanged after the passing of many centuries. (I 353)

Braudel moves gradually from one temporal plane to another, becoming more and more concerned with chronological history as he goes. Ricoeur contrasts the effect of this planar approach to temporality with the approach typically used by novelists:

All three levels contribute to this overall plot. But whereas a novelist – Tolstoy in *War and Peace* – would have combined all three together in a single narrative, Braudel proceeds analytically, by separating planes, leaving to the interferences that occur between them the task of producing an implicit image of the whole. In this way a virtual quasi-plot is obtained, which itself is split into several subplots, and these, although explicit, remain partial and in this sense abstract. (T&N1 215)

I will propose a similar reading of Books I-V in the next following section, taking “The Great Wheel”, “The Soul in Judgment” and “Dove or Swan” as Yeats’s three important planes of temporality. If this can be demonstrated, would it suggest that Yeats’s work anticipated, in some odd way, the methodology of the French historian? More plausibly, Braudel’s approach was perhaps less original than Ricoeur asserts. Yeats was certainly familiar with at

least one work with a structure that resembles Braudel's work, *The Stones of Venice* by John Ruskin¹⁸.

Apart from being an important precursor in its development of an aesthetics of history, *The Stones of Venice* is interesting for its structure. Like Braudel, Ruskin divided his monumental work into three parts, starting with general principles. In the first volume, aptly called *The Foundations*, after an opening argument which surveys the whole work, Ruskin describes the elements that participate in the construction of all buildings, whenever and wherever raised:

We address ourselves, then, first to the task of determining some law of right, which we may apply to the architecture of all the world and of all time; and by help of which, and judgment according to which, we may as easily pronounce whether a building is good or noble, as, by applying a plumb-line, whether it be perpendicular.

(I 35)

Ruskin then proceeds to describe all possible features of walls, columns, arches, roofs, apertures, and so on. It takes thirty chapters to get from quarry to vestibule, and only then

¹⁸ Although missing from his library at the time of his death, in the 1920s Yeats had a large collection of Ruskin's work, including six volumes of *Modern Painters* (1906 edition), *Lectures on Art* (1904 edition), *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1906 edition) and all three volumes of *The Stones of Venice* (1906 edition), together with the subsequent summary version, *St Mark's Rest* (1906 edition). ("List A" NLI MS 40,569)

does Ruskin unveil the prospect of a history in which these buildings take their place. In the second volume of Ruskin's work, *The Sea-Stories*, the reader is guided through Venice during the two periods of its greatness, the Byzantine and the Gothic, before being asked, in *The Fall*, third and final volume, to deplore the sign of its decadence in the architecture of the Renaissance. It is not hard to find the plot: the decline and fall of the *Serenissima*. When reading Braudel, Ricoeur alluded to the importance of transitional structures, the ways in which the writer maintains coherence in moving from one level to another. Ruskin is adept at this. Throughout, he uses "we" to establish a sense of community and solidarity¹⁹. When he wants to move from one level to another, he just takes this one step further by treating the reader literally as a fellow traveller. So, for example, at the end of the first volume, Ruskin invites the reader to join him on his approach to the city:

And now come with me, for I have kept you too long from your gondola: come with me, on an autumnal morning, through the dark gates of Padua, and let us take the broad road leading towards the East. (I 344)

In Braudel and Ruskin, then, it is possible to discern similarities of form that I shall argue are also present in *AVB*. Each proceeds from an analysis of permanent structures to a more specific chronological history. Secondly, as each seems to have found some formal

¹⁹ This corresponds to what, in *AVA*, Harper identifies as Yeats's attempt to establish his own community: "When Yeats, like Eliphas Lévi or Madame Blavatsky, speaks in the first person plural, he is on some level hoping to convert readers into disciples" (*A Vision in Time* 195).

satisfaction in dividing their respective subjects into three parts, each must find some way of uniting the three parts into a coherent whole, by managing the transitions from one part to the next.

Book I – The Great Wheel

In “The Great Wheel”, Yeats takes, as starting point for his system, a human or phenomenological conception of time:

A line is a movement without extension, and so symbolical of time – subjectivity – Berkeley’s stream of ideas – in Plotinus it is apparently “sensation” – and a plane cutting it at right angles is symbolical of space or objectivity. . . . The identification of time with subjectivity is probably as old as philosophy; all that we can touch or handle, and for the moment I mean no other objectivity, has shape or magnitude, whereas our thoughts and emotions have duration and quality, a thought recurs or is habitual, a lecture or a musical composition is measured upon the clock. At the same time pure time . . . and pure space, pure subjectivity and pure objectivity – the plane at the bottom of the cone and the point at its apex – are abstractions or figments of the mind. (CW14 51-52)

In this passage, which he tethers to the speculations of Berkeley, Plotinus and Kant, Yeats prioritizes human time in place of physical or cosmological time. Suggesting that his

story will begin at the beginning, he lines up the earliest philosophers that he can find – Empedocles and Heraclitus – to expound on the nature of “boundless time” (CW14 49). This “boundless time” of Empedocles is equivalent to “mythic time”; there is no reference in these pages to any calendar. This is a meditation on the nature of time, not a history. And time originates with subjective experience: “our thoughts or emotions have duration and quality”. The idea of pure time, conceived as external to human subjectivity, is a figment or abstraction.

As the *Great Wheel* progresses, Yeats adopts the link between human time and celestial movements. However, at this stage, the system borrows only symbols from cosmology. In a passage that stresses the limits and painful growth of his knowledge (“knew nothing of”, “did not know”, “understood it so little”), he invokes movements of sun and moon only as simile (“two [cones] moved from left to right *like* the sun’s daily course, two from right to left *like* the moon in the zodiac”) (CW14 59, my emphasis).

On the *Great Wheel* individual beings struggle first to find, and then to relinquish, personality. Dates can be put to little use in that struggle. If a date is used, such as 1870 in relation to Monticelli (CW14 100), it seems to clarify a period in the artist’s work rather than a specific historical era. (Importantly, there is also the date that concludes the section, marking the date of its composition; these end-dates are discussed later). Each being is freed from time and circumstance, separated from everything that tethers it to a form of time that might implicate history or the calendar. None is considered in relation to ancestors or descendants because all co-exist in the time-world of the *Great Wheel*. And

nobody is allowed any narrative of progression in that time-world; no one appears in more than one phase. Walt Whitman is forever confined to Phase 6. Each name signifies a specific configuration of the four *Faculties*, rather than a narrative or life story. Synge and Rembrandt can occupy the same phase (23), though separated, in historical time, by several centuries. This is a highly-controlled piece of writing, suggesting a form of contemporaneity for which the calendar has no relevance. There are only three instances in which there is any overt reference to the time-world described in “Dove or Swan”. They appear in relation to Thomas Aquinas, “whose historical epoch was nearly of this phase” (CW14 86), Shelley, living in an “age . . . itself so broken” (CW14 107), and Shakespeare, who “kept out of quarrels in a quarrelsome age” (CW14 114), and these references are so rare as to appear anomalous. Even as anomalies, though, they gesture towards “Dove or Swan”, the subject of which can be glimpsed in these stray references.

In *AVA*, Yeats had been explicit about the role of time as it affected being in the *Great Wheel*. In “II – THE FOUR FACULTIES”, he made time one of the constituents of the *Body of Fate*:

By *Body of Fate* is understood the physical and mental environment, the changing human body, the stream of Phenomena as this affects a particular individual, all that is forced upon us from without, Time as it affects sensation. (CW13 15)

This definition situates time in Ricoeur’s world of action, the environment apprehended in pre-narrative form before the configurating activity of emplotment. By treating time as a unity in the form of the single collective noun, and making it, “as it affects sensation”, an

aspect of the *Body of Fate*, a single form of time is dispersed throughout the *Great Wheel*, but its significance should ebb and flow, the *Body of Fate* being restricted in its influence on being in antithetical phases (if the being is true to phase) and stronger in primary phases (again, if the being is true to phase). What this means is that the experience of time as part of the external phenomena of life is weakest when the being is in the most subjective phases. Elsewhere, Yeats makes clear that the approach to complete subjectivity (in antithetical phases) involves a growing absorption in time (as opposed to space), and that this is complete at Phase 15. However, so long as no distinction is made between different forms of time, this could create confusion in the system. In *AVB*, Yeats dropped the statement to the effect that “Time as it affects sensation” is an aspect of the *Body of Fate*. If he had discriminated between physical or cosmological (objective) time, on the one hand, and human or phenomenological time (subjective) time, on the other hand, he could have allowed the two forms of time to alternate in occluding one another as the wheel was dominated by either subjective or lunar time, or by objective or solar time. But, at this stage of construction, as we have seen, sun and moon are symbolical rather than cosmological.

Accordingly, although Yeats does isolate different varieties of time so that he can treat them separately, he largely eliminates the category of phenomenological time from *The Great Wheel*. In effect, this prevents the development of the human personality in time. There is no suggestion that any of the individuals has a personal trove of memories, or hopes and fears for the future. Where Ricoeur sets phenomenological time against cosmological time, and studies the way in which it is possible to construct a “bridge” between them, Yeats avoids the problem by suppressing the former, and conflating

cosmological time with historical time. (In Chapter 2, we will see how this suppression of phenomenological time leads him to equate portraiture with personality, freezing individuals in simplifying images.) In effect, he suppresses objective time – by using sun and moon in metaphor or simile – until he needs it to justify the organization of the historical cycles, in “Dove or Swan”. To put it another way, the cosmos starts out as a figure of speech and slowly takes on substance as objective reality. It is the reverse of the path described in the Introduction; for Yeats, as the text proceeds, time is transformed from human artifice – a metaphor – into a fact of nature, the movement of the heavenly bodies.

In *AVA*, Yeats described the relation between time and subjectivity in the section on Phase 14:

The being has almost reached the end of that elaboration of itself which has for its climax an absorption in time, where space can be but symbols or images in the mind. (*CW13* 58)

This is unchanged in *AVB* (*CW14* 100). At Phase 15, the absorption in time is complete. By this, Yeats clearly means an inversion of the normal temporal order governed by the categories of past, present, and future (which would govern time “as it affects sensation”). In this condition, all thought is converted to image, because thought involves a movement in time, analogous to the syntagmatic or sequential axis of grammar:

As all effort has ceased, all thought has become image, because no thought could exist if it were not carried towards its own extinction, amid fear or in contemplation;

and every image is separate from every other, for if image were linked to image, the soul would awake from its immovable trance. (CW14 102)

In this condition, thought gives way to contemplation:

All that the being has experienced as thought is visible to its eyes as a whole, and in this way it perceives, not as they are to others, but according to its own perception, all orders of existence. (CW14 102)

The descent into the mundane world begins immediately, at Phase 16:

Since Phase 8 the man has more and more judged what is right in relation to time: a right action, or a right motive, has been one that he thought possible or desirable to think or do eternally; his soul “would come into possession of itself for ever in one single moment”; but now he begins once more to judge an action or motive in relation to space. A right action or motive must soon be right for any other man in similar circumstance. Hitherto an action, or motive, has been right precisely because it is exactly right for one person only, though for that person always. After the change, the belief in the soul’s immortality declines, though the decline is slow, and it may only be recovered when Phase 1 is passed. (CW14 104)

The description of the *Great Wheel* implies that these laws, although they make time an aspect of being, are themselves timeless. The laws are not inferred from the individual examples, they are assumed *a priori*, and apply even if it is impossible to name a single example of the type of being that should have been configured, as at Phases 2 to 5, 8, 26,

and 28 (leaving aside the special categories of Phases 1 and 15). The phases are fixed in perpetuity. To this extent, the *Great Wheel* corresponds to the first part of Braudel's work, "The Role of the Environment", and to the first part of *The Stones of Venice*, "The Foundations".

However, the *Great Wheel* can be read in different ways, raising the question of narrative to another level. In a reading that implicitly denies the overall coherence of Books I-V, Fredric Jameson sets aside what he considers the "whole latter half of the book" which, even if he can appreciate its poetic achievement, leaves him with the conviction that "we had better find something more satisfactory to do with the past" (271). He compares the *Great Wheel* to Carl Jung's *Psychological Types* and Gertrude Stein's *Making of Americans*:

As different as these books are from each other (and from *A Vision*), I think they share one impossible ambition, namely to "describe really describe every kind of human being that ever was or is or would be living." (272)

Jameson's reading of the *Great Wheel* is interesting for its attempt to distinguish between diachronic and synchronic readings of the phases of the *Great Wheel*. When read diachronically, the reader proceeds from phase to phase, making a path, roughly, from one form of objectivity (in which nature predominates), through subjectivity (at its zenith in Phase 15), to another form of objectivity (surrender to the divine). As Jameson says, it is hard to read this way and treat all phases as equal. And it is probably true that a reader will tend to assign a higher ethical value to one or another phase, if only because of the kind of

person he or she meets there: would you prefer to spend time (or eternity) with Shelley or Shaw? Jameson himself prefers a synchronic reading:

Seen synchronically there is no ethical judgment on any of these positions or characterological constellations: each one is necessarily contradictory, in some Whitmanesque way none is better than the others, Yeats celebrates all of them in turn, whence the richness of this strange text which offers all the elements of narrative in some pre-narrative stage in which all the ontological possibilities coexist in a kind of extratemporal suspension. (273-274)

Jameson, as I have said, severs the “whole latter half” of the book, treating it as a variety of poetic historiography. However, as I will show, it becomes impossible to read “The Great Wheel” fully without taking account of its relation to “Dove or Swan”. Even in a synchronic reading of the *Great Wheel*, the historical (diachronic) is still present in the minimal form of *names*. Certainly, these names are prised out of history, but they belong to individuals whose lives are historical (even Dostoyevsky’s fictional “Idiot” enters publishing history). In identifying these configurations as “elements of narrative in some pre-narrative stage”, like the walls and windows that Ruskin has not yet assembled into buildings, Jameson does, however, inadvertently point out that we are just at the first stage of Ricoeur’s three-fold mimesis, the stage at which we have “pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character” (*T&N1* 54) and can recognize “temporal structures that call for narration”, even if the “equation between narrative and time remains implicit” (*T&N1* 59). Another way of putting

it is to say that the reader is in the presence of a narrative constructing *ab initio* all the elements that it needs to develop, including the forms of temporality that allow it to move from one plane to another. As *AVB* proceeds, the diachronic aspect of the narrative moves from background to foreground and endows the *Great Wheel* with a historical context that it cannot by itself make explicit, precisely because *AVB* has not yet narrated it into existence.

Book II – The Completed Symbol

In “The Great Wheel”, time was organised with symbolic reference to the phases of the moon. In the following book, “The Completed Symbol”, the symbolic framework is extended, and the relation of one cycle to the other is described in terms of movements contained within one another:

The wheel or cone of the *Faculties* may be considered to complete its movement between birth and death, that of the *Principles* to include the period between lives as well. (*CW14* 138)

The new cycle is linked to a different cosmological spectrum reflecting its longer span: “. . . we do not divide the wheel of the *Principles* into the days of the month, but into the months of the year” (*CW14* 138). Here again, Yeats is careful with his similes: “I am told to . . . begin the year . . . *like* the early Roman year” (*CW14* 144, my emphasis). Chronology is not yet ready to take the stage.

In this part of *AVB*, Yeats introduces the fundamental divisions of time that perplexed Augustine: past, present and future. In the transition from *AVA* to *AVB*, Yeats had deleted reference to time as an aspect of the *Body of Fate*, one of the four *Faculties*. Now, it is re-introduced, but with a more precise attribution. No longer a simple unity (“Time”), it has been broken down into the three elements of human time (past, present, and future), which are joined by their unitary other (the timeless). Each of the four *Principles* corresponds to a single aspect of time/timelessness:

Spirit is the future, *Passionate Body* the present, *Husk* the past, deriving its name from the husk that is abandoned by the sprouting seed. (*CW14* 140)

Past and present fit neatly into the system:

The *Passionate Body* is the present, creation, light, the objects of sense. *Husk* is the past not merely because the objects are passed before we can know their images, but because those images fall in patterns and recurrences shaped by a past life or lives. (*CW14* 140)

Future is more troubling:

I am not, however, certain that I understand the statement that *Spirit* is the future. (*CW14* 140)

Yeats would have preferred *Celestial Body* as the future. It represents ideal form, and human hope for ideal form is always forward leaning. However, he concludes that humans “do not in reality seek these forms, that while separate from us they are illusionary”,

whereas *Spirit* may be sought as “complete self-realisation” and described as “reality as we perceive it under the category of the future” (CW14 141). His instructors leave him in the dark when it comes to the *Celestial Body*, but he concludes that “it is doubtless the timeless” (CW14 141). Next, looking back to Book I, the different orders of time are made to correspond with the *Faculties*, but with a “reversed attribution” (CW14 141). *Mask* is aligned with the timeless, *Will* with the future, *Body of Fate* with the present, and *Creative Mind* with the past. When the two cycles are superimposed, the effect is to oppose past and future, and the present and the timeless. Past and future face each other across the vanishing point of the present and the present is opposed to timelessness.

There are two important aspects to this new configuration. First, Yeats has articulated a geometry which internalizes the familiar temporal categories. Even if it is not possible to tease out the precise implications of each correspondence, and the text of *AVB* itself signifies hesitation and obscurity, time is now co-opted as a part of the system. No longer an external unity, as had been implied in *AVA* (when time still had a capital “T”), but a mobile set of relationships generated and sustained by the dynamics of the system itself. In this respect, Yeats has begun to take fuller advantage of the kind of freedom described in the Introduction whereby time was transformed from a fact of nature into a human artifice that could be re-shaped in the human imagination and given new form in art. And, following Ricoeur, it is the art of narrative that enables writers to play “games with time” in order to give expression to new models of time. Normally, in fictional narratives, those games are implied in the form of the story. But in the specific assignment of temporal categories to

aspects of the system in *AVB*, Yeats is making *explicit* use of this aspect of the art of narrative.

In relation to the structure of Books I-V, “The Completed Symbol” looks back to “The Great Wheel”, adding further depth to the *Faculties*, and looks forward to “The Soul in Judgment”, the addition of the *Principles* to the *Faculties* extending the system to take in “the period between lives” as well as the period between birth and death. But the period between lives has not yet been narrated. In effect, this prolepsis joins “The Great Wheel” to “The Soul in Judgment” by building a scaffolding that arches over both, making “The Completed Symbol” an example of the transitional structures that Ricoeur argues are needed in narratives with separated planes of temporality:

By transitional structure, I mean all the procedures of analysis and exposition that result in a work’s having to be read both forward and backward. (*T&N1* 209)

Book III – The Soul in Judgment

Yeats doesn’t detain the reader for too long in the period between lives. “The Soul in Judgment” is considerable shorter than either “The Great Wheel” or “Dove or Swan”. However, the dead are not compelled to experience time as the living had done. In “The Soul in Judgment”, time and narrative are let off the leash, as the *Spirit* moves backwards and forwards, pausing, moving on again, disappearing down one wormhole, and re-

appearing only to jump down another. Although the system continues to present itself as strictly rule-based, there is a kind of drunkenness to the *Spirit's* experience of temporality. (The same type of freedom pervades the analogous dream-state of *Finnegans Wake*.) There is a narrative progression through successive states from *The Vision of the Blood Kindred* onwards, corresponding to the phasal movement of the *Great Wheel*, but compared with the phases of the *Great Wheel*, the reader is given much more information about the temporality of each state. Rather than simply satisfy, and exemplify, the requirements of a specific configuration, as in *Great Wheel*, the *Spirit* must endure forms of purgation that seem designed to exhaust all possible experiences of time.

The profusion of different temporalities is most evident in the second state, which has three separate aspects and names: *Dreaming Back*, *Return*, and *Phantasmagoria*. In the *Dreaming Back*, the *Spirit* experiences time as recurrence: “the *Spirit* is compelled to live over and over again the events that had most moved it . . . in the order of their intensity” (CW14 164). Each such event is an “imprisonment” (CW14 165), from which the *Spirit* escapes by jumping the rails onto another track, the *Return*, where it “live[s] through past events in the order of their occurrence” (CW14 164). At each halt prompted by an event in the *Dreaming Back*, “represented upon the cone or wheel by a periodical stoppage of movement” (CW14 172), the *Spirit* must also live “the consequences of that event” (CW14 166). The event compels the *Spirit* to traverse time in two directions, it must first trace its way backwards to the cause and then forward from cause to effect, and further forward to all possible consequences, tracing a path through a ghostly *longue durée*. Next, in the *Phantasmagoria*, the *Spirit* “completes not only life but imagination” (CW14 168). Now,

everything that might have been imagined by the *Spirit*, when living, will appear to it in momentary flashes (“Houses appear built by thought in a moment . . .”) so that it can be “known and dismissed” (CW14 167).

Unlike the *Great Wheel*, where the tenor of synchronicity masks the absence of any overt statements about duration, an element of historical time-measurement is introduced to “The Soul in Judgment”. Twice, for example, it is said that a condition might last “for centuries” (CW14 163, 170). Just as a *Spirit* might have to fare backwards and forwards in time to understand the cause and consequences of events, moving beyond the limits of an individual life, these casual references to centuries suddenly give the reader pause to understand that the system, as it has been so far revealed to the reader, approximates the slow movement of historical time, centuries and ages, but that historical time has yet to be created within the system. In these references to centuries, “The Soul in Judgment” gestures towards the following book, “The Great Year of the Ancients”, in which the system begins to be situated with the realm of historical time.

Book IV – The Great Year of the Ancients

In the fourth book, which I take to be another transitional structure, Yeats takes on the related subjects of historiography and the calendar. “The Great Year of the Ancients” does for “Dove or Swan” what the “The Completed Symbol” did for “The Soul in Judgment”, builds a new temporal scaffold that Yeats then uses to secure a passage through the time-

world covered by the following book. Although he had earlier introduced the idea of the great year, now it will be treated, as Matthew Gibson has said, tellingly, “more thoroughly and perhaps *more chronologically*” (*Great Year 208*, my emphasis).

On the issue of historiography, Helen Vendler, in her early study of *AVB*, made no attempt to hide her exasperation at the comparison that Yeats makes between his model of history and that described by Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West*:

Yeats’s own analogies with Spengler are misleading in the extreme, and are mostly a case of his naïve delight in having apparently accomplished something verifiable – which he never set out to do. If Spengler had not published at just that crucial moment, we should probably have heard a lot less about historical validity. (17)

Vendler dismissed the Spenglerian comparison rather than admit that Yeats and Spengler might have some insight into the secret workings of history. Any such admission would, by extension, validate the route that Yeats took to get there, including “The Soul in Judgment”, for which Vendler reserved a positivist’s disdain. But Yeats made clear in the 1937 Introduction what he saw as common ground between his work and that of Spengler (*CW14* 14). Rather than dismiss the affiliation as naïve on Yeats’s part, it may be useful to explore not what they have in common but where they part company.

Spengler’s principal thesis is that there is no teleological progression to human history. There are only different cultures, each with its own timeline of birth, growth, maturity, old age, and death. Human history is not some form of pageant or relay in which each culture takes up the baton from its predecessors and hands it on to its successors, all

the while engaged in fertile exchanges with other cultures in a common time-world. For Spengler, each culture lives its own life. Its arts and sciences, and all that pertains to them, are an expression of that culture rather than so many threads to be woven into one great tapestry. It is important to Spengler, therefore, to deny that time itself is a unity, the common property of two or more cultures. Twice, Spengler cites with approval Augustine's famous dictum from the *Confessions* that he understands time until he is asked to explain it (I 124, 140). However, Spengler does not go on to examine the substance of Augustine's dilemma, his difficulty in grasping the relations of past, present and future, and their relation to eternity. He cites Augustine's difficulty as authority for the proposition that time is something about which it is better to remain silent. Put simply, for Spengler, cultures are not shaped by time acting as an external agent; rather, they each form their own version of time as an expression of their nature.

When the question of time is related to the writing of history, Spengler necessarily opposes a model of historiography that uses a calendar modelled on a single arbitrary periodization of time. He wants to reverse the angle from which time is normally viewed, proposing instead that it is plastic, the fluid property of each culture:

It is, I repeat, in effect the substitution of a Copernican for a Ptolemaic aspect of history, that is, an immeasurable widening of horizon. (I 39)

However, the obverse of this liberty is a type of radical confinement within one time-world. There is no temporal order to structure or support a community of cultures. If time is the individual expression of each culture, then eternity, as a form of time to which all

cultures relate in the same way, must be placed out of reach. Hence, in his discussion on the person of Christ, Spengler implicitly condemns Augustine to failure:

There is no bridge between directional Time and timeless Eternity, between the *course* of history and the *existence* of a divine world-order. . . . *This is the final meaning of the moment in which Jesus and Pilate confront one another.* (II 216, emphasis in the original)

Before turning to the way in which the differences between Spengler and Yeats help to illuminate the conception of time which is unfolded in *AVB*, it may be helpful to take a short detour to note some of the differences between Spengler's thought and that of Giambattista Vico. Although Spengler claimed not to be familiar with Vico's writings, Yeats, in reading Spengler, simply assumed that he must have been familiar with Vico's work, which Yeats quickly saw as being at the heart of many other conceptions of history:

. . . I discovered for myself Spengler's main source in Vico, and that half the revolutionary thoughts of Europe are a perversion of Vico's philosophy. (*CW14* 191)

Vico is a tangential, but illuminating, presence in *AVB*. In "The Great Year of the Ancients", Yeats distances himself from the common understanding of Vico's philosophy of historical cycles which sees each cycle returning to its origin:

An historical symbolism which covers too great a period of time for imagination to grasp or experience to explain may seem too theoretical, too arbitrary, to serve any

practical purpose; it is, however, necessary to the myth if we are not to suggest, as Vico did, civilisation perpetually returning to the same point. (CW14 186)

Already it is possible to see one of the differences between Yeats's conception of time-worlds and that of Spengler. Yeats does not distance himself completely from Vico. He simply claims that the brevity of the historical periods examined by Vico has the effect of leaving him blind to the structures revealed by a longer survey of historical time. As historiographer, Yeats is attracted to the *longue durée* and fundamentally differs from Spengler if it is correct to say, as Isaiah Berlin does, that Spengler wants each "civilisation enclosed in its own impenetrable bubble" (*Crooked Timber* 11). The aim of "The Great Year of the Ancients" is to flesh out an emerging conception of historical time that is cyclical on multiple levels, each civilisation held within the circle of an era, and multiple eras held within the common time-world of a larger cycle, of either 26,0000 or 36,0000 years, designated by a Platonic year or by some other name. Furthermore, the geometry described in "The Completed Symbol", which inscribes past, present and future (Spengler's "directional Time") in a common structure with the "timeless" (Spengler's "timeless Eternity"), implicitly denies Spengler's claim that there is no "bridge" between time and its other.

If Yeats's system has more in common with Vico than Spengler, in terms of temporality at least, he confronts a problem that did not concern Vico: how to find the right calendar for a period almost "too great . . . for imagination to grasp or experience" (CW14 186) and apply it to history. Yeats's interest in calendars might well be the seed of the

whole system, as he admitted in *AVB* (CW14 7-8). In “Per Amica Silentia Lunae” (1917), he had already linked the emerging system with the calendar:

I do not doubt those heaving circles, those winding arcs, whether in one man’s life or in that of an age, are mathematical, and that some in the world, or beyond the world, have foreknown the event and pricked upon the calendar the life-span of a Christ, a Buddha, a Napoleon: that every movement, in feeling or in thought, prepares in the dark by its own increasing clarity and confidence its own executioner. (CW5 14)

As Ricoeur points out, the calendar itself mediates between separated planes of temporality. He considers it in the context of what he calls the “creative capacity” of history to reconfigure time²⁰. For Ricoeur, the institution of the calendar “constitutes the invention of a third form of time”. Calendrical time is inscribed within a wider frame, that of “mythic time”, which orders the time of humans and societies in relation to cosmological time. The frame of mythic time is too wide for chronology to be of any use, and is regulated rather by “ordering in terms of one another cycles of different duration, the great celestial cycles, biological recurrences and the rhythms of social life” (*T&N3* 104-105). (In Book I of *AVB*,

²⁰ Yeats’s interest in the calendar is consistent with widespread efforts at calendar reform in the early twentieth century involving, among other bodies and interest groups, the League of Nations. According to Vanessa Ogle, “calendar activism reached its height in the early and mid-1930s” (199).

Yeats refers to Empedocles' "boundless time" (CW14 49); in Books I-III, he does little else but order "in terms of one another cycles of different duration"; in Book IV, he refers to the system, as elaborated up to that point, as "myth" (CW14 186) Every calendar is inscribed in mythic time and fastened to it by observable celestial phenomena. Being subject to the contingency of those observations, the calendar is periodically adjusted to retain the appearance of stability.

Three features are present in every calendar. First, there is a "founding event . . . such as the birth of Christ or of the Buddha . . . [that] determines the axial moment in relation to which every other event is dated". Second, there is an ability "to traverse time in two directions", from the past to the present and from the present to the past, allowing every event to be dated. Accordingly, the past does not simply drift into invisibility; it can be searched in a series of graduated recessions. Finally, there are specific units of measurement such as days, months, years. Thus, the calendar is fixed by reference to a moment in *human* (subjective, phenomenological) time and borrows from *physical* (objective, cosmological) time the recurrences that it needs to create manageable series of numbers that can be transformed into dates (T&N3 106-107).

Ricoeur's explanation helps to explain why Yeats situates "The Great Wheel of the Ancients" where he does. Once the system can be stitched into the fabric of a shared and recognised calendar, he can cross the bridge from myth to history, from boundless time to chronology. As already mentioned, Yeats has joined cosmological time to historical time. By so doing, Yeats has built his own bridge between human time, which is historical, and

cosmological time. However, he has not yet resolved the problem of lived time, because he eliminated phenomenological or lived time from *The Great Wheel*, and he has yet to put anything in its place. This will be the work of “Dove or Swan”, where the heaving arcs and winding circles of the myth, as described in Books I-III, are embodied in historical time. The quadrilateral geometry of the earlier books is transposed into temporal-historical form. The *Faculties* have become “periods of time” measurable on the calendar. *AVB* has gradually prepared its articulation of temporality to the point where it can make its most radical claim with respect to the idea of time, a claim necessitated by its geometry:

Its *Four Faculties* so found are four periods of time eternally co-existent, four co-existent acts; as seen in time we explain their effect by saying that the spirits of the three periods that seem to us past are present among us, though unseen. (*CW14* 187)

Book V – Dove or Swan

Frank Kermode has written of the instinct to join up the loose ends of a text that does not appear to be coherent:

If there is one belief (however the facts resist it) that unites us all, from the evangelists to those who argue away inconvenient portions of their texts, and those who spin large plots to accommodate the discrepancies and dissonances into some

larger scheme, it is this conviction that somehow, in some occult fashion, if we could only detect it, everything will be found to hang together. (*Secrecy* 72)

It is a statement that could just as well be read as a warning not to force everything to hang together. In trying to locate the keystone that will enable every building block of Yeats's system to fit into place, the reader is in the position that Ricoeur ascribes to anyone confronted by a disfigured modernist narrative such as *Ulysses*: ". . . it is the reader, almost abandoned by the work, who carries the burden of emplotment" (*T&N1* 77).

In a recent essay expressly concerned with the historical symbolism of *AVB*, Graham Dampier puts it this way: "If the system is to maintain its internal cohesion . . . the correspondence of 'Dove or Swan' to the rest of *A Vision* must be illustrated." (250). His own attempt succeeds in demonstrating that Yeats's system as it relates to history is not deterministic, and that it differs from Spengler's morphology in allowing a measure of freedom for historical agents, even if each historical period is shaped by other periods. Dampier is one of few commentators to take literally (and therefore correctly) what *AVB* says about each set of four historical periods, that they are "co-existent". However, he falls back into a vocabulary that denies the more radical aspect of Yeats's approach to simultaneity:

The system of *A Vision* provides a differing cyclical account of history. It shows that every point of human progress is influenced by *three past moments of time* that inform the present, but without determining it. Every present moment of history is

unique, while at the same time repeating social conditions and elements that characterized previous cultures and civilizations. (249, my emphasis)

This lapse into a grammar of past and present tenses is easily understood, but it is the very grammar of time that the system is straining to rewrite, and this reaches its limit in “Dove or Swan”.

My own attempt to demonstrate the correspondence of “Dove or Swan” to the rest of *AVB* has been concerned with narratology and emplotment. Ricoeur, as we have seen, was able to delineate the outline of a plot in Braudel’s *History of the Mediterranean*. In Braudel’s work, and in *The Stones of Venice*, the opening examination of permanent structures (for Braudel, geographical; for Ruskin, architectural) is followed by historical narrative, bringing a specific period into focus and giving each work its plot. If it is possible to bring a narratological analysis of *AVB* to a conclusion, it should be possible, having reached the end of “Dove or Swan”, to propose the elements of a plot. I would say that the plot of Books I-V of *AVB* is the development of “historical time” as a “quasi-character”, discernible in the growing historicization of time as Books I-V proceed.

Although *AVB* takes the construction of a human being as a permanent structure, beyond history and beyond chronology, the names pinned to the *Great Wheel* are the seeds of a historicity that comes to fruition in “Dove or Swan”, mythic or “boundless” time becoming historical time. This development is reflected metonymically in “Dove or Swan”, itself divided into five parts, beginning with myth in “I – Leda”, concluding with history in “V – From A.D. 1050 to the Present Day”, making it a smaller version of the larger cycle. *AVB*

has used the calendar to bridge the gap between human time and cosmological time, and the sense of reality conferred on the system by the recognised calendar gives credence, retrospectively, to the system elaborated up to that point. The individual beings of the *Great Wheel* are now retrospectively back-lit by the historical phase in which they lived out their personal phases.

Where *AVB* exceeds Braudel and Ruskin in the difficulties that it imposes upon itself is that they assume the existence of time *a priori*, because they have other characters to develop and plots to spin. Because “historical time” is a “quasi-character” in *AVB*, Yeats cannot simply outline an overarching conception of time at the beginning. As with the hero of a *Bildungsroman*, his subject is a work-in-progress, augmenting and extending its development at each stage just enough to reach the following stage. The reader can only grasp the plot by synthesizing the various elements and levels. As Ricoeur said of Braudel’s *History of the Mediterranean*:

Finally, by his analytical and disjunctive method, Braudel has invented a new type of plot. If it is true that the plot is always to some extent a synthesis of the heterogeneous, the virtual plot of Braudel’s book teaches us to unite structures, cycles, and events by joining together heterogeneous temporalities and contradictory chronicles. (*T&N1* 216)

But the first level concordance achieved in the development of this narrative is augmented, in *AVB*, by a second level concordance based on the metaphorical identity of the personal phases described in “The Great Wheel” and the historical phases described in

“Dove or Swan”. In other words, “historical time” develops as a “quasi-character”, diachronically, but the reader eventually learns that the same genetic structure has been present, synchronically, all along. The *Faculties* are synchronized to configure both individual beings and periods of historical time. This creates complications that put the whole structure under pressure of collapse.

The editors to *AVB* point out:

In the Yeatses’ system, the Age of Phidias, the Age of Justinian, and the Renaissance are parallel as fifteenth phases of millennial eras. (*CW14* 451)

But the terminology used in *AVB* goes beyond the notion of ages being “parallel”. It is intrinsic to the concept of the parallel that there is no intersection between two lines. This is what allows Spengler to construct his morphology of hermetically-sealed civilizations. *AVB* refers to “periods of time eternally co-existent”, and, to complete the system, in imagination at least, one would have to grasp what exactly is figured by the constellation of historical periods in the way that individual being is configured by the *Faculties*. We can give names to the latter. “Synge” is one name for the precise arrangement of the *Faculties* at Phase 23, “Rembrandt” is another. These names also signify visual forms. Is there a name to what is configured by the comparable intersection of four historical *Faculties*, or must we recognize, with Yeats, that “the limit itself has become a new dimension”? (*CW14* 218) I would say that this is the point at which the system, the world projected by *AVB*, risks incoherence.

Yeats's own concern with the ultimate coherence of the system is the subject of the short section that follows "Dove or Swan", which, I will argue, adds another meta-textual dimension to the narrative of *AVB*, and suggests that the answer to this test of coherence already lies within *AVB*.

The End of the Cycle

In "The End of the Cycle", Yeats evaluates his own system, specifically in its power to project likely or possible futures. Using the dates that Yeats appends to this section and to "Dove or Swan", the reader sees that nine years have passed, sufficient time for sober retrospection. As Harper has noticed, the historical phase has changed, from Phase 22 to Phase 23 (*A Vision in Time* 192). A change of phase seems to be reflected in the movement from "Dove or Swan"; the number of sections has been reduced from five to three, the cone is narrowing. Furthermore, it is not surprising, as the end of the text grows nearer, to find that this short section reflects "Dove or Swan" with, as Yeats would put it, a reversed attribution. The five sections of "Dove or Swan" opened with myth and poetry (Yeats's "Leda") and ended with historical speculation. The three sections of "The End of the Cycle" open with historical speculation and end in myth and poetry (Homer's *Odyssey*). There is a sense that formal coherence and textual correspondence is being used to buttress a system that might otherwise fly apart.

In the first of its three sections, the author is presented as a solitary figure ruminating on the system revealed to the reader in the preceding five books:

Day after day I have sat in my chair turning a symbol over and over in my mind, exploring all its details, defining and again defining its elements, testing my convictions and those of others by its unity, attempting to substitute particulars for an abstraction like algebra. (*CW14* 219)

His own recurrent memories (four consecutive sentences begin “I remember. . .”) are the problem:

Then I draw myself up into the symbol and it seems as if I should know all if I could but banish such memories and find everything in the symbol. (*CW14* 219)

In the break before the second section, he realizes that he has reached the limit of discursive reasoning: “I have already said all that can be said” (*CW14* 219). After some twenty years of labour, producing two separate versions of the text, Yeats makes way for Homer:

Shall we follow the image of Heracles that walks through the darkness bow in hand, or mount to that other Heracles, man, not image, he that has for his bride Hebe, “The daughter of Zeus, the mighty, and Hera, shod with gold”? (*CW14* 220)

I said earlier that Aherne and Robartes seem to be haunting Yeats in these final pages. In “The Phases of the Moon”, Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes stand on a bridge outside a tower in which an unnamed avatar for Yeats works late into the night. They

describe exactly the condition in which Yeats represents himself in the first and second parts of “The End of the Cycle”:

And now he seeks in book or manuscript

What he shall never find. (19-20)

In the poem, after Robartes has concluded his description of the phases of the moon,

Aherne prompts him to go further:

But the escape; the song’s not finished yet. (117)

Robartes makes the following gnomic pronouncement:

Hunchback and Saint and Fool are the last crescents.

The burning bow that once could shoot an arrow

Out of the up and down, the wagon-wheel

Of beauty’s cruelty and wisdom’s chatter –

Out of that raving tide – is drawn betwixt

Deformity of body and of mind. (118-123)

In the phase of sainthood, between hunchback (deformity of body) and fool (deformity of mind), bow and arrow provide an image of possible escape. Not inevitable escape, because the arrow may never take flight. Aherne amuses himself with the thought that he could summon the tower-dweller from desk to door, and give him the final key to the system, by muttering “Hunchback and Saint and Fool”:

. . . He’d crack his wits

Day after day, yet never find the meaning. (134-135)

Yeats, it seems, *contra* Robartes and Aherne, *has* understood – in world-historical terms – what Robartes had explained to Aherne in terms of personal reincarnation. On the diagram of the historical phases in *AVB*, Yeats has not assigned dates to the final phases 26, 27, and 28. In “The End of the Cycle”, he gives up the attempt to pencil in the historical detail, just as Aherne predicted he would. However, in wondering whether “we” will ascend to join Heracles on Olympus, or follow him through Hades, he transposes Robartes’ image of the bow and arrow from personal into historical phases. The return to an autobiographical discourse in “The End of the Cycle”, the description of solitary labour, frustration and difficulty, does more than simply describe Yeats’s activities between 1934 and 1936. It joins the end of the book to its beginning in a three-way conversation between Aherne, Robartes and Yeats.

In its closing sections, then, *AVB* seems to use formal narrative correspondences to patch up a system that cannot make its projection of the co-existence of different historical periods apparent to the reader. Furthermore, it suggests that we should think of the co-existent periods of history in the way that we might think of personal re-incarnation, in which “earlier” and “later” lives share a single incarnation at any single moment.

However, if it is impossible to give a name to what is signified by the interaction of the four historical periods, that is not necessarily fatal to the system. To give a name to the configuration of the historical *Faculties*, it would be necessary to have a position outside the system itself, in the same way that everyone except “Synge” is outside “Synge”, occupying a

position from which to identify and name him. In his study of narratives that co-ordinate multiple temporalities, David Wittenberg describes this narrative position as the “viewpoint-over-histories” (148-177). He argues that time travel stories generate what he calls a “hyperspace and hypertime of narration” (99), a space outside conventional time and space, which the reader must both imagine and occupy to perform the work of co-ordination that the story seems to demand. There is a plausible reason for Yeats’s refusal to occupy this position, going beyond a simple failure of imagination.

On 4 May 1937, Yeats wrote to Dorothy Wellesley from his home in Rathfarnham: “you & I are in history the history of the mind — your ‘Fire’ has a date or dates so has my ‘wild old wicked man’”. Mallarmé, he says, “escapes from history”. As for himself, he writes, “It is not the way I go *now* but one of the legitimate roads” (*CL IntelLex* 6922, my emphasis). Rather than escape from history, to occupy a purely fictional “viewpoint-over-histories”, Yeats wrote himself deeper into the text and history.

Living in History

Although he erased his own name from Phase 17 of the *Great Wheel*, in both versions of *A Vision*, Yeats did write his own life into the text in the dates that he appended to various sections. For example, in the prefatory material, the “Rapallo” section is dated “March and October 1928” (*CW14* 6), “Introduction to “*A Vision*”” is dated “November 23rd 1928, and later” (*CW14* 19), although “To Ezra Pound” (*CW14* 19) is undated. The section

“Stories of Michael Robartes and his Friends” is undated, but a footnote to the “Introduction”, referring to the original 1925 fiction, states that “Michael Robartes and his Friends” is the amended version of that fiction. The use of the footnote creates the impression that the revisions post-date the writing of the substantial text of the “Introduction” but necessarily pre-date the undated footnote, placing the time of production at some undisclosed time after 23 November 1928.

The main text of *A Vision*, Books I-V, uses dates in similarly inconsistent ways. “The Great Wheel” concludes with the words:

Finished at Thoor Ballylee, 1922,

In a time of Civil War.

(*CW14* 136)

None of the three following books, preceding “Dove or Swan”, is dated. “Dove or Swan” itself, despite being apparently repeated “without change” (*CW14* 15), is stated to have been “Written at Capri, February 1925” (*CW14* 218). “Dove or Swan” is followed first by “The End of the Cycle”, which is dated “1934-1936” (*CW14* 220), and then by “All Souls’ Night: An Epilogue”, dated “Oxford, Autumn 1920” (*CW14* 224).

Even as he amended the concluding sections of the text, in 1932, Yeats ensured that the amendments should not displace the dates that he had carefully embedded in the text. These small acts of auto-historicism create new vistas, opening new and potentially limitless horizons of reference. Commenting on the “autobiographical asides . . . that contribute so much to the vividness” of Michelet’s work, Genette writes:

. . . Michelet lingers over his evocation of Toulon where he lived while writing that book: "I have twice spoken of Toulon; but I can never speak enough of a place which has brought me such happiness. It meant much for me to finish this gloomy history in the land of light. Our works feel the influence of the country where they were wrought. Nature labours with us; and it is a duty to render gratitude to this mysterious comrade, to thank the *Genius loci*."

In appreciation, Genette concludes, "One would wish to happen upon this kind of genetic counterpoint more often" (*Paratexts* 326-327).

The dedication to the 1925 version of *A Vision* provided a genetic counterpoint of the Michelet type, one that suggests how deeply the *genius loci* impressed itself upon the book, resulting in a beautiful passage that unfortunately found no place in the 1937 version:

Yet when I wander upon the cliffs where Augustus and Tiberius wandered, I know that the new intensity that seems to have come into all visible and tangible things is not a reaction from that wisdom but its very self. Yesterday when I saw the dry and leafless vineyards at the very edge of the motionless sea, or lifting their brown stems from almost inaccessible patches of earth high up on the cliff-side, or met at the turn of the path the orange and lemon trees in full fruit, or the crimson cactus flower, or felt the warm sunlight falling between blue and blue, I murmured, as I have countless times, 'I have been part of it always and there is maybe no escape, forgetting and returning life after life like an insect in the roots of the grass.' But murmured it without terror, in exultation almost. (*CW13* lvi)

The vivid evocation may have been suppressed but the biographical element remains encoded in the words that still conclude “Dove or Swan”.

In *AVB*, the dates tell us where different parts of the work were written and when, revealing the disjointed temporality of its production. Even as the text dutifully observes normal conventions – the introduction is at the beginning and the epilogue is at the end – the counterpoint generated by the dates reverses that sequence – the epilogue, they tell us, was written in 1920 and the introduction was written, or partly written, eight years later, in 1928. We can read from beginning to end but, along the way, the dates continually switch the horizon of time and space against which the reader sees the work being formed. In some sections, for no apparent reason, the text simply omits time and place of production. To the extent that the reader has become accustomed to look for the text’s co-ordinates, the contrast leaves these parts of the text looking lost in time and space.

Thus, with Wittenberg’s notion of the “viewpoint-over-histories” in mind, what becomes clear is that, in *AVB*, Yeats refused to risk undermining the entire system by proposing, even implicitly, the existence of a temporal position external to the system itself, from which it could be viewed in its entirety. In *AVA*, he mentions that one of the notes on which he based the book “identifies *Creative Mind, Will and Mask* with our three dimensions, but *Body of Fate* with the unknown fourth, time externally perceived”. He goes on to admit that he tried then to understand some “modern research” on the subject, but lacked the necessary training (*CW13* 142). Hence the recognition, in the final paragraph of “Dove or Swan” that “the limit itself has become a new dimension” (*CW14* 218).

In writing of the “co-existent” periods of historical time, Yeats partially solved the problem of this limit by changing vocabulary. From grammatical tenses with their temporal implications, he turned to a vocabulary of visibility and invisibility so that the “spirits of the three periods that seem to us past are *present among us*, though *unseen*” (CW14 187, my emphasis). This condition of limited sight could be overcome only by having history itself occupy something akin to Phase 15 of the *Great Wheel*, where all that the being has experienced as though “is visible to its eyes as a whole, and in this way it perceives, not as they are to others, but according to its own perception, all orders of existence” (CW14 102).

But this vantage point is equally out of reach for the individual being and for history. In “Dove or Swan”, when the narrative reaches this point at 560 A.D. and 1450 A.D., Yeats is careful not to disturb the balance of the system by claiming more for history than he allows to individuals. Writing of the first instance, 560 A.D, he says: “Of the moment of climax itself I can say nothing . . .” (CW14 205). When he reaches 1450 A.D., he explains how this moment affects the individuals who live through it but who can never occupy Phase 15 as a personal phase of being:

Because the 15th Phase can never find direct human expression, being a supernatural incarnation, it impressed upon work and thought an element of strain and artifice, a desire to combine elements which may be incompatible, or which suggest by their combination something supernatural. (CW14 212)

All that Yeats can offer is “All Souls’ Night”. If poems have phases, this is almost certainly a poem of the fifteenth phase. As Yeats had said of that supernatural phase, “all effort has ceased”, the being is in “immovable trance”, and perceives “not as they are to

others, but according to its own perception, all orders of existence" (CW14 102). Named for the recurrent intersection of two orders of time, the poem joins the world of "The Great Wheel", occupied by Yeats and George, to the world of "The Soul in Judgment", inhabited by spirits of William Horton, Florence Farr Emery and MacGregor Mathers, and tethers both to historical time, the world of "Dove or Swan", Oxford in the autumn of 1920, where the mission of the Black Eagle was first revealed to George and Yeats.

AVB's final set of temporal co-ordinates denotes a point at which the author's life, the text, and history intersect. When the reader adds this date to the others sprinkled throughout the text, the dates begin to mark an absence. Although Book I of *AVB* identifies time with subjectivity, asserting that "our thoughts and emotions have duration and quality" (CW14 52), *AVB* does not attempt to explain how the system affects Yeats as he lives his life in the realm of phenomenological time. Yeats had faced the difficulty of writing about a life lived in time in *The Trembling of the Veil*, which was written while he and George were building the system. It will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2. Daily Mind, Buried Self: Narrating Lived Time in *The Trembling of the Veil*

Not Being a Realist

On 9 October 1920, Yeats arrived in Dublin for an operation to have his tonsils removed. John Quinn had suggested using a Harley Street surgeon, but Yeats called at the wrong address and missed his appointment. George then cast a horoscope, and the results persuaded them to go to Dublin, where Oliver St. John Gogarty would operate. It was an eventful stay. Before the operation, Maud Gonne unexpectedly requested Yeats's presence in Glenmalur, where he had spent some trying days in the summer, acting as peace envoy between Iseult Gonne and Francis Stuart. Now her son was the problem, his Republican activities attracting attention from the local police. Yeats had the operation on 13 October at the Elpis nursing home (where Synge had died). He suffered a haemorrhage and lost enough blood to worry Gogarty. Then, he and George abandoned plans to check on Ballylee, worried that a looming rail strike might leave them stranded. Instead, they made their way back to Oxford, leaving the nursing home on 17 October, and spending just one more night in Dublin, on board the steamer that would take them to Holyhead the following

morning. George was sufficiently concerned to arrange overnight stays in Holyhead and Chester to break the journey. They arrived back in Oxford on 20 October.

This summary of Yeats's movements is based on Ann Saddlemyer's life of George Yeats (264-265). The trip and the tonsillectomy also feature in Roy Foster's biography of Yeats (*Life II* 181). But Foster describes a trip to Sir Horace Plunkett as Yeats's "very first action" (*Life II* 181) on arrival in Dublin, whereas Saddlemyer says that, on arrival, they had dinner with Lennox Robinson. Furthermore, she says that George pretended to Lily Yeats that Yeats was paying a call on Sir Horace Plunkett as a cover story to keep from Lily news of Yeats's involvement in the latest Gonne fiasco. Now it is possible that both are correct, that there was an actual visit to Sir Horace Plunkett and an imaginary visit to Sir Horace Plunkett, at different times. It may be that Foster and Saddlemyer, as biographers of Yeats and George respectively, have deliberately selected and emphasized different incidents. And, despite its temporal relation to the "sleep" that I described in the Introduction, there is no evidence that the any anxiety about the impending operation were the cause of the extraordinary disclosures made to them. Yeats might have preferred a reader to ignore realist and positivist approaches to biographical information, and to take the disparity in the two accounts of his movements as evidence of his simultaneous appearance in two different places, Foxrock and Glenmalure, with the justification he offered to T. Sturge Moore a few years later:

There are many well-attested cases of prevision. Just as *the double images seem to imply a spaceless reality*, these seem to imply a reality which is timeless, a

transcendental ego. Again, not being a realist these rare cases give me little trouble.

(Bridge 77, my emphasis)

Unlike Yeats, biographers are expected to behave like fully paid-up realists, but they will be guided by their own criteria of selection and judgment. Foster's eye is drawn to history. For him, "very first action" seems to mean "very first action of any historical significance". Saddlemyer attends more to the daily movements of the family. Her account leaves more room for contingency and accident, his account makes more explicit the imbrication of life and history, but both, as they must, assume the existence of a continuous personality in time and space. Yeats's own autobiographical practice employs different principles of selection and uses narrative and emplotment to different ends. In Chapter 1, I mentioned three separate instances of Yeats's presence in Italy: Venice, May 1907; Syracuse, January 1925; Capri, February 1925. The implication of what Yeats says to Moore is that it is only the conventions of realism that present these appearances to the imagination as separate and exclusive stages in the life of an individual. If space is unreal, there is no reason why Yeats might not have appeared to someone in London in May 1907 on the very evening that Lady Gregory left him sitting on the Piazza di San Marco. If space *and* time are unreal, no distinction could be made between Yeats's appearing to Lady Gregory in Venice (to which realism gives one set of spatial and temporal co-ordinates) and his appearing to Ezra Pound amid the ruins of the Greek amphitheatre on the outskirts of Syracuse (to which realism assigns a different set of spatial and temporal co-ordinates).

For someone holding these beliefs, it might have been easier to leave the genre of autobiography well alone. However, Yeats was drawn to life-writing practices continually. If the complex question of living in time, the apparent unity of the temporal passage from birth to death, was largely eliminated from “The Great Wheel” in both versions of *A Vision*, Yeats’s autobiographies are more revealing. For this chapter, I will focus primarily on *The Trembling of the Veil*, because it is the experimentation in that text that best shows how Yeats was beginning to find narrative forms equal to his conception of individual being. Furthermore, it shows how Yeats used the “portrait” as a way of placing the individual outside time, a correlate to the confinement to phase of the *Great Wheel*, reserving for himself an existence in poetry, with the poem an image of continual personal re-creation or re-incarnation.

Re-making the Self

As early as 1908, Yeats was insisting on the identity between his life and his poetry, and on his right to revisit and revise his poems:

The friends that have it I do wrong
 When ever I remake a song,
 Should know what issue is at stake:
 It is myself that I remake.

(1-4)

Although little more than a defence of the poet's right to amend his poetry from time to time, the verse still gives some sense of the equivalent fluidity that Yeats wanted to claim for life and text. In the last twenty years of his life, Yeats played numerous variations on this simple melody.

In completing the first version of *A Vision* in 1925, he had described personality as a never-ending negotiation between freedom and fate. As shown in Chapter 1, this was reflected in temporal terms in the opposition between a subjective withdrawal into time and the objective experience of time as it affects sensation. By 1937, Yeats had further refined the system by fitting the conventional categories of temporality to the geometry of choices that generate personality and character. However, the early sense that the poet's self was not extended continuously in time but capable of revision and restatement at any moment, simply by taking up a pen, is still visible in the form of the masks put on and then discarded in the transit across the *Great Wheel*.

In the years between the first and second versions of *A Vision*, the opposition between the continuous and the momentary is often expressed in the language of perception. There are the "Seven Propositions" quoted in Ellmann's *The Identity of Yeats* (236-237). Ellmann describes them as late, and Neil Mann convincingly sets out the case for their formulation towards the end of the summer of 1929 (*Seven Propositions*). In the context of time and personality, the most important are the initial four propositions (the text is taken from Ellmann):

(I) Reality is a timeless and spaceless community of Spirits which perceive each other. Each Spirit is determined by and determines those it perceives, and each Spirit is unique.

(II) When these Spirits reflect themselves in time and space they still determine each other, and each Spirit sees the others as thoughts, images, objects of sense. Time and Space are unreal.

(III) This reflection into time and space is only complete at certain moments of birth, or passivity, which recur many times in each destiny. At these moments the destiny receives its character until the next such moment from those Spirits who constitute the external universe. The horoscope is a set of geometrical relations between the Spirit's reflection and the principal masses in the universe and defines that character.

(IV) The emotional character of a timeless and spaceless spirit reflects itself as its position in time, its intellectual character as its position in space. The position of a Spirit in space and time therefore defines character.

(Identity 236)

This abstract dogma – in which reflection into time and space happens only at “certain moments of birth, or passivity” – gives rise to a problem recognized by Yeats in the diary he kept in 1930:

I have to face Berkeley's greatest difficulty: to account for the continuity of perception, but my problem is limited to the continuity of the perception that constitutes, in my own and other eyes, my body and its acts. (*Explorations* 331)

Can one of these moments last for over seventy years? If not, how then could "Yeats" account for his apparent existence in his own eyes and in the eyes of others? Despite the seeming importance of the moments of birth or passivity in the creation of new beings, neither *A Vision* nor the "Seven Propositions" makes explicit whether it is possible to experience such moments of passivity during the passage between birth and death or whether that would break up the "continuity of perception". In the "Seven Propositions", however, Yeats does write of birth and passivity as though they are two different routes to a new "reflection" in time and space. This would imply that rebirth, the possibility of re-incarnation, is always available. In the much-quoted characterization of the poet in "A General Introduction to my Work" (1937) as something more than the "bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast", as being instead "re-born as an idea, something intended, complete" (CW5 204), Yeats proposes that, for the poem at least, the poet must experience "rebirth" as a new "reflection" of the kind described in the "Seven Propositions".

This short survey of some of Yeats's approaches to the question of time and continuous personality shows that, for Yeats, realistic life-writing of the kind practiced by Saddlemyer and Foster will always be limited by its mistaken understanding of reality; it does not endorse the kind of collective hallucination that Yeats seems to have in mind when

he tries to think beyond individual being, “reality” as an ever-changing aggregate of reflections of spirits, generating the appearance of time and space. In certain respects, this is still the old white “Magic” of 1901, now given a pseudo-scientific makeover in the technical language of the system, and it is difficult, this far into Yeats’s private language, to separate metaphor from magic. But we have his own life-writing practice as embodiment of his theories of personality, character and time, making it possible to see various connections in Yeats’s work. As already mentioned, Yeats used his life-writing practice to explore aspects of time left largely untouched in *A Vision*. As demonstrated in the last chapter, in both *AVA* and *AVB*, personality is considered primarily in a context of synchronic time, and the principal narrative aim of the text is to develop a model of historical time. Unsurprisingly, the autobiographies are more concerned with the individual’s experience of time, and with the imbrication of individual and generational time, which is the human form of historical time.

In the autobiographical texts, it is possible to see how Yeats uses form to resist simple models of chronology. And in the elaborate structure of *The Trembling of the Veil*, second of his autobiographies, it is possible to see structural correspondences with *A Vision*, in both of its incarnations. Furthermore, a close reading of *The Trembling of the Veil* makes it possible to trace affinities between a specific group of poems, similarly autobiographical in nature, of which I have selected “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” and “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited” as the most revealing of Yeats’s concern with time and personality.

The Autobiographies in Context

The Trembling of the Veil is the second substantial volume of Yeats's autobiographical writings. He had published *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* in 1916. The text of *The Trembling of the Veil* was produced in 1920-1922. It is divided into five "books", the titles of which – "Four Years: 1887- 1891", "Ireland after Parnell", "Hodos Chameliontos", "The Tragic Generation" and "The Stirring of the Bones" – immediately make clear that the text is organized thematically, and that any autobiographical content will be subordinated to historical, political and occult contexts. First published in October 1922, Yeats had nursed plans to make it one part of a two-volume set by pairing it with the first version of *A Vision* (I will come back to this), but when it was subsequently published, in November 1926, it was joined by *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* (using the general heading "Autobiographies" for the first time), and those two texts were later joined by others in the posthumous Macmillan "Autobiographies", which has since become the standard edition.

Laura Marcus has described some of the ways in which autobiographical writing was conceptualized in the late nineteenth century: a spontaneous overflow of expressive power; a scientific enquiry into the nature of genius; an attempt to account for the continuity of individual identity (11-89). In the preface to *The Trembling of the Veil*, Yeats claimed to be

following the second approach, implicitly suggesting that the work was less about him than about the “artist and writers and certain among them men of genius” (CW3 111) the reader will encounter in its pages, but the text itself tells us much more about his approach to the third category. He faced the same difficulties as any other autobiographer. He was willing to censor himself out of concern for others: to JBY, he wrote, “You need not fear that I am not amiable” (CL *InteLex* 2571). He also shared some of the less exalted motives of other autobiographers, as in the case of George Moore, where he simply wanted revenge, getting his own back on a former collaborator. And Charles Armstrong points out that Yeats’s ventures into autobiographical writing were “never his main interest” and “very much a money-making enterprise” (39-40). Still, the diversity of form in his autobiographical writings is evidence of the careful attention he paid to these works, and a comparison of *Memoirs* (a draft from 1915-1916 transcribed by Denis Donoghue) with *The Trembling of the Veil* brings out the high finish and careful design of the latter. As Armstrong says:

The patterning of Yeats’s autobiographical writings thus implies something more than a mere copying of facts. It implies an internal structuring that shapes the events of the story into the organicism of a well-crafted plot. Paul Ricoeur’s translation of the Ancient Greek *muthos* as ‘emplotment’ alerts us to how Yeats’s desire for a ‘mythological coherence’ in the structures of self and nation communicates with his

insistence upon how all art transcends mere mimeticism²¹. At heart, individuals, nations and plots should all be structured around one central fulcrum in order to have true coherence. (43)

I will pay close attention to the “plot” of *The Trembling of the Veil*, but I will also situate this work in the context of a specific group of Yeats’s poems, particularly in its use of ekphrastic or quasi-ekphrastic techniques to explore the intersection of time and personality. Together, these texts illuminate the description of reality in the “Seven Propositions”, showing how Yeats adopted the portrait gallery as a model (or metaphor) for his vision of reality, as the collective and provisional reflection of spirits in time and space.

Autobiography and Portraiture

In *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* in 1916, Yeats refused to put his earliest memories into chronological sequence:

My first memories are fragmentary and isolated and contemporaneous, as though one remembered some first moments of the Seven Days. It seems as if time had not

²¹ In this context, “mimeticism” seems to connote something akin to artless copying rather than Ricoeur’s model of mimesis, in which “emplotment” is an indispensable part of the mimetic process.

yet been created, for all thoughts are connected with emotion and place without sequence. (CW3 41)

The allusion to the early chapters of Genesis is apposite: the book begins and ends with William Pollexfen, portrayed with the severity and indomitability of an Old Testament patriarch. His death terminates the series of reminiscences, and the work ends on a note of disappointment:

It is not that I have accomplished too few of my plans, for I am not ambitious; but when I think of all the books I have read, and of the wise words that I have heard spoken, and of the anxiety I have given to parents and grandparents, and of the hopes that I have had, all life weighed in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens. (CW3 108)

Not for the last time, Yeats's practice is to situate the autobiographical text as a curtain-raiser. And, in a book that was originally to have been named after a painting, his brother's *Memory Harbour* (1900) (CW3 16), Yeats is already thinking in terms of portraiture:

I did not care for mere reality and believed that creation should be deliberate, and yet I could only imitate my father. I could not compose anything but a portrait and even to-day I constantly see people as a portrait-painter, posing them in the mind's eye before such-and-such a background. (CW3 92)

This last statement should be read in the context of correspondence between Yeats and his father in the years preceding the completion and publication of Yeats's first volume of autobiography.

Yeats had waged a long campaign to have his father write his memoirs, anxious that a record of JBY's time should survive, and probably equally anxious to lift some of the financial pressure that his father's thriftless life was imposing on the poet. In a letter of 21 November 1912, Yeats had proposed to JBY that his memoir should contain a series of potted biographies of characters of his acquaintance but also that the book should contain reproductions of his father's portraits of some of the same characters, and reproductions of some of their paintings (*CL IntelLex* 2018). His earliest creative thoughts about life-writing generated a model that would mix text and image.

Yeats's enthusiasm for the project is clear from the outset, but JBY never really took the bait. He was living in New York, well out of reach, and absorbed in both the practice and theory of portrait-painting. On 2 July 1913, JBY described an encounter on the streets of New York with a poor Irish woman and her sick child, trying to explain to himself the apparent indecency of his desire to paint her:

Poetry is the reaction from the imperfect to the perfect – to a perfect grief as in Synge's *Riders to the Sea* or to a perfect joy as in your earlier poetry – the accompanying melody whether of prose or verse the effort to keep the heart soft and wakeful, portraiture in art or poetry the effort to keep the pain alive and intensify it, since out of the heart of the pain comes the solace, as a monk scourges

himself to bring an ecstasy. Some time ago I saw a young mother with a sick infant in her arms. . . . why did I try constantly to recall and keep alive the incident? I regretted that I could not take my canvas and paint a portrait of her and her child. . . . She was *ashamed* of her sick child and *tried to hide it from me*. . . . I would fain scourge myself spiritually, and it pained me that the image should fade. (*Letters* 114)

Yeats replied on 5 August:

I thought your letter about 'portraiture' being 'pain' most beautiful & profound. All our art is but the putting our faith & the evidence of our faith into words or forms & our faith is in ecstasy. Of recent years instead of 'vision' meaning by vision the intense realization of a state of ecstatic emotion symbolized in a definite imagined region I have tried for more self portraiture. I have tried to make my work convincing with a speech so natural & dramatic that the hearer would feel the presence of a man thinking & feeling. There are always the two types of poetry — Keats the type of vision, Burns a very obvious type of the other, too obvious indeed. It is in dramatic lyric expression that English poetry is most lacking as compared with French poetry. Villon always & Ronsard at times create a marvellous drama out of their own lives. (*CL InteLex* 2232)

Over a year later, on 7 September 1914, JBY was still brooding on his encounter with the young Irishwoman:

Why did I look at her so constantly, not being able to take away my eyes, and why did I ask so many questions, such as perhaps would have been resented by a woman less gentle and good? . . . and why did I, after I left her hoping in a cowardly way never to see her again, make every effort of memory to recall every detail of what I said and of what she told me? The answer is that every feeling and especially it might seem the painful feeling, tries to keep itself alive, and not only that but to *increase in strength*. This is the law of human nature and is what I have called the spirit of growth – in other words, I would have given worlds to have painted a careful study of her and her sick infant and carried it away with me to keep my sorrow alive. . . . At any rate have I not made it obvious that all art begins in portraiture? (*Letters* 135-136, emphasis in the original)

In this correspondence, JBY says portraiture is motivated the need to keep feeling alive, especially, “the painful feeling”, which not only tries to keep itself alive, but to “*increase in strength*”. For JBY, then, portraiture is associated with life. But not with the life, lived in time, of its subject. He uses the portrait to keep a past feeling from vanishing, to preserve a living moment. And he became almost as famous for his failure to complete his portraits as for his skills as a painter. But it might be that one source of that failure was inherent in his chosen practice. Unlike a poem, a painting is a physical artefact, capable of being separated from its originator, who is prevented from making any further changes. One way of keeping both feeling and painting alive was to avoid completion, to keep adding brush-stroke to brush-stroke, year after year, as he did with his own self-portrait. He seems

to have seen the final brush-stroke as a form of death. As John McGahern wrote of the relationship between man and portrait:

When he died . . . the self-portrait that had been commissioned eleven years ago to the very day stared down from the wall at the lifeless body. In the light of his belief that nothing is ever finished since everything is continually changing, it could not be said to be finished or unfinished. On 3 February 1922, the artist and his portrait had both just 'stopped'. (21)

The correspondence on portraiture impressed itself deeply upon Yeats. Three years later, in 1917, in the first part of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, he wrote:

An old artist wrote to me of his wanderings by the quays of New York, and how he found there a woman nursing a sick child, and drew her story from her. She spoke, too, of other children who had died: a long tragic story. 'I wanted to paint her,' he wrote; 'if I denied myself any of the pain I could not believe in my own ecstasy'.
(CW5 8-9)

In the same passage, "ecstasy" is the name given "for the awakening, for the vision, for the revelation of reality" (CW5 8). In this work, Yeats hints at the direction he will take in *The Trembling of the Veil*. It will be a group portrait of the revelation-hungry, tragic generation, and he will use exact portraiture as a necessary preliminary to that ecstasy, awakening, revelation. In other words, *The Trembling of the Veil* will prepare the way for *A Vision*.

As a genre, the group portrait or collective biography of a group of artists goes back at least as far as Giorgio Vasari's sixteenth-century *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. John Ruskin produced something similar for the nineteenth century with *Modern Painters* (1843-1860), and Walter Pater provided another model for Renaissance artists in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Yeats departs from tradition by writing of failed or fallen artists, his tragic generation. The reader can make out the figure of Yeats gliding past the wreckage of their lives to find glory in the decades most of them never lived to see. At the same time, the pattern that shimmers under the surface of the narrative reveals another preoccupation: personal identity as an ongoing negotiation between past and present. As a curator of his own memories, as narrator of the story in which he is the hero, he doesn't simply accept his memories: he steps back to choose, judge, and reconfigure. As he puts it in *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* in a passage where he describes a series of different poses he had adopted as a child:

I had as many ideas as I have now, only I did not know how to choose from among them those that belonged to my life. (CW3 92)

And in *The Trembling of the Veil* he writes:

. . . I am persuaded that our intellects at twenty contain all the truths we shall ever find, but as yet we do not know truths that belong to us from opinions caught up in casual irritation or momentary fantasy. (CW3 163).

Similarly, in the autobiographies, he chooses the memories that "belong" to him. It is the later self that discriminates and selects but the earlier self had everything from which the

choice is made. Narrator and hero are equally configured by the act of selection, the elimination of all that does not belong to the self. In “the common practice of ‘autobiographical’ narrating”, Gérard Genette says, the reader expects “to see the narrative bring its hero to the point where the narrator awaits him, in order that these two hypostases might meet and finally merge” (*Narrative Discourse* 226). Yeats’s curatorship of his own past brings about this fusion of the two hypostases. However, what will emerge from a close reading of *The Trembling of the Veil* is that Yeats also uses the form of his text to maintain a distance, a tension, between the two hypostases.

The Trembling of the Veil

If there is a single quality shared by the formal experiments which Yeats conducts in the texts collected posthumously in the Macmillan “Autobiographies”, it is that Yeats frequently sidesteps the construction of a temporal point-of-view that would impose, retrospectively, a linear temporal continuity on his own life. He uses a deliberately impressionistic technique in *Reveries*, and the explicit manifesto of the opening paragraph is an accurate description of what follows: sections are self-contained, and the scene shifts, without warning, from Dublin to London to Sligo; the lines are carefully blurred; proper names are withheld, even when known, and ages are usually approximate, “eight or nine”, “ten or twelve”, “twenty-two or three” (*CW3* 68, 69, 85). And there are periodic reminders that these are just pictures in the mind of the writer, rather than events strung along linear

time: “I do not know how old I was (for all these events seem at the same distance) when I was made drunk” (CW3 49). Yeats achieves the same effect through the diary form of *Estrangement* (1926), and the dream-like present tense in *The Bounty of Sweden* (1924), described by Yeats himself as a “kind of diary . . . strange, mobile and disconnected” (CW3 391).

Compared with those texts, *The Trembling of the Veil* is unusual in being carefully and elaborately plotted. In this work, Yeats displaces himself from the centre of the narrative to its periphery, blending autobiography with the kind of collective biography described above. He adopts the portrait as a concrete form with which to establish a “simplifying image” (CW3 143) for the lives at the centre of the narrative, and a carefully-constructed “plot” gives the work the sense of an ending. However, this negotiation of the difficulties inherent in autobiography is complemented by the construction of complex internal temporalities, more personal and idiosyncratic. I will argue that Yeats resists the linear temporality of biographical and autobiographical form in three important ways: first, the concept of the “generation” shifts the temporal axis of the work from the diachronic to the synchronic; next, a continual oscillation between vantage-points of past and present splits the narrative voice in two, undermining the sense of authority normally conveyed through the past tense of narration; finally, just as the narrative approaches its end, it shifts into reverse gear and a series of events is narrated in reverse, switching the direction of the arrow of time.

Portraits of All My Friends

We left Yeats above after his return to Oxford from Dublin on 20 October 1920.

Recovering from the operation, he potted in his study on Broad Street, with friends and portraits on his mind. In a letter of 30 October 1920 to John Quinn, he writes:

I have been arranging the portraits in my study. Swift wrote to Stella once "I am bringing back with me portraits of all my friends". Meaning by that, doubtless, mezzotints. I have lithographs, photogravures, pencil drawings & photographs from pictures & pencil drawings. There is only one absent — John Quinn — will you send me a photograph of Augustus John's drawing of you. My sister has one, but I don't like to beg it of her. (*CL IntelLex* 3800)

A few weeks later, he wrote to Lady Gregory to say that he had again taken up work on his memoirs. A year later, on 22 December 1921, when "Four Years: 1887-1891" had already received serial publication, and he had a contract with T. Werner Laurie to publish the whole work, he wrote to Olivia Shakespear:

I send you "Four Years", which is the first third of the complete memoirs. As they go on they will grow less personal, or at least less adequate as personal representation for the most vehement part of youth must be left out, the only part that one will

remember & live over again in memory when one is old age²², the passionate part. I think they will give all the more sense of inadequateness from the fact that I study every man I meet at some moment of crisis – I alone have no crises. (*CL IntelLex* 4039)

For Yeats, “crisis” means more than hard times. In *The Trembling of the Veil*, “crisis” is the point where the momentary is joined to the continuous, where permanent and impermanent selves meet, when the “bundle of accident and incoherence” at the breakfast table encounters something “intended, complete” (*CW5* 204):

I know now that revelation is from the self, but from that age-long memoried self, that shapes the elaborate shell of the mollusc and the child in the womb, that teaches the birds to make their nest; and that genius is a crisis that joins that buried self for certain moments to our trivial daily mind. (*CW3* 216-217)

This is the kind of formulation that has James Olney reaching for Plato:

Yeats’s autobiography is more anecdotal than almost any other that comes to mind. . . . It is composed of a string of more or less factual stories about people, both the famous and the not-so-famous, whom Yeats had known either slightly or well. . . . these anecdotes are something other and more than simply historical or factual: in

²² There are so many errors of spelling and grammar in Yeats’s letters that I have not inserted “(sic)” every time; it should be taken as present whenever a quotation from the letters is used.

them Yeats seeks to capture character at its most typical, thus catching a glimpse of the essence that lies behind . . . the accident. . . . The ontology of Yeats's autobiography is a thoroughly platonic one. (*Ontology* 261)

Distracted by these entertaining anecdotes, and keen to place Yeats in his typology of autobiographers, Olney pays less attention to the narrative currents beneath the surface. I want to look, firstly, at the supposed Platonism of Yeats's approach to character in the context of the ekphrastic texture of the text, before considering its narrative structure and direction.

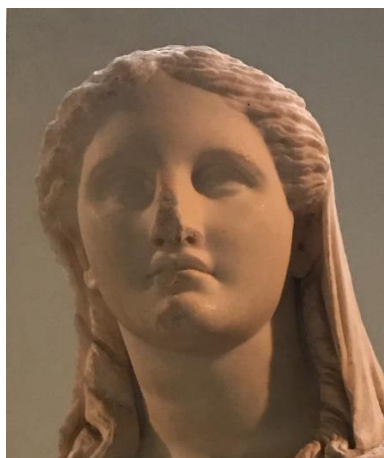
Ekphrastic Techniques

The art of portraiture is deeply embedded in *The Trembling of the Veil*. At its faintest, it is simply implied in the description of the physical appearance of the subject. In a painting, the subject can wear only one costume. One would expect that, in a narrative work, although it might rarely be mentioned, the characters will change their clothes from time to time. Here, however, is the reader's introduction to York Powell:

But my father's chief friend was York Powell, a famous Oxford Professor of History, a broad-built, broad-headed, brown-bearded man clothed in heavy blue cloth and looking, but for his glasses and the dim sight of a student, like some captain in the Merchant Service. (*CW3* 116)

When this passage describes York Powell as “clothed in heavy blue cloth and looking . . . like some captain in the Merchant Service”, it suggests that York Powell always wore the same clothes. Yeats combines a past continuous tense, “my father’s chief friend was York Powell”, with a tense-less visual image divorced from any specific encounter with York Powell and seeming, therefore, to stretch back over the entire duration of his friendship with JBY. Without spelling it out, Yeats gives the impression that he is describing the image of York Powell that comes into his own mind whenever York Powell’s name is mentioned.

When Yeats is being more explicit, a person’s physical appearance is referred to a specific artwork. When he writes that Florence Farr has “a tranquil beauty like that of Demeter’s image near the British Museum Reading-Room door” (*CW3* 118), the reader is directed not just to the Greek goddess, but to one specific image of her:



Demeter, British Museum

When he describes the young men who flock around Charles Gavan Duffy, Yeats thinks of a change in Spanish painting:

. . . here and there I noticed that smooth, smiling face that we discover for the first time in certain pictures by Velasquez; the hungry, mediaeval speculation vanished that had worn the faces of El Greco . . . (CW3 172).

In these instances, whether specific and individualised, as in the case of Farr and Demeter, or general and collective, the young nationalists and the faces painted by Velasquez, what emerges is a texture in which images of people known or unknown are held and fixed by reference to visual artworks.

However, Yeats also reverses this angle and moves from a specific portrait to compose a mental image of the living person, in some cases making explicit reference to the lithographs and portraits carefully assembled in his study on Broad Street. On William Henley, for example:

His portrait, a lithograph by Rothenstein, hangs over my mantelpiece among portraits of other friends. He is drawn standing, but because doubtless of his crippled legs he leans forward, resting his elbows upon some slightly suggested object – a table or a window-sill. His heavy figure and powerful head, the disordered hair standing upright, his short irregular beard and moustache, his lined and wrinkled face, his eyes steadily fixed upon some object in complete confidence and self-possession, and yet as in half-broken reverie, all are there exactly as I remember him. I have seen other portraits and they too show him exactly as I remember him,

as though he had but one appearance and that seen fully at the first glance and by all alike. (CW3 120)

The significant phrase in this passage is the repeated “exactly as I remember him”. Yeats even goes so far as to suggest that the existence of diverse portraits cannot increase the number of possible representations of Henley, asserting instead that Henley has been trapped, once and for all time, by a single image, and not just for Yeats, but for “all alike”. Henley is denied the possibility of development or change in time, whether as a man or as a portrait: “seen *fully* at the first glance” (my emphasis). In this passage, the technique reveals a tendency to move from conventional ekphrasis into the magical territory of iconography. Yeats erases the distance between the representation and the man – “exactly as I remember him” – and erases the differences between all other representations of Henley – “they too show him exactly as I remember him” – and insists that this is not a personal revelation but that all must see these images in the same way, “seen fully at the first glance and by all alike”. The vehemence of the language suggests a compulsion to “trap” Henley, to deny him access to a temporal world in which he might change his appearance or his posture. He has been completely subordinated to the text. This kind of icon returns in even stronger and stranger form in “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited”, considered below.

These examples show how Yeats writes about the primary subject of the portrait, the sitter. However, in *Reveries*, as we have seen, Yeats says that he tends to see individuals standing out against a background. In *Trembling*, for the more significant characters, he

describes that background with delicate precision, despite his hatred of realism. The best examples are from his descriptions of William Morris and Oscar Wilde.

Of Oscar Wilde, he writes:

He lived in a little house at Chelsea that the architect Godwin had decorated with an elegance that owed something to Whistler. There was nothing mediaeval nor Pre-Raphaelite. . . . I remember vaguely a white drawing-room with Whistler etchings, 'let into' white panels, and a dining-room all white, chairs, walls, mantelpiece, carpet, except for a diamond-shaped piece of red cloth in the middle of the table under a terracotta statuette, and, I think, a red-shaded lamp hanging from the ceiling to a little above the statuette. It was perhaps too perfect in its unity, his past of a few years before had gone too completely, and I remember thinking that the perfect harmony of his life there, with his beautiful wife and his two young children, suggested some deliberate artistic composition. (CW3 127)

Yeats is beginning to see how his technique of portraiture, brought to a high degree of completion with his miniature of Henley, could be applied to a group context, moving from the individual to the family. And he perceives temporal relations in the family portraits that he composes. He sees that Wilde's curation of his living space displaces part of his own earlier life, and he has misgivings about Wilde's total annihilation of the past: "It was perhaps too perfect in its unity, his past of a few years before had gone too completely". Wilde's house is contrasted with that of William Morris, too imperfect, his beautiful things rubbing up against a life-time's *bric-à-brac*:

I was a little disappointed in the house, for Morris was an ageing man content at last to gather beautiful things rather than to arrange a beautiful house. I saw the drawing-room once or twice, and there alone all my sense of decoration, founded upon the background of Rossetti's pictures, was satisfied by a big cupboard painted with a scene from Chaucer by Burne-Jones; but even there were objects, perhaps a chair or a little table, that seemed accidental, bought hurriedly perhaps and with little thought, to make wife or daughter comfortable. (CW3 131)

These descriptions make person and place, text and image, almost indistinguishable. In both, allusions to specific artists are combined with vivid descriptions of specific interiors. In the second description, the reflection between the work of writer and painter is repeatedly mirrored, as Yeats describes a cupboard decorated by a painter, Burne-Jones, under the influence of another painter-writer Rossetti, with a theme drawn from the works of Chaucer. But there is also a structural and thematic point to the elaborate descriptions, as the jumble and warmth of the Morris household, where odd pieces of furniture are bought to supply comfort to wife and child, contrasts sharply with Wilde's too-perfect minimalism, in which wife and children are more lifeless background than living family, as though the happy life of Morris and the tragic life of Wilde are convex and concave reflections of a single reality. Even so, neither ultimately satisfies Yeats, the proportions are wrong, as if each is missing something that it could find in the other.

All of this demonstrates how Yeats was writing *The Trembling of the Veil*, certainly its opening part, as a type of portrait gallery to stand as textual counterpart to his domestic

portrait gallery on Broad Street. The dominant mode of description is either conventionally ekphrastic, the textual representation of a visual work of art, or quasi-ekphrastic, where the relation is reversed and the work of art becomes a way of describing a living person, or where the description suggests the presence before the author of a visual representation that does not in fact exist. The difference between an actual portrait and an imaginary portrait in the mind's eye grows tenuous. At its most extreme, as in the case of Henley, the extravagance of language seems to will the portrait into an icon. However, *The Trembling of the Veil* is more than an accumulation of discrete portraits. To appreciate fully the point of Yeats's technique, it is necessary to move beyond Olney's assertion of an underlying Platonic ontology, to consider Armstrong's emphasis on emplotment. This will reveal the complex currents and counter-currents of temporality that run through the text. And this analysis of structure will help to outline the (buried) form that Yeats himself assumes in a text from the surface of which he seems strangely absent.

Narrative Structures (I): Individual Time and Generational Time

In "Four Years: 1887-1891", individuals are assigned a "simplifying image" (CW3 118). In "Ireland after Parnell", Yeats starts to group individuals into collective entities, and each such collective entity has, in turn, its own simplifying image or motive to guide it, literary and nationalist in the case of the Irish Literary Society, political and nationalist in the attempted rejuvenation of the Young Ireland movement under Charles Gavan Duffy,

philosophical and ethical for the occupants of the questing community that surround Æ in the house on Ely Place.

These two books are followed by “Hodos Chameliontos”, in which there is an interruption of the group scenes that allows Yeats to describe the occult speculation that he pursued with George Pollexfen. This allows him to propose, in response to the collectives he describes in “Ireland after Parnell”, his own counter-movement, “a mystical Order . . . for contemplation, and where we might establish mysteries like those of Eleusis and Samothrace” (CW3 204). As in the final form of *A Vision*, AVB, occult speculation is deepest at the centre, but “The Soul in Judgment” is the achievement of revelation, whereas “Hodos Chameliontos” describes another instance of the failure of ambition that permeates *The Trembling of the Veil*. The mystical academy never got off the drawing-board, Castle Island to this day is much as it was when Yeats and his uncle enjoyed their sandwiches there. From this first approach to revelation, a false start, the narrative turns back to the characters who had populated the first two books. Having painted his portraits, Yeats can now hang his gallery.

In Book IV of *The Trembling of the Veil*, Yeats turns to the concept that re-directs the organization of time, giving the book its title, “The Tragic Generation”. When compared with the title of the first book, where the reader first met most of these people, the change in direction is clear. The title of the first book insists on its direction along a linear chronological axis, a progression now, in “The Tragic Generation”, arrested in a synchronic arrangement, a new axis that cuts through the chronological axis at right angles. In both

AVA and AVB, Yeats thinks of these intersections, whether of dimensions or gyres, in the same way:

Every dimension is at *right angles* to all dimensions below it in the scale. (CW13 142, my emphasis).

If, however, we were to consider both wheels or cones moving at the same speed and to place, for purposes of comparison, the *Principles* in a double cone, drawn and numbered like that of the *Faculties*, and superimpose it upon that of the *Faculties*, a line drawn between Phase 1 and Phase 15 on the first would be at *right angles* to a line drawn between the same phases upon the other. (CW14 138, my emphasis)

In the last chapter, I showed how Yeats's use of the calendar in *AVB* was illuminated by Paul Ricoeur's work in *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur sees the calendar as one of the ways in which humans attempt to inscribe human or phenomenological time in cosmological time. Ricoeur sees the concept of the generation in the same terms, which makes its significance in the fourth book of *The Trembling of the Veil* analogous to the equivalent significance of the calendar in the fourth book of *AVB*, with the difference that, in *The Trembling of the Veil*, Yeats is trying to establish relations between individual time and generational time, rather than historical time and cosmological time.

Ricoeur says that recourse "to the idea of a generation in the philosophy of history is not new" (T&N3 109), and bases his analysis on the work of sociologists Karl Mannheim and Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey's contribution is to propose a discrimination between two different uses of the term. Firstly, it allows one to conceptualize a different relation to one's

contemporaries, extending a relationship beyond the immediately known to those unnamed contemporaries “who have been exposed to the same influences and marked by the same events and changes”. This is a relationship “wider than that of the we-relation but narrower than that of anonymous contemporaneity” (*T&N3* 111). Yeats names members of the “tragic” generation: Johnson, Dowson, Wilde, Davidson and so on. By naming them, and explaining the basis for their belonging to a group exposed to the “same influences and marked by the same events and changes”, he ascribes to them a significance beyond the shared experiences of “at homes” in Chiswick and Hammersmith and poetry readings in The Cheshire Cheese on Fleet Street. He drops a stone into the lake of history and, at first, the ripples reach individuals known to him, establishing the “we-relation”, but the same ripples spread outwards, reaching unnamed contemporaries, transforming known and unknown into a distinct “generation”:

Why are these strange souls born everywhere today, with hearts that Christianity, as shaped by history, cannot satisfy? (*CW3* 243, my emphasis)

Yeats is reprising the kind of conquest-by-stealth that he used for Henley. Starting from personal experience, he works his way into a position where he assumes the right to speak in universal terms. No portrait of Henley can add anything to *his* portrait of Henley or *his* mental image of Henley. Here, he does the same. In constructing this voice of authority, Yeats deliberately ignores competing claims on the same lives and images. In the strategic interest of his narrative, he is ignoring a difficulty that he will finally face up to in “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited”.

For Ricoeur, this classification of a generation is a preliminary step. Once you have grasped the idea of a generation, you soon realize that there must be more than just one, and arrive at the idea of a “succession of generations”. Without the idea of the succession of generations, we would see, in the process of time, simply “the brute facts about human biology: birth, aging, death” (*T&N3* 110), a replenishment of the stock of humanity.

Mannheim explains how far we are indebted to the idea of the generation. A single word gives us “the combination of replacement (which is successive) and stratification (which is simultaneous)” and a dialectical process that binds generation to generation: “. . . not just the confrontation between heritage and innovation in the transmitting of the acquired culture but also the impact of the questions of youth on older people’s certainties, acquired during their own youths” (*T&N3* 112).

Where the calendar uses numbers to move backwards and forwards along the diachronic axis of time, the “succession of generations” covers the same ground with human lives. Ricoeur portrays the process as a collective undertaking. In *The Trembling of the Veil*, however, Yeats signifies his intention to establish, by himself, an entire network of symbolic relations to the same end, partly by placing some distance between himself and the very generation that he is in the process of constructing:

I was unlike others of my generation in one thing only. I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable

from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. I wished for a world where I could discover this tradition perpetually, and not in pictures and poems only, but in tiles round the chimney-piece and in the hangings that kept out the draught. (CW3 115)

Yeats goes further than Ricoeur. Instead of using only actual ancestors and their memories and stories to bridge generational gap after generational gap, Yeats claims the right to define a generation by admitting select voices of artistic creation:

I had even created a dogma: 'Because those imaginary people are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm, whatever I can imagine those mouths speaking may be the nearest I can go to truth.' (CW3 115)

In its extreme formulation, imaginary people have transmissible memory. When he wrote "The Tower" in 1925, three years after the publication of *The Trembling of the Veil* in 1922, Yeats's own Hanrahan is gifted with such memory, and preferred over those with supposedly real memories:

Go therefore; but leave Hanrahan,
For I need all his mighty memories.
(103-104)

By moving from the diachronic axis of time to this type of synchronic stratification, Yeats arrests the normal time of autobiographical narrative. This sense of arrest is given

deeper thematic resonance in selecting and imagining as a “generation” individuals joined by their failure to generate, not only mortal successors in many cases, but sustained artistic accomplishment. By writing these individuals out of the succession of generations, Yeats succeeds in rendering them, in Ricoeur’s terms, as “shadows haunting the historical present” (*T&N3* 115). Yeats’s depiction of the tragic generation seems to anticipate some of the difficulties he will confront in later texts. Importantly, there is his own separation from the tragic generation. But the price of this separation is solitude and the poems of *The Tower* give deeper expression to this growing solitude. Furthermore, the implicit antagonism towards a time of succession and generation, here reflected in his fixation on biological and artistic sterility, will assume more explicitly violent proportions in later works such as *Purgatory*, the subject of Chapter 4.

Close to the end of the “The Tragic Generation”, Yeats warns himself against making too much of Synge’s role in his life in the period he is writing about:

But in writing of Synge I have run far ahead, for in 1896 he was but one picture among many²³.

And yet, at the same time, not being a realist, he doesn’t quite concede his ground and admit that events must follow a linear chronology:

I am often astonished when I think that we can meet unmoved some person, or pass some house, that in later years is to bear a chief part in our life. Should there not be

²³ Incidentally, another example of the habitual equation of man and “picture”.

some flutter of the nerve or stopping of the heart like that MacGregor Mathers experienced at the first meeting with a phantom? (CW3 264)

After his meditation on Synge and his astonishment that he should not have somehow experienced the *frisson* of precognition at their first meeting, “The Tragic Generation” abandons retrospective narrative completely; it ends with seven paragraphs written in a present tense. This brings us to the second of the three ways in which Yeats disrupts linear chronology in *The Trembling of the Veil*.

Narrative Structures (II): Past and Present Voices

The appearance of the present tense in an autobiography should signify the moment when the hero meets and merges with the narrator, when the past tense narrative catches up with the time of writing, the present of enunciation. In *The Trembling of the Veil*, its use is more complicated. Each of the five books ends in the present tense. In the first, third and final book, the present is clearly the time of writing, Yeats in his study on Broad Street, looking back but thinking of where he is “now”. However, in each of the intervening books, the present is a “real-time” narration of events that took place in the earlier period of his life. In “Ireland after Parnell”, the shift back in time is prompted by words that describe a drift into a passive condition in which he is at the mercy of his memories – “certain vivid moments come back to me as I write. . . .” – and the ellipsis is followed by four such moments, each narrated in the present tense:

Russell has just come in

I get in talk with a young man who has taken the orthodox side in some debate.

We are sitting round the fire one night, and a member, a woman, tells a dream that she has just had.

I have a young man with me

(*CW3* 202-203)

In the final section of “The Tragic Generation”, Yeats uses the same device. First, there is the condition of passivity:

Many pictures come before me without date or order. (*CW3* 264)

This is followed again by present tense narration. This time, there are seven “vivid moments” or “pictures”. In the final book, the same thing happens (*CW3* 275). But this time, the narrator is caught unawares. In the fifth section, without warning, the shift to the present tense simply happens, in the middle of the book, rather than at the end, when he might by now have been prepared for it. The section is comprised of twelve of these “pictures” or “vivid moments”.

The reader follows a single direction, but the narrative is moving in two directions, the direction along the diachronic axis being repeatedly interrupted by a voice speaking directly, and with increasing strength, if the number of “pictures” or “vivid moments” is taken as an index of strength, out of a past that the narrator’s voice is trying to separate

itself from. Why is this happening? On one level, it is likely that Yeats is unknowingly adapting one of the principal aspects of lyric poetry in this constant return to the present. Jonathan Culler says that “the present tense is the dominant tense of lyric” (*Lyric* 283), that “lyrics that remain in the past tense, recounting incidents, are not so common” (*Lyric* 277), and he adds:

A very common structure is the move from past to present: the past anecdote explicitly pulled into the lyric present at the end, with a present-tense reflection on the significance of the incident recounted or other references to a present of enunciation. (*Lyric* 285)

As I have said, this is what Yeats does at the end of the each of first, third, and fifth books. In fact, the narrative voice is often drawn back to the present of enunciation, as if Yeats is so conditioned to thinking in lyric structures that he is unable to shake off the habit so that the text is saturated with reminders of this “present of enunciation”. What makes Yeats’s return to the present more unusual is the return to the present tense “real-time” narration, rather than the present of enunciation. On one level, this signifies an antagonism to the linearity of chronological time because it gives a living voice to the earlier self, but it also suggests how, for Yeats, lyric structure dominates the prosaic form of the autobiographical text.

These lyric incursions can create real difficulties of interpretation, as for example with the opening words of the ninth section of “The Tragic Generation”:

Two men are always at my side, Lionel Johnson and John Synge whom I was to meet a little later . . . (*CW3* 241).

Here, the present tense blurs the chronology. Is this another unannounced return to the past, one from which Yeats recovers before it becomes a full-blown moment of entranced re-enactment, or is it a statement of his condition in 1920, brooding continually on the spectral forms of his dead friends, both of whom are present in a similar way in the elegy for Robert Gregory? It is difficult to opt for one interpretation over the other, because the voice seems to hover between two times without being firmly anchored in either.

This lyric present is one of the features that I would claim as a family resemblance between *The Trembling of the Veil* and a specific group of Yeats's poems that I will take up later. And the ending of *The Trembling of the Veil* is an example of another resemblance with a different group of poems, discussed in more detail in the next chapter, the counter-temporal movement, where the narrative moves backwards, rather than forwards, in time (or rather, in both directions at once).

Narrative Structures (III): Narrating in Reverse

After its long section of "vivid moments", the final book, "The Stirring of the Bones", has only one remaining section. And this is where the eye of the historian is very helpful because Roy Foster has noticed something strange going on in the text:

In his most blatant chronological reversal, he begins with the '98 centennial activities: presented as his last, misguided attempt to create a unity of culture where

none could exist, when he suffered ‘the worst months of my life’. The Jubilee riot of 1897 is then introduced, and the passions which thus found temporary release are connected directly to the 1916 Rising nearly twenty years in the future. And then the searchlight is thrown further back, without mentioning the year, to WBY’s pivotal journey west in 1896: the visit to Tillyra[,]the lunar invocations which preceded his ‘Archer’ vision, and finally the summons to Coole, with its woods by water. The final refuge appears as the fulfilment of his invocation, the end of his experimental wanderings on the chameleon’s way. At Coole he could find his revelation, through withdrawal, concentration, and – in time – the development of his own philosophy. ‘It was at Coole that the first few simple thoughts that now, grown complex through their contact with other thoughts, explain the world, came to me from beyond my own mind.’ (*Life II* 202)

We can trace in the narrative form of *The Trembling of the Veil* what Yeats will shortly explain at length in *AVA*, that for every step you take in one direction, you will retrace that step going in the opposite direction. Here, at the end of *The Trembling of the Veil*, he seems to take up the challenge that he had formulated earlier in the text, in another reference to the visual arts: “must I reverse the cinematograph?” (*CW3* 166). It is an arresting image, suggesting at least some familiarity with the impact that cinematic technology was having on the perception of time. Writing of experiments with freeze-frames and parallel editing, Stephen Kern observes:

An even more striking representation of time reversal was produced by running film backwards through the projector, first tried by Louis Lumière in *Charcuterie mécanique* (1895). One cinema critic described these amazing effects: boys fly out of the water feet first and land on the diving board, firemen carry their victims back into a burning building, and eggs unscramble themselves. (30)

Even at the time, moreover, it was recognized that cinematic techniques were being adapted in other arts, Hugo Münsterberg, writing in 1916, having noted that “several contemporary playwrights attempted to imitate the cinema and use time reversals on stage” (Kern 30). Yeats’s own statement about reversing the cinematograph refers to a “reversal” of “the general movement of literature”, but Yeats, with the instincts of an alchemist and Cabbalist, follows the rule of macrocosm and microcosm, adopting for his own text a form which attempts, within its own limits, a similar reversal. And if, as he says in *The Trembling of the Veil*, revelation is from the self, the revelation that follows his own self-interrogation will find its form when the veil of the temple drops to reveal *A Vision*.

In thinking of *The Trembling of the Veil* and *AVA* as paired volumes, in the set that T. Werner Laurie was to have produced, the form that Yeats adopted for the autobiographical text stands out in a new light. The later book took three more years to complete, and few critics, apart from Margaret Mills Harper, have paid much attention to their correspondences, except to the extent that the autobiographical work relies on the phasal system of personality, and alludes to, even if it never fully explicates, the historical system. As Harper says:

Werner Laurie had published *The Trembling of the Veil* in a volume with matching design in 1922, so that a discerning collector might acquire it and *AVA* as a set. That imagined collector might well find these two books matching in other ways besides their physical similarities: at several points, *The Trembling of the Veil* suggests that Yeats's life and times are a case study for ideas that receive theoretical treatment in *AVA*. (*A Vision in Time* 197)

Because *AVA* went through the press a second time, some fifteen years after the initial publication of *The Trembling of the Veil*, and because *The Trembling of the Veil* was later given a different context as part of *Autobiographies*, initially with just *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* but subsequently with *Dramatis Personae* (1935), *Estrangement*, *The Death of Synge* (1928) and *The Bounty of Sweden*, the intended correspondence between the texts produced in the 1920s was obscured. After its initial publication, Yeats never made any substantial changes to the text of *The Trembling of the Veil*. However, Yeats's decision to structure the revised version of *A Vision*, *AVB*, into five parts or "books", moving from the personal to the historical, and placing the most obscure part at its centre, generates formal and thematic links between the *The Trembling of the Veil* and *AVB* that take the place of the links that he had intended, in the 1920s, to generate by means of publishing format and presentation.

The structural re-organization of *A Vision* as *AVB* brings out the latent affinities between the two texts. Without suggesting that Yeats aimed at a point-by-point mapping of *AVB* onto the structure of *The Trembling of the Veil*, his recourse to the five-part structure

of the earlier book does help to give greater coherence to *AVB*. And if the texts have drifted apart for most purposes, including criticism, there is a satisfying symmetry in imagining *The Trembling of the Veil* as the primary (solar, objective) version of the system, and *AVB* as the antithetical (lunar, subjective) version. When the two structures are imposed on one another, at right angles to observe the normal geometric practice of *AVB*, they form the shape of a Greek Cross, bringing “The Soul in Judgment” and “Hodos Chameliontos” into alignment. That Yeats had made a specific structure of thought, the interlocking cones or gyres of *A Vision*, so much a part of his personal mythology that it informed his approach to temporality of poetic sequences and to the relations between different volumes of poetry, is something I take up in the next chapter, in the context of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*. However, Yeats’s treatment of personality and the idea of a life-time as the intersection and conflict between the momentary and the continuous relates the techniques of *The Trembling of the Veil* to a specific group of his later poems.

Family Resemblance: Autobiography and Poetry

Charles Armstrong sees poems such as “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”, “All Souls’ Night” and “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited” as a specific group in Yeats’s work. Along with “Among School Children” and, at Helen Vendler’s suggestion, the second poem of “The Tower”, Armstrong sees in these poems “the kind of family resemblance that is

distinctive of genre” (119). Armstrong does not attempt to itemize the specific terms of resemblance, but a rudimentary list of shared characteristics could include the following:

- the use of proper names of relations and contemporaries: Synge, Pollexfen, Mathers etc.
- obscure but, by implication, rigorous criteria of selection.
- a physical space: tower, study, schoolroom, gallery etc.
- ekphrasis or quasi-ekphrasis.
- necromancy, or atmosphere of séance, ritual incantation.

Based on the foregoing, “Easter, 1916” might be entitled to claim a place in this emergent genre. It employs proper names, and semi-obscure criteria of selection: why name only four of the sixteen executed? In its second stanza, it uses deictics in a way that suggests the negotiation of a physical space, as if the poet and his auditor were walking around a collection of sculptures or portraits. And in its final stanza it proposes the future ritual incantation of proper names. “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz” also belongs in this company. Of these poems, I want to look at two that seem to be specifically concerned with the relation between time, character and personality, and the connection between the “daily, trivial mind” and the “buried self” that Yeats describes in *The Trembling of the Veil*: “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” and “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited”.

“In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”

The Gregory elegy was written nearly two years after “In Memory of Alfred Pollexfen” (1917), and the structure of the poem suggests that Yeats looked back to the earlier poem as a starting point. In the Pollexfen elegy, what is important to Yeats is the “simplifying image” that his relatives can be made to serve. The poem puts off consideration of its ostensible subject, Alfred Pollexfen, starting instead with the patriarchal figurehead, William Pollexfen, who builds his tomb in Sligo. The poem then introduces three of William’s sons – George, John and Alfred – and each is made to represent a different kind of life-line, the differences lying in the extent to which each is bound to the ties of home and custom. Alfred leaves home, lives anonymously in an unnamed metropolis, and finally returns to Sligo. George lives and dies, “a melancholy man” (11), in the place where he was born. (In fact, George had spent some time in charge of the Liverpool branch of the family business.) And John, the sea-farer, lives and dies far from “the customary skies” (14). (He is portrayed as an exotic figure, putting in at different ports and buried in some unknown, far-flung place, but he makes a rather prosaic appearance in the pages of Foster’s biography, as a visitor to the family when they lived at Bedford Park (*Life* 1 155). If Yeats hides in plain sight in the pages of *The Trembling of the Veil*, he does the same thing here. All three sons died unmarried, without children. When Yeats wrote the poem, he was in France, unmarried, without children. Not far away, men were being buried in unmarked graves. Alfred Pollexfen had decided to return to Sligo in his “fiftieth year” (31), a milestone Yeats had reached in 1915. In the poem, then, Yeats uses the Pollexfens to outline different ways of living and dying.

The Gregory elegy also contains a group of three men – Lionel Johnson, John Synge and George Pollexfen – counterpointed against a fourth, Robert Gregory. If Yeats is present at the edge of the earlier poem, as a fifty-year-old man contemplating the range of options personified by his maternal uncles, he and George Yeats are both present in the framing device that opens and closes the later poem. In the Gregory elegy, the three ghosts are summoned at the outset, taking precedence over Gregory, just as Alfred is forced to wait for attention in his elegy.

Lionel Johnson's forlorn trajectory is given considerable space in *The Trembling of the Veil*. His retreat into a private world, devoted equally to the study of religion and consumption of alcohol, leads to disintegration and early death, and Yeats builds the tragic generation around him. Synge represents a more balanced figure than either Johnson or Pollexfen, on either side of him in this triptych. Yeats describes Synge as one "That dying chose the living world for text" (26). The syntax supports two meanings: the living world is the text that Synge chose to read, and the living world gives Synge matter for his own text. Although the relationship is more productive than that of Johnson, whose Greek and Latin learning brings him only a "little nearer" (23) to the "measureless consummation that he dreamed" (24), Synge's achievement is possible only after "long travelling" (28), and takes time. In his case, premature death made impossible the completion of a full life's work. In the Pollexfen elegy, as in *The Trembling of the Veil*, George signifies melancholia, and a turning from productive life to the pursuit of occult speculation, without any outlet, becoming "sluggish and contemplative" (40). Having given a stanza to each, Yeats groups them in an allusion to the art of portraiture:

And now their breathless faces seem to look

Out of some old picture-book;

(43-44)

In retrospect, the Gregory elegy seems to prefigure the dominant technique of *The Trembling of the Veil*. Having portrayed Johnson, Synge and George Pollexfen, individually and collectively, the poem moves on to Gregory who is elevated above them in the way that Yeats escapes from the tragic generation in the autobiography. Gregory is portrayed as the active agent to the passive figures that precede him. They look out of an old picture-book, but he is a painter, an image-maker.

More than just painter. The elegy is deeply concerned with Gregory's effortless mastery of multiple roles. As Claude Rawson makes clear, the poem operates as a reversal of Dryden's mock-heroic treatment of the figure of the Duke of Buckingham as Zimri in *Absalom and Achitophel*, who was "everything by starts, and nothing long" (548). If Dryden "exposes a latter-day degradation of the idea of the Renaissance complete man", says Rawson, Yeats is "reinstating a version of Dryden's fallen ideal" (181). In Gregory, certainly, everything is "done perfectly / As though he had but that one trade alone." (79-80) But it is not just that he is more skilled than the others. Gregory seems to live in a speeded-up world compared to the slow-motion version endured by the others. For Johnson, the goal is always just out of reach. Synge reaches his proper place only after "long travelling" (28). Even then, the present participles of "living" and "dying" suggest that his achievement involves an expense of time. Meanwhile, the melancholic George Pollexfen moves from his

“muscular youth” (34) to an old age “sluggish and contemplative” (40). All three lives are congealed in time.

In the eleventh stanza, the antinomy is made explicit as the continuous expense of time is set against a momentary conflagration:

Some burn damp faggots, others may consume
 The entire combustible world in one small room
 As though dried straw, and if we turn about
 The bare chimney is gone black out
 Because the work had finished in that flare.

(81-85)

Gregory can occupy multiple roles simultaneously, because he occupies them without preparation, without expenditure of time: “We dreamed that a great painter had been born” (65). Born, not made, because Gregory has no need for study or apprenticeship. If his experience of time is fundamentally other than that of the time-bound Johnson, Synge and Pollexfen, it becomes natural for the speaker to ask: “What made us dream that he could comb grey hair?” (88) For Gregory, life seems to consist *only* of those moments of crisis when the daily mind is joined to its buried self, giving him the capacity to occupy multiple roles rather than labour through one. Three times, Yeats uses the same line – “Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,” (70, 78, 86) – to remind us of Gregory’s multiplicity, his ability to take possession of numerous identities. That final “he” in the repeated line takes the place of Gregory’s own name as a suitably indistinct signifier of the being-in-crisis, the moment when “Robert Gregory” meets his nameless buried self, triggering his varied appearances as

painter, soldier, scholar, horseman. It is as if, in the timeless and spaceless reality that Yeats described in the “Seven Propositions” (Ellmann *Identity* 236-237), “Robert Gregory” flickers on and off, each momentary illumination a new reflection into time and space, none of them bound by time and space in the way that Pollexfen, Synge and Johnson appear to be.

The brilliant closing line achieves for the poem what it celebrates in Gregory. If the poet has been rendered speechless, everything that has just been said or recited immediately disappears in a textual puff of smoke. There are poems that disguise their own construction, such as “The Thought-Fox” by Ted Hughes. That poem’s opening lines describe it as a poem yet to be written:

I imagine this midnight moment’s forest:

Something else is alive

Beside the clock’s loneliness

And this blank page where my fingers move.

(1-4)

As Hughes looks through the window, he sees, or imagines he sees, a fox creeping into view, the composite “thought-fox” of the poem’s title, described as setting “neat prints” (13) in the snow, as a “body that is bold to come” (16), until, finally, it “enters the dark hole of the head” (22). In its final lines, the poem achieves its own existence:

The window is starless still; the clock ticks,

The page is printed.

(23-24)

Seamus Heaney's "Digging" is another example. In that poem, Heaney replaces Hughes at the window:

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

(1-2)

Heaney's eye and imagination is drawn to his father digging with a spade, and wonders how he can ever measure up to him. The poem finishes where it starts, except that it appears to have written itself in the interim:

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it.

(29-31)

Unlike "The Thought-Fox" and "Digging", Yeats's elegy for Robert Gregory is a poem of disguised self-destruction. Hughes and Heaney refer to page and pen, respectively, as the physical means of recording their poems for posterity. Yeats never suggests that he is planning to write anything down. He is thinking only of words as speech:

Now that we're almost settled in our house

I'll **name** the friends that cannot sup with us

Beside a fire of turf in th' ancient tower,

And **having talked** to some late hour

Climb up the narrow winding stair to bed:

...

(1-5, my emphasis)

We think we are listening to him do just that. Until we hear the final stanza:

I had thought, seeing how bitter is that wind
 That shakes the shutter, to have brought to mind
 All those that manhood tried, or childhood loved
 Or boyish intellect approved,
 With some appropriate commentary on each;
 Until imagination brought
 A fitter welcome; but a thought
 Of that late death took all my heart for speech.

(89-96)

He appears, still, to be talking about what he is planning to do, after having done just that, before going on to tell George that he is not going to do it after all. In the last line, he has undone everything that was said (was it said?) before that line. He gives, and he takes away. By re-instating the moment which opened the poem, Yeats is “reversing the cinematograph” so that he can shoot a new film on the same reel, erasing what had gone before. He distances himself from Johnson, Synge and Pollexfen, all of whom, as I have said, are congealed in time, and places himself closer to Gregory. There is no time to separate the moment of creation from the moment of destruction. This use of narrative form to erase the interim will find more extreme application in *Purgatory*, when the Old Man wishes to reverse the clock to the moment that precedes his own conception so that he can

forestall it. We will see in Chapter 4 how the writing of *Purgatory* led Yeats much deeper into his meditation on time and temporal existence.

In the context of Yeats's evolving conception of reality, in which personality is achieved in fleeting moments, the figure of Gregory is attractive because everything other than the moments of "reflection", the moments of rebirth, is eliminated. Gregory, readers of *A Vision* should understand, is the kind of person who will burn quickly through the phases of the *Great Wheel*. As Yeats will formulate it in *AVB*: "Neither between death and birth or between birth and death can the soul find more than momentary happiness; its object is to pass rapidly round its circle and find freedom from that circle" (*CW14* 172). Gregory is the model of momentary happiness.

As we have seen, Yeats wrote early and often of the poet's ability to remake himself, from the short poem on remaking the self of 1908 to the authoritative statement of "A General Introduction to my Work". Gregory, as a paragon of perpetual rebirth into new roles, is then almost a desirable model for Yeats himself, just as Alfred Pollexfen, in his return to Sligo at fifty years of age, was another model on which the poet could possibly shape his life. Yeats may not find a way to reconcile the settled occupation of a single role (husband, tower-builder) with the desire to achieve the weightlessness of Gregory. But, at the very least, his occupation as poet could allow him to savour something of Gregory's multiplicity. Most often, the "rebirth" that enables him to occupy different roles is displaced to the edge of the poem, Yeats adopting the role (or mask) of lover or fool, man or woman, speaking in tongues in dramatic monologue. These poems encourage the reader to imagine a world out of which the adopted voice speaks. As we have seen, Yeats had explained to

Olivia Shakespear that he does not himself experience, in the pages of *The Trembling of the Veil*, the kind of “crisis” that produces the “simplifying image”. However, in the context of the group of poems identified above as an emergent genre within Yeats’s work, “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited” is compelling because the poet finally does seem to experience, in the poem itself rather than on its margins, a confrontation with the kind of “crisis” that he imposes on everyone else he writes about. The Municipal Gallery is the location for a fascinating late interrogation of his own methods.

“The Municipal Gallery Re-visited”

In terms of the characteristics of this emergent genre, “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited” is strongest in its relation to place and its relation to portraiture. But the element of necromancy is significantly present in the use of the proper names of Augusta Gregory and John Synge, both of which appear three times in the poem, an unusual excess for Yeats, ritual incantation taking place in the poem itself, rather than in a deferred future as is proposed in “Easter, 1916”. The number three is associated with rituals of disappointment in the underworlds of Homer and Virgil, being, respectively, the number of times that Odysseus tries and fails to hold the shade of his mother, and that Aeneas tries to take the shade of his father in his arms. Its subtle deployment in this poem should alert us to the thought that there is a sub-textual note of disappointment and a concern with mothers and fathers. The only other proper noun used three times in the poem is “Ireland” (11, 11, 53), and the spectre of “Ireland’s history” (53) can be glimpsed in the “lineaments” (53) of Yeats’s dead friends, Gregory and Synge.

Putting aside his usual reserve with the use of proper names, Yeats has Gregory and Synge joined by Roger Casement, Arthur Griffith, Kevin O'Higgins, Hugh Lane, and Hazel Lavery. There are two painters, Antonio Mancini, a contemporary, and Rembrandt, with Synge a tenant of Phase 23 of the *Great Wheel*. There are writers, Spenser and Shakespeare, the latter quoted rather than named. The poem is crowded. And the crowd occupies a new physical space in Yeats's poetry, the Municipal Gallery in Charlemont House on Parnell Square. It is the most directly ekphrastic of these poems, and therefore closely related to *The Trembling of the Veil*.

The poem divides critical opinion. For some, it seems to repeat much that Yeats said elsewhere in more interesting ways, making this "an uncharacteristically jaded effort on Yeats's part", as Armstrong describes the judgment of the critical naysayers (120). In the context of ekphrasis, Elizabeth Loizeaux, in her book on Yeats and the visual arts, as if in secret sympathy with the general critical consensus, has surprisingly little to say about the poem. Not everyone takes it at face value. Catherine Paul generates useful insights by exploring it in the context of the trope of the "poet in the gallery", and Charles Armstrong responds to, and extends, her analysis.

Armstrong lists a host of genres in which the poem participates in some degree, while also arguing that it extends the emergent genre within Yeats's own work, saying that the "poetic response to pictures is . . . a new addition to the distinctively Yeatsian genre in which this poem participates". He remarks that one "does not find ekphrasis in the elegy to Robert Gregory, in the second part of the 'The Tower', or any of the other poems that have

been mentioned" (120). However, this supposes a traditionally restricted meaning of ekphrasis. What I have tried to demonstrate through his correspondence with his father and his autobiographical writings is that Yeats consistently thought of portraiture when he wrote about his contemporaries. Even without a specific painting for reference, the poetry implies the existence of a possible artwork. Yeats frequently uses quasi-ekphrasis, the textual representation of a visual representation that doesn't exist. In the Gregory elegy, the faces of Johnson, Pollexfen and Synge "seem to look / Out of some old picture-book" (43-44). In other instances, a poem might lead critics to the language of painting, even though no painting is named, as when Helen Vendler describes the first few lines of the Gore-Booth elegy as the "stilled verbless tableau with which the poem opens (a painting presented through nouns – light, Lisadell, windows, girls) . . ." (*Secret Discipline* 226). But Armstrong does seem to be correct in seeing something new in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited".

The first hint is in the poem's title. In Yeats's poetry, there is no other mention of a visit to the gallery, whether in the temporary home it occupied on Harcourt Street, its virtual home on the plans Sir Edwin Lutyens prepared for the Halfpenny Bridge site, or its permanent home on Parnell Square. There is a visit to the idea of the gallery in "To a Wealthy Man who promised a second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures" (1913), the only other poem to mention the gallery by name. At that stage, the gallery belonged to the realm of possibility. Now, the idea has been given a final fixed shape. The "revisiting" that takes place in the poem is less a return to the physical gallery than a return to the idea of the gallery, a confrontation between the

possible and the actual. The title should remind the reader of the hope expressed in the earlier poem for a gallery that would bring Renaissance Italy to the Liffey. If the reader pauses before entering the poem, he or she will see the only remaining traces of those Renaissance ambitions in Yeats's choice of form, *ottava rima*, for Vendler a signifier of courtly achievement and Renaissance ideals (*Secret Discipline* 66).

The gallery location brings the other recurring aspect of Yeats's autobiographical practice into play. In his autobiographies, he adopts the role of curator of his own memories. This is another extension of the possibilities of ekphrastic technique. *The Trembling of the Veil* proceeds by way of selection and exhibition, with the aim of preparing the way for *A Vision*. Yeats had become adept at appropriating life stories, compressing them into "simplifying images", as if he was making the mould for the wax impression, and then exhibiting them with a specific strategic aim. The point of departure for "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited", when considered in this context, is that Yeats is experiencing a kind of visual and technical feedback, when the images made and curated by others confront him from the walls of the gallery.

In this light, the crisis is a late reckoning with the kind of autonomy he exercised with Henley's portrait in *The Trembling of the Veil*. He had denied that additional representations of Henley could add anything to the image of him that Yeats hung on his study wall; that image, and all other representations, revealed the same Henley to all; and that Henley had been translated from visual image into the words of Yeats's autobiography. Here, however,

the poet is forced to confront multiple images over which he lacks that level of control or assurance. The opening words should tell us how much danger he is in:

Around me the images of thirty years;

An ambush;

(1-2)

An *ambush*. A reader might be so distracted by the desire to identify the corresponding painting that he or she fails to take Yeats at his word – he is in trouble. He is in trouble precisely because his choice of words might be taken for ekphrasis, and he might sense that he is losing the power to make them refer to *him*. Or to the painting *and to him*. In the opening two lines, Yeats has set up the problem that he will spend the rest of the poem trying to solve. As a poet who has consistently sought identity with his poetry, he must make its language refer to him. The difficulty that critics have found in identifying some of the paintings to which the poem seems to refer may simply be another aspect of the same problem, the poet saying: it's not important, don't look for them, look at me.

In the context of Yeats's own poetic practice, the gallery must seem like a random collection of images waiting to be made whole in the form of a poem. Going back to Paul Ricoeur's three-fold mimesis, the poet is still in the first stage, in the "world of action" (*T&N1* 54), upon which the second stage of mimesis brings the process of emplotment to bear. In these terms, Yeats is bringing the first stage of mimesis into the poem itself, just as he did in *AVB*, as I argued in the last chapter. But the poem seems to become concerned almost entirely by questions of mimesis, representation and reproduction. Yeats is

confronted with two problems. First, in opening the poem in the gallery in the present tense, the poet is immediately located amid images that, in Ricoeur's terms, "call for narration" (*T&N* 59), a poem waiting to be made. To escape his predicament, then, he will have to improvise. Second, in his poetry he has always assumed the role of image-maker, but now he is confronted with images made by others. In the "Seven Propositions", Yeats says that each spirit "is determined by and determines those it perceives" (Ellmann *Identity* 236). In this poem, the crisis seems to arise from the fact that the poet is facing the spirits by whom he will be determined. When he uses the word "images" for the second time, in the third stanza, he recognizes the confrontation, the difference, between the gallery's images and his own, when the definite article of the first line ("the images") is replaced by the possessive pronoun, as if he is trying to re-assert his own authority over the images that flood the poem: "My permanent and impermanent images" (20).

Before he reaches the point of breakdown in that third stanza, the reader sees the poet struggling amid the confusions of mimesis. For example, formal constraint splits what most commentators take to be a single painting, "The Blessing of the Colours" by Sir John Lavery (c. 1922), into two separate images, one on either side of the line break between the first and second stanzas, as if Yeats had taken an axe to the painting in question:

I

A revolutionary soldier kneeling to be blessed;

II

An Abbot or Archbishop with an upraised hand

Blessing the Tricolour.

(8-9)

More confusingly, his initial reaction to the paintings is to dispute their reference to reality:

‘This is not’ I say

‘The dead Ireland of my youth, but an Ireland

The poets have imagined, terrible and gay.’

(10-12)

This could be taken as an assertion of the primacy of poetry: we got there first, in other words. But it hardly makes sense in terms of mimesis. Is he saying that the artists painted from poetry rather than from life? Or is he saying that the poets, as Shelley’s unacknowledged legislators, imagined an Ireland that their works then brought into being, and that the artists therefore painted from life, a life that had already been reconfigured by the works of the poets? Poetry becomes life becomes painting. If the latter, the middle term, life, is missing from his response to the paintings.

The breakdown comes in the third stanza. The sense that he has been troubled by a doubling of reality bubbles on the surface of the stanza in a series of repetitions:

Heart smitten with emotion I sink down

My heart *recovering* with *covered* eyes;

Wherever *I had looked I had looked* upon

My *permanent* or *impermanent* images;

Augusta Gregory’s *son*; her sister’s *son*,

Hugh Lane, 'onlie begetter' of all these;

Hazel Lavery living and dying, that tale

As though some ballad singer had sung it all.

(17-24, my emphases)

A few months earlier, he had written to Dorothy Wellesley: "I begin to see things doubled" (*CL IntelLex* 6922). The occasion of his visit to the gallery provided him with a perfect opportunity to find a correlate or "double" for the phantasmagorical portrait galleries of his own earlier poetry and autobiography. But in this stanza, the doubling becomes a linguistic compulsion. Syllables, words, phrases, and initials, all repeat themselves. The poet is forced to shield his eyes, to block out the images that others have made, to recover his own relation to reality. But in so doing, his mind is only drawn, by an uncontainable momentum, to other forms of doubling, in two mother-son relations: Augusta and Robert Gregory, and Adelaide Lane (née Persse) and her son Hugh. Two sisters, two mothers, two sons, two cousins. And now that he has started to think of motherhood as a form of reproduction, he thinks of Hugh Lane as 'onlie begetter' of the gallery. This nod to Shakespeare's *Sonnets* has been read as a coded warning not to make over-confident claims about the identity of the painters whose paintings the poem seems to describe (Armstrong 121). However, the context rather suggests that the poet is thinking of the early sonnets in the sequence, and of Shakespeare's repeated plea to the fair youth to father children, to "beget" a copy of himself to leave to posterity. And when the poet turns to Hazel Lavery, it is only to experience double vision of another kind, in the two portraits of her, living and dying.

In the third stanza, the poem seems close to collapse; its language continually reproduces itself, mirroring a thematic fixation on forms of reproduction, biological and artistic. But Yeats can barely do more than name these forms without explaining why he is so troubled by them. In the words that William Empson uses for one of his seven types of ambiguity, the lines “combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author” (*Ambiguity* 133). And William Empson, at this point, would probably encourage a reader to put aside fears about the so-called intentional fallacy, and at least make a guess at the author’s intentions. As Michael Wood says in his book on Empson: “Many authors are articulate yet distinctly evasive about intention, and unconscious intentions lurk all over the place” (*On Empson* 11).

In one of the letters quoted above, Yeats had told his father that he wanted readers of his verse to feel that they were in the presence of a man thinking and feeling. But trying hard not to think about something is also a way of thinking and, making an Empsonian guess, I would say that this is what Yeats is doing here. On one level, he seems overcome by the endless possibilities of mimesis. As an image-maker, how can his vision accommodate the infinite number of other possible systems and images, and the lines of the third stanza seem to signify, and replicate in microcosm, a world of endless fission. More specifically, how could a man whose thought is saturated with images of mothers and sons, and structured almost entirely by a language of reproduction, fail to think of his own mother, and her near-invisibility in his work? And few critics comment on the most glaring absence in the poem – the fact that he never mentions his own father’s portrait of him, gifted by Hugh Lane to the Municipal Gallery in 1912, a part of the collection that leads to his crisis. In

photographs of the new lay-out of the gallery, published as part of a commemorative booklet in 1933, John Butler Yeats's portraits of Yeats and Synge are seen clearly, hanging close to each other, separated only by a single painting. How can he be as free as he believes himself to be when he is a copy twice over, a copy of the kind that Shakespeare urges the fair youth to create, and a copy in the portrait his father made of him? In the gallery, the poet is trying to find a way to reconcile his claim to freedom in his own self-fashioning ("it is myself that I remake") with the fact that he is equally made by others, that they will produce their own "simplifying image" of him.

In the context of the poem, it seems as if everything that Yeats says after this third stanza is an attempt to recover from the shock he has received, a shock that he still doesn't seem fully to understand. There are almost too many contexts for him to address. There is the gallery itself: he thinks back to his earlier hopes for an Irish version of the Renaissance, and asserts that at least he, Gregory and Synge, with their test of the beggar and nobleman, remained true to that earlier ideal, and he contemplates the very different world that is projected by the images of a Catholic Church triumphant. In response to the multiplicity of images of the earlier stanzas, he turns inward, to his own carefully-honed portraits of Synge and Gregory. But this leads only to the strange anxiety that underlies the confident rhetoric of the last lines. Roy Foster sees these lines as disingenuous and damaging to the poem:

Yet the ending rings hollow; WBY was aware that his glory would reside in his books, not in the roll-call of his acquaintance. (*Life* // 598)

And while Armstrong sees the friendship that Yeats celebrates in the context of an older, classical tradition, he finds the lines jarring:

It is hard, though, to not feel that this statement is something of an exaggeration.

(118)

As I said above, Yeats has generated almost too many questions in the poem. But I think that Foster may be wrong in thinking that the poem is primarily addressed to Yeats's readers or to his biographers. The ending does seem to return the poet from private meditation to a more public mode of address:

You that would judge me do not judge alone

This book or that, come to this hallowed place

Where my friends' portraits hang and look thereon;

Ireland's history in their lineaments trace;

Think where man's glory most begins and ends

And say my glory was I had such friends.

(50-55)

But it seems more likely here that the poet is facing the only judges that he ever seems to care about, those he addresses in "Are You Content?", which follows "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited" in *New Poems*:

I call on those that call me son,

Grandson, or great-grandson,
 On uncles, aunts, great-uncles or great-aunts,
 To judge what I have done.
 Have I, that put it into words,
 Spoilt what old loins have sent?

(1-6)

He had voiced a similar concern at the end of *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, and in the poem that prefaces *Responsibilities*. He has always had the same anxiety: was he letting them down, being merely a writer? But “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited” gives him a new forum in which to address them. In the final stanza, Yeats meets Synge for the last time in his poetry. After the third ritual naming of “John Synge”, the dead man appears: “And here’s John Synge *himself*” (48, my emphasis). The apparition seems to heal the ruptures with which the poem began, where the poet was besieged by images of reality, leading to a breakdown that seemed to have everything to do with a doubling or tripling of reality. Now, the iconic aspect of Synge’s portrait repairs the breach. We are not in the presence of a mere representation, we are in the presence of the man himself, as is Yeats. With Gregory (and Yeats himself, in his father’s portrait), the reader is in the presence of icons that give access to the whole history of Ireland, past and future, rather than the partial representation of reality embodied in the paintings of the first two stanzas.

And is Yeats being disingenuous, and marring his poem, by claiming glory in his friendship with Synge and Gregory rather than in his poetry? One possible answer (another Empsonian guess) is that Yeats is appealing to his ancestors rather than his readers, and has

decided not to wait for the answer that he fears they would give to the question he keeps putting to them, and decides instead to appeal to them by citing his friendship (and, by implication, caste solidarity) with two people who would have led Ireland to the kind of Renaissance he desired in "To a Wealthy Man". As importantly, in the context of Yeats's preference for the fleeting and evanescent, he chooses something that is normally lost to posterity, and it is significant in this context that he does not represent poetry as a vanishing speech act – the Gregory elegy, for example – but rather the permanent, physical form in which it is cast: "This book or that" (51). And, if he is trying to justify to his ancestors the absence of his mother and father from his poetry, is it going too far to say that he might need to plead that man's glory begins and ends in something chosen rather than something given, freedom rather than fate? And that the empty niches in his poetry, which might otherwise be reserved for elegies for mother and father, be filled instead by a woman and a man who assisted him in inventing himself, Augusta Gregory and John Synge?

In its final stanza, the Municipal Gallery is translated into the poem. From now on, the "this" of "this hallowed place" is constituted by the poem and the situation of the person speaking the poem. This is an enormous extension of his quasi-ekphrastic technique. The effect is to constitute, out of the poem, something like the timeless and spaceless community of Spirits that Yeats takes as reality in the "Seven Propositions" quoted above. Timeless, because the portraits of Synge and Gregory (and Yeats himself, in the portrait he cannot bring himself to acknowledge) constitute an iconostasis in which it is possible to read the complete history of Ireland, taking the place of more conventional forms of chronology and historiography. Spaceless, because the poem translates the gallery and its

paintings into a mouthful of air. In the process, Yeats comes as close to accepting his own “simplifying image” as he ever does, although he can never quite renounce his own belief in his power of self-creation. Even if each Spirit is partially determined by other Spirits, Yeats still wants to dictate the form of words that others will use of him: “And say my glory was I had such friends.” (55)

This accounting for Yeats’s claim for glory suggests that the poem prefers the self-made to the made, a life of Gregory-esque re-invention in preference to the kind of organic life that only appears to be real. As he puts it in *Dramatis Personae* (1935):

A writer must die every day he lives, be reborn, as it is said in the Burial Service, an incorruptible self, that self opposite of all that he has named ‘himself’. (CW3 336)

The difficulty with this formulation is that it does not accord with the fundamental distinction that *A Vision* makes between the life between birth and death and the life between death and birth, which operate according to very different sets of rules. In *AVB*, as we have seen, the first of these worlds is basically synchronic and the second is filled with many forms of temporal experience. *The Trembling of the Veil* reveals structures and forms that Yeats might find useful in the context of lyric poetry: dual modes of temporality, narratives that flow backwards in time, the division of the self into two or more voices. If the Gregory elegy is exemplary in its ability to translate Yeats’s evolving thought into a form that plays unusual “games with time”, in Paul Ricoeur’s formula, “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” is an example of the kind of complex problematic that motivates other late works, particularly *Purgatory*, which is the subject of Chapter 4. And in that play, as in *The*

Trembling of the Veil and “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited”, the world projected by the text is akin to a necropolis in which the living move among the dead, so that Yeats is forced to examine the ways in which the time between birth and death and the time between death and birth relate to each other. But the “games with time” that Yeats begins to play in the Gregory elegy are raised to a much higher level in the poems of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, the subject of Chapter 3.

Coda

And what of the meeting with Sir Horace Plunkett in October 1920? Did Yeats appear to him and to Maud Gonne simultaneously, at some point between arrival in Dublin on Saturday, 9 October 1920, and the operation on Wednesday, 13 October 1920? Joseph Hone, our final witness, was closer to the events in question than either Roy Foster or Ann Saddlemyer, although he too relies almost entirely on hearsay evidence. And he makes no mention of any trip to Sir Horace Plunkett. Most of his information is drawn from the report of Cecil Salkeld, who was present at Glenmalure as a guest of Maud Gonne. There is no mention of any trouble between the local constabulary and young Seán MacBride, and most of the account is given over to a description of Yeats’s good spirits. There is therefore no agreement among the witnesses. Yeats may have been in two places at once. There is just one last anomaly. Hone says that the trip took place in September, and not in October, as

the other accounts claim (Hone 326-329). In the pages of his biographies, at least, Yeats eludes a fixed place in time and space.

Chapter 3. The Double Cones: Time's Arrow in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*

Introduction

Anne Butler Yeats was born on 9 May 1919. Just over two weeks later, on 26 May, Yeats wrote a short letter to Harriet Monroe, founder of *Poetry* magazine. Monroe must have congratulated him in an earlier letter, and Yeats responded:

Yes the child is a great joy for she fills the future. (*CL InteLex* 3611)

In another letter, Yeats wrote that “having a child seems to prolong ones own life” (*CL InteLex* 3616). The letters demonstrate the extent to which the relations between past and future, experience and expectation, can be altered, in this case by enlarging Yeats’s sense of the future. Anne’s birth had an immediate impact on his poetry. It repaid the ancestral debt that he acknowledged in the poem that opens *Responsibilities* (1914). More obviously, it provided the occasion for “A Prayer for my Daughter” (1919). Furthermore, that poem, some thirty years into the poetry that makes up the *Collected Poems*, marks the first time that Yeats used the word “future” in his poetry:

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
 And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,

And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
 In the elms above the flooded stream;
 Imagining in excited reverie
 That the future years had come,
 Dancing to a frenzied drum,
 Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.
 (9-16)

Yeats used the word “future” on only three other occasions – in “All Souls’ Night” (1921), “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” (1921) and “A Prayer for my Son” (1922) – and all four appearances occur in poems written in just three years, from early 1919 to late 1921²⁴. Having borrowed this quantitative methodology from Michael Wood, who was puzzled by the scarcity of the word “violence” in Yeats’s poetry, I will borrow his argument as well:

And yet Yeats very rarely uses the word violence itself in his verse: four mentions in the whole of the *Collected Poems*, two of them in one line of ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’. The other two are in ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ and in . . . ‘Under Ben Bulben’. There are only six uses of the adjective ‘violent’ – again two of them in a single poem. How can this be? Perhaps Yeats doesn’t name violence much because for him it is everywhere. Or shall we say he doesn’t name it more often because for

²⁴ Parrish, Stephen Maxfield. *A Concordance to the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1963.

him it is not usually a concept but a practice that has many names and shapes and above all many instances, and it is the instances that matter? (*Violence* 8)

The absence of the word may reflect Yeats's preference for the concrete over the abstract, the same impulse that led him to reckon the passage of time in seasons rather than in years: the "nineteenth autumn" (7) of "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1917), the "sixty or more winters" (38) of "Among School Children" (1927). Or it may have been due simply to local difficulties of rhyme or metre. Whatever the reason, he could get around the problem by using "coming" or "to come" instead: "To Ireland in the Coming Times" (1892), the "hate of what's to come" (30) of "I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness" (1923). In "A Prayer for my Daughter", both words are used ("future years had come" (14)) and an early draft of "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927) shows an attempt to repeat the conjunction in the last line: "Of present past & future & to come" (*Tower Manuscripts* 43-44). There is a difference of emphasis in the two usages. "Future" suggests a static, empty form awaiting content. This is what Walter Benjamin called "homogeneous, empty time" (252). It is the standard time of a Newtonian universe. In contrast, "coming" and its variants are dynamic and spatial, marking the present as a place towards which something is moving, just as the "future years" of "A Prayer for my Daughter" emerge from the sea to advance on the tower.

Yeats gives ample evidence of his belief that the future is not an empty form, that it contains dynamic content, and he frequently asserts that this content is perceptible in the present. I have chosen two statements from the period that forms the backdrop to *The*

Tower as representative of his belief in human access to this content. *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917) contains the following brief prospectus for what became *A Vision* in 1925, already quoted in Chapter 1:

I do not doubt those heaving circles, those winding arcs, whether in one man's life or in that of an age, are mathematical, and that some in the world, or beyond the world, have foreknown the event and pricked upon the calendar the life-span of a Christ, a Buddha, a Napoleon: that every movement, in feeling or in thought, prepares in the dark by its own increasing clarity and confidence its own executioner. (CW5 14)

As in the historical time narrated in *A Vision*, so also in the life-time explored in *The Trembling of the Veil*. We have seen how Yeats, after recalling his first meeting with Synge, wonders why there is never at such moments an immediate recognition of their significance:

But in writing of Synge I have run far ahead, for in 1896 he was but one picture among many. I am often astonished when I think that we can meet unmoved some person, or pass some house, that in later years is to bear a chief part in our life. Should there not be some flutter of the nerve or stopping of the heart like that MacGregor Mathers experienced at the first meeting with a phantom? (CW3 264)

In fact, as we have seen, the closing pages of each of those two texts are oriented to the past more than to the future. The chronology of *A Vision*, as reflected in the dates appended to its opening and closing sections, runs "withershins", AVA beginning in 1925

and ending in 1920, the year in which “All Souls’ Night” was composed, *AVB* beginning in 1928, also ending in 1920 with “All Souls’ Night”. Moreover, the final prose section of *AVB*, “The End of the Cycle”, reflects the situation of its opening poem, “The Phases of the Moon”, just as Book V, “Dove or Swan”, puts the finishing touches to a model of historical time that retrospectively illuminates the apparent timelessness of Book I, “The Great Wheel”. *The Trembling of the Veil* uses some of the same techniques. As that text approaches its end, the “flashback” sections, which are narrated in the present tense, increase in number, until the final reel of Yeats’s cinematograph, as Roy Foster noticed (*Life* // 202), is projected backwards, and events are narrated in reverse order. In these long texts, then, as the narrative approaches its end-limit, a counter-movement emerges, changing the temporal orientation of the text. And in the years between *AVA* and *AVB*, I will argue in this chapter, Yeats’s poetry translates those narrative experiments into lyric dimensions.

From Geometry to Text: Flaubert and Blake in *A Vision*:

When *A Vision* is invoked in relation to Yeats’s poetry, it is usually to identify a type of allegorical correspondence between the former and the latter, stopping short of any deeper investigation of the extent to which the poetry might embody, in concrete form, the

geometrical figures that Yeats deploys in *A Vision*²⁵. However, in the first version of *A Vision*, Yeats criticized his own youthful reading of Blake's *The Mental Traveller* (c. 1805) for just this reason, mastery of local details without apprehension or appreciation of the deeper structures on which the work was based. The older Yeats saw Blake, and Flaubert after him, trying to give form to the fundamental patterns that he saw in life and history:

Flaubert talked much of writing a story called 'La Spirale' and died before he began it, but since his death an editor has collected the scheme from various sources. It would have concerned a man whose dreams during sleep grew in magnificence as his life became more and more unlucky. He dreamt of marriage with a princess when all went wrong with his own love adventure. (CW13 103)

"The Mental Traveller" tells another version of the story:

Blake, in the "Mental Traveller", describes a struggle, a struggle perpetually repeated between a man and a woman, and as the one ages, the other grows young. (CW13 107)

Yeats goes on to explain how his understanding of Blake's poem was incomplete so long as he had not appreciated the underlying geometry:

²⁵ There are exceptions. Helen Vendler, for example, likens certain stanzaic forms to gyres in *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 69-70).

When Edwin J. Ellis and I had finished our big book on the philosophy of William Blake, I felt that we had no understanding of this poem: we had explained its details, for they occur elsewhere in his verse or his pictures, but not the poem as a whole, not the myth, the perpetual return to the same thing; not that which certainly moved Blake to write it; but when I had understood the double cones, I understood it also. (CW13 108)

In referring to the “double cones”, Yeats is referring to the cones or gyres that he uses in *A Vision* to describe the ways in which life and history move in alternating cycles. Importantly, these cycles are not merely consecutive in time: one is always shadowed by the other, strengthening or weakening in opposition and in proportion to the other’s weakness or strength, preparing “in the dark by its own increasing clarity and confidence its own executioner” as he puts it in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (CW5 14).

Had Flaubert lived to write his story, he would have been bound by the strictures of prose narrative as they relate to direction. Although narrative in prose can use analepsis and prolepsis to manipulate the chronology of the story that it tells, narrative discourse is synchronized with the direction of the sentence. Yeats’s “double cones”, however, embody movement in two opposed directions. “The Mental Traveller” comes closer to the double cones than Flaubert’s unwritten story, but the two opposing movements (man growing old as woman grows young, until they trade places and start over, in perpetuity) are still recounted in accordance with the standard laws of narrative direction.

Among literary texts, these were the two best approximations that Yeats could find for the “double cones”, but neither is equal to the geometry of *A Vision*²⁶. Yeats borrows other descriptions from philosophers and mystics, and most are limited to a single phrase or image. In the second version of *A Vision*, he did produce one astonishing, anthropomorphic image for the pattern: “a being racing into the future passes a being racing into the past, two footprints perpetually obliterating one another, toe to heel, heel to toe” (*CW14* 154-155). In this formulation, the past and the future are never separated, and the present is the name given to the relationship between them, a dynamic relationship in which past and future inter-penetrate, each always “present” in and balancing the other. The disappearance of an independent past and independent future is pre-figured in the consciousness of the pilot in “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” (1919):

I balanced all, brought all to mind,
 The years to come seemed waste of breath,
 A waste of breath the years behind
 In balance with this life, this death.
 (13-16)

In this chapter, I will be arguing that Yeats, through the 1920s and 1930s, in some of his most ambitious experiments with literary form, attempted to translate the dynamic

²⁶ In view of the importance that “The Mental Traveller” assumed for Yeats, it is not surprising to see it acknowledged in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* in the sequences “A Man Young and Old” and “A Woman Young and Old” respectively.

geometry of *A Vision* into poetic form, allowing him to embody, in more satisfying ways, the relationship between two beings (or movements in thought or history – for Yeats in this mood they are nearly always the same thing) racing through one another. As I mentioned in the last chapter, Jonathan Culler argues that lyric poetry is firmly oriented towards the present and the present tense. Although *A Vision* frequently adopts the present tense proper to scientific discourse, which enlists the present tense as part of its claim to describe supposedly timeless laws, it uses the past tense for the short-form biographies of “The Great Wheel” and the historical analysis of “Dove or Swan”. *The Trembling of the Veil* is pulled towards lyric in its recourse to the present tense narration that emerges in the “picture” sections. However, in his lyrics, because the present and the present tense predominate, Yeats is starting from a position which should more naturally accommodate the complex relationship between past and future. Moreover, lyric has the additional advantage that it can dispense with the sentence, the basic unit of discourse in prose.

In reading the lyrics which I discuss in this chapter, I am primarily interested in the ways in which Yeats resists narrative closure in individual lyrics, and reconstructs new models of temporality on other levels, through inter-textual form. By this, I mean the relations between poems, and the order of poems within volumes, rather than the specific form of individual poems. Using the four poems that open *The Tower* – “Sailing to Byzantium”, “The Tower” (1927), “Meditations in Time of Civil War” (1923) and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” (1921) (together, “the Tower Sequence”) – I will look firstly at Yeats’s use of sequence. I will then look at the extent to which it gives form to Yeats’s dynamic model of time. I will then go on to consider the relationship between *The Tower* and *The Winding*

Stair, taking the opening and closing poems of the two volumes as the cardinal points that co-ordinate relations between the two volumes.

Yeats's Use of Sequence

Collections of lyric poetry typically comprise the best poems the poet has written since his or her last collection. The running order might be designed with a view to generating a sense of variety:

As [Philip] Larkin said, with deceptive levity, its [*The Whitsun Weddings*] poems are arranged, 'like a music-hall bill: you know, contrast, difference in length, the comic, the Irish tenor, bring on the girls'. Readers can remind themselves of its 'score', as it were, by running their eyes down the table of contents. (Booth 290)

There is something of this variety in *The Tower*. After the long, highly-wrought poetry of the Tower Sequence, there is an extreme contrast in "The Wheel" (1922), just eight lines long, and "Youth and Age" (1924), shorter again by half. Draft materials show that Yeats thought deeply about the running order. He was concerned with the organization of sequences, whether gathered under a single title, as in "Meditations in Time of Civil War", or as a group of separately titled poems arranged in a meaningful order. In *Our Secret Discipline*, Helen Vendler devotes a full chapter to what she terms the "puzzle of sequence" (62-89), and

claims that Yeats's use of the sequence was an important aspect of his development as a poet:

These sequences, which approach a single phenomenon (civil war) or concept (vacillation) from various angles, replaced in Yeats's ambition the narrative poems of his earlier poetic career. (62)

Vendler distinguishes Yeats's later use of the sequence from earlier examples by reference to his articulation of different *forms* under a single title, asserting that Yeats sought to create meaning in the formal choices that he made. But it is also worth mentioning one of Yeats's own uses of the word, made in relation to the cycles of history that he describes in the "Dove or Swan" section of *A Vision*. In the first version of *A Vision*, there is a reference to the "stream of *recurrence*" (CW13 162, emphasis in the original) and a footnote distinguishes recurrence from sequence:

The documents [i.e., the automatic scripts] distinguish between *recurrence* which is an impulse that begins strongly and dies out by degrees, and *sequence* where every part of the impulse is related to every other. Every phase is a *recurrence*, and *sequence* is related to Unity of Being. (CW13 162, emphases in the original)

Yeats, then, at least in this oblique reference, uses the word to denote not an approach to a single theme from different angles but an arrangement in which each part is defined dynamically by its relationship to some other part.

Vendler is primarily concerned with sequences grouped under a single title, such as “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, but Yeats also creates sequences of sequences, such as the opening four poems of *The Tower*. All four poems in the Tower Sequence have end-dates. This is worth remarking, because comparatively few of Yeats’s poems, as published in collected form, have these end-dates, and there are even fewer examples where consecutive poems have end-dates. Nicholas Grene has observed that the dates of all four poems in the sequence are slightly askew:

The re-dating and re-titling of ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ [written 1921, dated 1919] constitute a puzzle, which can perhaps best be seen in relation to the dating pattern of the first four poems in *The Tower*, in each of which there is some degree of adjustment of the actual dates of composition. (*Poetic Codes* 24)

Noting that the dates finally used (1927, 1926, 1923, 1919) become “signs that support a deliberately recessive movement of the four poems” (*Poetic Codes* 25), Grene observes that the insertion of the dates suggests a spatial, as well as a temporal, movement, constituting a spatial form, moreover, drawn from the geometry that Yeats outlined in *A Vision*:

Each of the poems in this sequence takes off from the previous one, undoing what the previous poem has seemed to have closed off, opening out as the focus moves backward in time. . . . This backward, darkening, spiralling movement one could call a widening gyre, and it is completed in ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’. (25-26)

In the final form in which the poems appeared in *The Tower* and in all subsequent collected editions, then, the poems appear not in chronological order but in counter-chronological order.

The Tower Sequence			
<i>Volume Order</i>	<i>End-Date</i>	<i>Chronological Order</i>	<i>End-Date (Date of Composition)</i>
"Sailing to Byzantium"	1927	"Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"	1919 (Written 1921)
"The Tower"	1926	"Meditations in Time of Civil War"	1923 (Written 1922)
"Meditations in Time of Civil War"	1923	"The Tower"	1926 (Written 1925)
"Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"	1919	"Sailing to Byzantium"	1927 (Written 1926)

Both Vendler and Grene see a "puzzle" in Yeats's sequences, suggesting that confusion will give way to clarity. So far as solving puzzles goes, Michael Wood sees Vendler as a strong proponent for harmonic closure in Yeats's use of form:

What Helen Vendler predominantly finds in Yeats' formal achievement is a satisfying mimesis of content. . . . Vendler says she 'would argue' that a certain section of

‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ ‘could not have seemed aesthetically credible to Yeats . . . unless its *thematic* notions found a mimetic reflection in the structure of the stanzas narrating them.’ I take it she would also argue, indeed is arguing, that *nothing* could seem aesthetically credible to Yeats if some such consonance were not present. (*Violence* 92, emphases in the original)

As the title of his chapter (“The Temptation of Form”) suggests, Wood is more guarded in his approach to any poem that displays “considerable amounts of noise and disorder” (*Violence* 92). Although he acquits Vendler of readings that are either “timid or reductive” (*Violence* 92), she does, he suggests, look for a way in which to redeem the clatter of “noise and disorder”, using the act of interpretation to restore wholeness and consonance: “But in the end Vendler always sees the mess as part of the poem’s plan, . . . and the plan redeems the world’s disorder” (*Violence* 93). Wood is less willing to force harmony where he does not perceive it. Like someone whose tongue is drawn irresistibly to an aching tooth, Wood probes those parts of the poetry that seem to him to register the breakdown of form.

If, as I argue, Yeats was trying to find forms to represent the dynamic geometry of *A Vision*, going further than Flaubert and Blake in the process, I am, like Vendler, trying to establish “a satisfying mimesis of content”. However, I am also trying to split the difference between Vendler and Wood by arguing that the mimesis is not necessarily achieved within individual poems, which retain their “noise and disorder”, but rather at the level of the sequence of poems and, by extension, at the level of the volume of poetry and, at its most ambitious level, in the relations between separate volumes of poetry. Furthermore, I

believe that there is an element of improvisation in Yeats's uses of inter-textual form, that he sometimes saw structural implications *ex post facto* and made retrospective adjustments to create the impression that it had all been thought out in advance. In prospecting for Yeats's geometry, I will be guided by the suggestion implicit in Yeats's figure of two beings running through one another: that for every movement in one direction, there is a corresponding movement in the other direction. To anticipate what follows, I will be arguing that Yeats's use of sequence allows him to establish relationships between poems that serve a model of temporality that escapes the linear model of time of most prose narratives, including his own²⁷.

I will be arguing, later, that "Sailing to Byzantium" can be read as the final poem in the Tower Sequence, but I propose to start *in media res* with "The Tower". "The Tower" is deeply concerned with the breakdown of symmetry between past and future, the balance

²⁷ This is not intended to suggest that narrative form is incapable of similar experiments.

Time's Arrow by Martin Amis (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), which reverses historical narrative, is an extreme example. There is also a vast literature based on time travel, much of which assumes the existence of a traversable linear temporality. In *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2013) David Wittenberg explores the extent to which time travel literature is concerned with narrative conservation through the resolution of paradoxes generated by trans-temporal interventions.

between experience and expectation. In “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death”, balance was achieved only by the elimination of past and future and the identification of the present – of life – with death. “The Tower” is concerned with the same balancing act, without eliminating past and future, and refusing the solution offered by death. In the poem, the poet is stuck with the perennial problem of ageing, that there seems to be more behind than there is ahead. Like anyone who is unwilling to grow old gracefully, Yeats will have to face the difficulty that Edward Said identifies as “*timeliness* . . . that what is appropriate to early life is not appropriate for later stages, and vice versa” (5, emphasis in the original). This issue of timeliness is partly conditioned by seeing a life as a narrative: a life-story. Every narrative, at least in the Aristotelian model, has a beginning, middle and end, and to the extent that a life-story follows that model, an ageing man is closer to the end than the beginning. Resistance of old age should, then, bring with it some resistance of narrative form. “The Tower”, I will argue, does precisely this. After “The Tower”, I will look in more detail at the question of direction and temporality in the other poems of the Tower Sequence.

“The Tower”: A Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man

For the poet who opens “The Tower”, time is unbalanced: he does not feel as old as he appears to be. Whether figured as a caricature tied to a dog’s tail or as a battered kettle at the heel, old age is so nauseating that it must be held physically apart. When he

remembers his earlier self, climbing Ben Bulbin to go fishing with the “livelong summer day to spend” (10), it is only to demonstrate that even then, when it might have been considered more age-appropriate (timely), he did not have the sense of anticipation that he now has, with wild imagination and an ear and eye that had never more “expected the impossible” (7). The language of expectation is significant. As Paul Ricoeur says, “the term ‘expectation’ is broad enough to include hope and fear, what is wished for and what is chosen, rational calculations and curiosity – in short, every private or public manifestation aimed at the future” (*T&N3* 208). Is all of this to be cut short for the poet? He recognizes, without accepting, the standard prescription for his ailment: a renunciation of creative powers and an embrace of philosophy. In other words, timeliness.

In Part II of the “The Tower”, the poet seems to be in a very different mood, as the opening stanza manifests a sense of agency, urgency, and power: “I pace . . . and stare / / / And send . . . / . . . and call / / / For I would ask . . .” (17-24). While he waits, he tells stories. There’s the one about Mrs. French and the severed ears of an insolent farmer. There’s Raftery and the peasants driven to distraction by his songs about Mary Hynes. And finally, the exploits of his own Hanrahan. The stories are prompted by the landscape he surveys. Both Mrs. French and Raftery lived in the neighbourhood of Thoor Ballylee and the fictional Hanrahan started out from somewhere “in the neighbouring cottages” (59). In each of the anecdotes, word or song combines with some derangement of the senses – blindness, drunkenness – to cause tragedy, hinting at the ways in which language escapes the intentions of its speaker, resulting in misdirection and misunderstanding, unintended and terrible consequences.

What seems to be at the back of the poet's mind is the power of language and the stability of its reference to reality. The back-story to the Mrs. French anecdote – in which a servant brings her the clipped ears of her enemy in “a little covered dish” (32) – turns on the fact that when she said, “I wish the fellow's ears were cut off! that might quiet him”, she was speaking metaphorically (or so she apparently claimed at her trial) and was taken literally (Barrington 39). Raftery's poetry about Mary Hynes raises the question that Yeats, as he reported in *The Celtic Twilight (Mythologies 28)*, put to his peasant informants: was Raftery in fact partially sighted? If he was blind, how could he have written poems or songs that imagined and represented beauty to such a pitch that it drove men to madness and drowning? Homer's example reminds him that words are not necessarily dependent on external referents for their power. Circling around Mrs. French, Raftery and Homer, the poet is stirring up associations between the power of language, its independence of external reality, and the ways in which infatuation and intoxication can derange the senses.

In its way, the poem is reprising one of the very old themes of Yeats's poetry, celebration of the creative capacity of language coupled with a suspicion of its power and effects. In the first poem of the *Collected Poems*, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” (1885), he came up with the formula that Roy Foster took for the title of one of his books on Yeats: “Words alone are certain good” (10). But in the very next poem, “The Sad Shepherd” (1886), he is already learning that there is a gap between the word spoken and the word heard, a gap in which anything might happen. In that poem, the sad shepherd whispers his story to a sea-shell, hoping to have it echoed back to him exactly as he told it, only to find that the sea-shell changed “all he sang to inarticulate moan” (27). There is a symmetry in his

return to the theme in one of the last poems of the *Collected Poems*, “Man and the Echo” (1939), where he wonders:

Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?

(11-12)

Yeats opened himself up to mockery in these lines and got it, most memorably from Paul Muldoon²⁸. But the lines are another example of his recurrent anxiety about aspects of his poetic calling, like that explored in the last chapter in the context of “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited”, but now raised to the level of an ethical concern with language itself. And in “Man and the Echo”, he goes on to enumerate other instances where words, spoken or unspoken, might have caused harm:

Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman’s reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked?
And all seems evil until I
Sleepless would lie down and die.

(13-18)

²⁸ In “Wystan”, the first poem of “7, Middagh Street” (*Poems 1968-1998*, Faber and Faber, 2001).

Here, even silence is implicated as the shadow of potential speech. In the same way, speech or song is ultimately the cause of the violence and tragedy recounted in the second poem of “The Tower”, the mutilation of a farmer’s ears and a man’s drowning. And those stories are described in colourful, even comic, terms, so that language is guilty twice over, first as the cause of the horror and tragedy, and then as the veil thrown over it.

The poem rambles on, until Hanrahan comes into the poet’s mind. In Hanrahan, another poet, the speaker brings “Yeats” as “I myself” (57) back into the story: “I thought it all out twenty years ago” (64). Although he starts to tell Hanrahan’s story, he breaks it off abruptly, having allegedly “forgotten” (73) what happens. He opts instead to “recall” (74) a nameless “ancient bankrupt master of this house” (80), whose place in time has been forgotten: “There’s not a neighbour left to say / When he finished his dog’s day” (78-79). As a bankrupt confined to the tower for six days a week (so Yeats tells us in a note to the poem), he might have found a way to resolve the troubling gap between expectation and mortality, the solution being isolation and the acceptance of loss.

The poet has spent a full nine stanzas assembling his interlocutors. Or rather, he has spent the time telling stories. It is only those stories that bring this audience to the mind of the reader. We can hear the poet addressing them – “As I would question all, come all who can; / Come old, necessitous, half-mounted man; / And bring beauty’s blind rambling celebrant;” (89-91) – but we are never actually permitted to see them or hear them. The reader is excluded from whatever it is that the poet sees. When the poet finally puts his question, he doesn’t bother to wait for a response. In words, at least. He claims to know

their answer by the look in their eyes. In this respect, the poem takes its place with other instances of one-sided necromancy in Yeats's work. In "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz", for example, the ghosts of the two sisters never appear to issue the command the poet requests. In "All Souls' Night", the tables are turned completely: "I have mummy truths to tell" (86). In "The Tower", the speaker seems to be looking only for confirmation of what he already knew. Mrs. French, Hanrahan *et al.* are simply the passive audience that he needs so that he can formulate his question. And the question itself is hardly overwhelming. Did they all rage against old age? Probably. It is not surprising then that they are "impatient to be gone" (102). One begins to suspect that, despite all those active verbs in the first stanza of Part II, and the later expression of lordly power – "And I myself *created* Hanrahan" (57, my emphasis) – the poet is being evasive. In Hanrahan, he is dwelling on past glories. Even if he had the power to create, that was twenty years ago.

It is possible to conclude that Yeats is dramatizing the situation of a poet testing, and resisting, the truth that it may well be time to bid the muse go pack. After all, at the juncture between the seventh and eighth stanzas, where he "forgets" what happened to Hanrahan, what has he angrily caught himself doing? Telling stories. That is what prose does, what narrative does:

Hanrahan rose in frenzy there

And followed up those baying creatures towards –

– O towards I have forgotten what – enough!

(71-73)

In “Red Hanrahan’s Curse”, (as Yeats would have known, but the speaker of “The Tower” might well claim to have forgotten), Hanrahan had recited a poem, “a curse upon old age and upon the old men”, that includes a curse on Peter Hart and Michael Gill because “their wandering histories are never at an end” (*Mythologies* 243). In “The Tower”, then, the speaker of Part II seems to have caught himself in the same trap, a windy old man telling rambling, interminable stories.

The poet’s fixation with Hanrahan seems to turn on the preoccupation with the loss of poetic power or of language itself. The ancient bankrupt master of the house was put forward as the more important character only three stanzas earlier, but it is clear by the end of the eleventh stanza that the poet has unfinished business with Hanrahan. The disturbance caused by Hanrahan’s appearance is evident in the syntax. Each of the first four stanzas contains a single sentence. The fifth contains two sentences. In the sixth and seventh stanzas, when Hanrahan appears, the syntax loses its way, as a single sentence stretches over two stanzas without sign of stopping. The poet simply interrupts himself: “. . . enough!” (73). After that syntactic disturbance, the sentence-stanza relationship settles down again, for a while. Each of the ninth and tenth stanzas comprises a single sentence. The eleventh is divided into a four-line question followed by a four-line response. But the syntax of the final two stanzas is broken only by the question mark at the end of second line of the final stanza, as if the re-appearance of Hanrahan has again caused the poet’s mind and syntax to wander.

When the speaker puts his question to Hanrahan, it admits of only two possible responses, and, for the second time, he doesn't wait for a reply. This time, he lectures Hanrahan on the reasons for the response that the poet presumed he would make. The poet had claimed to need all of Hanrahan's "mighty memories" (104). Why then doesn't Hanrahan get to speak? The poet had earlier claimed to have "forgotten" what happened to Hanrahan. What happened was that the bewitched Hanrahan found himself in the presence of the other-worldly beauty of Echtge, awestruck and incapable of speech: ". . . he was in dread now to speak. . . . he could not think of the right words. . . . said no word. . . . he said nothing at all" (*Mythologies* 221). Did the speaker bring the story to an abrupt end because he suddenly remembered that to go on would show up Hanrahan as a poet lost for words, exactly what he fears he is becoming himself? In the story, Hanrahan sleeps; when he wakes, Echtge is gone, and he has lost his memory. He spends an amnesiac year drifting from place to place until his return to the "old bawn" (65) unlocks his memory. He then tries to find his flesh-and-blood love, Mary Lavelle, only to discover that her cottage is in ruins and that she has emigrated to London or Liverpool. (Those city names would sound very out-of-place in the land of the dead conjured up in "The Tower", another reason to break off the narrative). The question about a woman won or woman lost makes little sense for Hanrahan. If he was to speak, he would surely point out that he lost two women and rarely thought of anything else. He lost Echtge because he was lost for words. He lost Mary Lavelle because he lost his memory.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the whole display – the elaborate arrangement of interlocutors, the grandiloquent (but oddly pointless) questions – is a sham and that the

poet is really putting something off. He prolongs his recitation, like Scheherazade in the fable, to put off the moment of reckoning with the temporal asymmetry registered in Part I of the poem, the gap between physical reality and imaginative expectation. The poet seems to use even the form of his questions to repair that loss of symmetry, with a comforting seesaw of neat categories: men/women, rich/poor, secret/public, won/lost.

As noted in Chapter 2, Helen Vendler has linked Part II of “The Tower” to both “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” and “All Souls’ Night”, both poems constructed around the presentation of “vignettes” and the “apparent spontaneity of recollection” (*Secret Discipline* 295). Part II of the “The Tower” differs from those two poems in one important respect. There is far less sense of a poet in control of his material, neatly laying out the order in which each character is introduced and dismissed. In “The Tower”, Hanrahan is certainly a disruptive presence. But the immediacy of the language suggests also that the poet is trying to compose his thoughts while still experiencing the surge of raw poetic material, whereas in the other two poems he has had time to organize his thought. In “The Tower”, he is improvising, free-wheeling, changing his mind and losing his way. The second part of the poem ends in an accusatory tone, belligerent even, far from the composed and measured tone of the other two poems.

Yeats in this mood meets Edward Said’s definition of late style as rejection of timeliness: “artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction” (7). In this respect, the poem is closer to another poem identified in Chapter 2 as belonging to an identifiable genre within Yeats’s poetry, “The

Municipal Gallery Re-visited”, where Yeats engages in a similar struggle to contain confusion and distress. In both poems, there is an extensive cast of characters, rapid juxtaposition of half-told stories, concern with the reference of language to reality, and a besieged poet attempting last-ditch self-justification.

If he has tested the muse in this second part of the poem, while hinting at the untrustworthiness of language in its power to misdirect and madden, Part III of “The Tower” finds the poet turning to an explicitly non-poetic use of language: “It is time that I wrote my will” (121). On one level, this is a surrender to timeliness. On another, it is a brilliant, imaginative solution to the problem of temporal asymmetry. However, its full significance can be measured only by widening the focus to take in “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, and relating parts of one to parts of the other, as Yeats’s definition of sequence suggests we should.

“The Tower” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War”: Inheritance and Loss

The law of probate rarely sets literary hearts racing. T.S. Eliot gave us the lean solicitor breaking seals in empty rooms and Dickens gave us *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*. However, just as George Steiner once claimed that “every human use of the future tense of the verb ‘to be’ is a negation, however limited, of mortality” (*Grammars* 5), the will as verbal instrument is one of the most imaginative ways in which humans enlist language in the attempt to surpass mortality. It is easy to see why it appeals to the poet of “The Tower” – it

invests words with a latent power that becomes effective only after death, when the testator's voice (and wills still employ the form of the first person singular, unlike contracts which normally use the third person) speaks from beyond the grave. If "The Tower" is concerned with the growing asymmetry between the limitless future of the poet's imagination and the diminishing future felt by the body, Yeats uses the will as a concrete device to resist that asymmetry by extending the life of the imagination beyond its mortal limit, the poet's voice telling "mummy truths" in earnest. The will can be taken as a figure for poetry itself in its ability to preserve the present utterance of the poet/testator. Just as Yeats had used the present tense as a kind of defibrillator to resuscitate the dead prose of past tense narration in *The Trembling of the Veil*, he uses the last will and testament as another way to insert the present tense of the poet's living voice into a future from which he will be absent.

The use of the trope of inheritance to organize the relations between past and future is fundamental to "The Tower" and to "Meditations in Time of Civil War", but the difference in the ways in which it is used in each poem shows how the poet changes between these two poems. This, in turn, places the local details and meanings of "The Tower", its concern with the failure of the body and of poetic power, in a different light. In tracing Yeats's use of the trope of inheritance, I propose to read "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and "The Tower" in chronological order of composition rather than in the volume order.

When Yeats had turned to the question of inheritance in 1914, he used the untitled poem that opens *Responsibilities* to depict his own inheritance as a mixture of blood and pride: “Merchant and scholar who have left me blood / That has not passed through any huckster’s loin,” (7-8). His regret then was that he had no children of his own to renew the contract between generations:

Pardon that for a barren passion’s sake,
 Although I have come close on forty-nine,
 I have no child, I have nothing but a book,
 Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine. (19-22)

The earlier-written of the two sequences, “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, takes up the question of inheritance where it had been left off in 1914. One of the dominant concerns of “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, appropriate for a poem about division, is the maintenance of balance through time. In this instance, the poet is more concerned with the balance of time on a generational scale than with the balance of time in his own life (the subject of “The Tower”). In the first poem of “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, “Ancestral Houses”, he speculates on what will happen to the house built as the antithesis of violence and bitterness if that violence and that bitterness abate in later generations. What seems to bother him is the same question that runs through the tangled narrative of “The Tower”, the loss of symmetry, here reflected in the productive tension between violence and bitterness, on one side, and sweetness and grace, on the other. That tension might give way to entropy:

But when the master's buried mice can play,
 And maybe the great-grandson of that house,
 For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse. (l. 22-24)

In "My Table", the third poem in "Meditations in Time of Civil War", Yeats dwells on the way in which Japanese craftsmen maintained an unchanging craft, a "marvellous accomplishment" (III. 17), passed on from "father unto son" (III. 19), that "through the centuries ran" (III. 20). However, the heroic effort required to maintain an unchanging craft that produces unchanging works of art in every generation demands that each successive generation tamp down the "aching heart" (III. 28) that produces it. But this is not sustainable either. At the end of a long line, the "most rich inheritor" (III. 25), burdened by the weight of generations of achievement, worn out by what *A Vision* in a similar context describes as the "struggle to keep self-control" (CW13 150) has "waking wits" (III. 31). The scream of Juno's peacock figures the end of an increasingly unbearable accomplishment.

In the following poem, "My Descendants", these concerns are situated in the context of the poet's own family. "The Tower" was concerned with the balance between past and future within the limits of the poet's own life, but now he considers himself as the fulcrum on which past and future generations, ancestors and descendants, must be balanced:

Having inherited a vigorous mind
 From my old fathers, I must nourish dreams
 And leave a woman and a man behind
 As vigorous of mind, and yet it seems

Life scarce can cast a fragrance on the wind,
 Scarce spread a glory to the morning beams,
 But the torn petals strew the garden plot;
 And there's but common greenness after that.

(IV. 1-8)

The poem marks a formal and semantic return to the opening "Ancestral Houses". Both are *ottava rima*, and the "what if" construction that appears four times in "Ancestral Houses" (l. 25, 29, 33, 38) surfaces again: "And what if my descendants lose the flower" (IV. 9). If the speaker of Part I of "The Tower" was rapt with wide-eyed expectation that the impossible was within reach, the "what if" of "My Descendants" pitches expectation ambiguously between trepidation and indifference. It might be a fearful question: what awful consequences will follow if my children squander their inheritance? Or it might be a shrug of the shoulders: what matter if they do squander their inheritance? The ambiguity means that it is not at all clear whether the following prayer is to be heard only if, and when, the inheritance is squandered or whether it is a prayer to be heard now, as a pre-emptive strike against a future possibility, eliminating that future just as the Irish airman had done:

May this laborious stair and this stark tower
 Become a roofless ruin that the owl
 May build in the cracked masonry and cry
 Her desolation to the desolate sky.

(IV. 13-16)

Unlike the builder of the house and gardens of “Ancestral Houses”, or the Japanese craftsmen of “My Table”, Yeats’s work on the tower is inspired simply by love and friendship. Rather than fear the “roofless ruin”, he celebrates the “stones” as sufficient monument despite the fact, or even because of the fact, that the tower will survive only for as long as that love or friendship does:

. . . whatever flourish and decline

These stones remain their monument and mine.

(IV. 23-24)

His seeming indifference to the ruinous fate of the tower shades into positive desire for immediate destruction. It is as if Macbeth was whispering in his ear, “If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well / It were done quickly” (*Mac.* I.vii. 1-2). In writing of Thoor Ballylee in this way, Yeats is worrying at a problem that recurs in his late poetry: if every achievement must turn to dust in the end, should he put his faith entirely in ephemeral things? Where does glory lie? Earlier in the poem, he had said:

Life scarce can cast a fragrance on the wind,
 Scarce spread a glory to the morning beams,
 But the torn petals strew the garden plot;
 And there’s but common greenness after that.

(IV. 5-8)

Elsewhere in his poetry, “glory” describes what can be handed down from generation to generation. In “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” (1932), for example, it is associated with the ancestral dwelling and garden:

A spot whereon the founders lived and died
 Seemed once more dear than life; ancestral trees
 Or gardens rich in memory glorified
 Marriages, alliances and families,
 And every bride's ambition satisfied.
 Where fashion or mere fantasy decrees
 Man shifts about – all that great glory spent –
 Like some poor Arab tribesman and his tent.

(33-40)

But sometimes Yeats seems to think that the Arab tribesman had it right all along. As seen in Chapter 2, in "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited", the last of these *ottava rima* poems, Yeats separates the word from its association with the ancestral house and its generations of family and transfers it to the public space of the municipal gallery and the brief bonds of friendship:

Think where man's glory most begins and ends
 And say my glory was I had such friends.

(54-55)

(Later, in the context of the four cardinal points of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, their opening and closing poems, I will look at another of the twists and turns taken by "glory".)

When the poet says that he must "leave a woman and a man behind", his words suggests that he is moving on, and moving *forward*, as though he has resolved, for now, his fears about the preservation of inheritance. If we follow the chronological arrow of time

forward, we follow the poet to “The Tower” and there we find a much more elaborate performance of the testamentary process, but one in which the other elements have all changed; neither inheritance nor beneficiaries are the same. One field of reference (historical, familial, material) has been left behind.

In Part III of “The Tower”, the poet is not concerned with the tower as property to be willed to his descendants. The object of his bequest is two-fold: pride and faith. The first is something transmitted from generation to generation, “pride of people” (128). This pride is a compound of freedom (“Bound neither to Cause nor to State, / Neither to slaves that were spat on, / Nor to the tyrants that spat,” (129-131), generosity (“The people of Burke and of Grattan / That gave, though free to refuse” (132-133)), abundance (“Pride, like that of the morn, / When the headlong light is loose, / Or that of the fabulous horn, / Or that of the sudden shower / When all streams are dry,” (134-138)) and, finally, solitude, the swan’s “last song” (144). In the compression of these lines, pride moves from social origins, through politics and nature, until it emerges in the figure of the swan that meets its death in song. The swan-song is an image of the poet’s own death-song in Part III of “The Tower”.

The only other part of the poet’s estate is faith. In *The Trembling of the Veil*, Yeats had admitted his need to create his own religion, describing how his personal selection of cultural artefacts formed “almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians” (CW3 115). Now, he describes it in terms that usurp even more explicitly

the role of God. In the “simple-minded religion” (CW3 115) of Yeats’s childhood, peace was a property of divinity, “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding” (Phil 4:7), but in “The Tower”, the poet crafts his own peace as a bird builds its nest:

I have prepared my peace
 With learned Italian things
 and the proud stones of Greece,
 Poet’s imaginings
 And memories of love,
 Memories of the words of women,
 All those things whereof
 Man makes a superhuman
 Mirror-resembling dream.
 (157-165)

The poet has partially resolved the problem that he faced in “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, when he was troubled by the symbolic relationship between ancestral and physical forms of inheritance by turning wholly towards what is intangible and invisible. Unlike the blood that “has not passed through any huckster’s loin” (8) of the opening poem of *Responsibilities*, neither faith nor pride is genetic. Both are achievements (Yeats might have said monuments) of intellect. Just as he sets aside material inheritance, he sets aside his living descendants when it comes to choosing legatees, opting instead for “upstanding men / That climb the streams until / The fountain leap, and at dawn / Drop their cast at the side / of dripping stone” (122-126). Whether the poet’s chosen beneficiaries are

“upstanding men” (122) or the more limited category of “young upstanding men” (174), in a court the will would probably be set aside for want of clarity. But this last will and testament is not being written for anyone but its author. It is evident from Curtis Bradford’s *Yeats at Work* (1965) that it is this seemingly insignificant aspect of the poem that gave Yeats most trouble (96-97). Bradford notes how many iterations these lines went through, as Yeats discarded adjective after adjective. He concludes that Yeats was not sure what qualities he wanted his heirs to have, and that the difficulty arose from Yeats’s “uncertainty about what he wanted to say” (97). As Bradford says, he clearly had “The Fisherman” (1916) in mind. Both poems use the same form, and it is evident from one of his draft work-sheets that Yeats even contemplated recycling the “grey connemara cloth” in which his fisherman was clothed (*Tower Manuscripts* 82-83). In another draft, he considers but rejects “vigourous” (sic) (*Tower Manuscripts* 84-85). He had used that word in “My Descendants” to describe the mind that he had inherited from his ancestors, and which he must tend and maintain so that he can leave it to his own children. In the very different atmosphere of “The Tower”, he is in a different realm.

What Yeats seems to be searching for is a category that melds both the “man who does not exist” (35) of “The Fisherman” and his own pre-poetic self: “Being of that metal made / Till it was broken by / This sedentary trade” (178-180). The poem seems to be suggesting that the poet’s preferred beneficiary is a composite of the various selves he could have become if he had not become a writer. In this respect, the poem offers another example of the kind of fluidity of self that Yeats tried to reconcile with the autobiographical writings discussed in Chapter 2, another way of “reversing the cinematograph” and

following a different course in life. However, this re-living of the past, and the pressure exerted on the poet's mind by the presence of other possible selves, suggests that the poet is inhabiting the kind of world described by "The Soul in Judgment" rather than the world of "The Great Wheel".

"The Tower" itself has followed the progress of the self that he did become. Between the "boyhood" (8) summoned up in Part I and to which Part III returns, we encounter, in Part II, a spectral version of the Yeats who walked the Western countryside, asking questions and collecting stories, the writer of "The Celtic Twilight" (1893) and "Stories of Red Hanrahan" (1897). Yeats was revising these collections in 1925, the year in which "The Tower" was written, and they were republished in 1927, with "Sailing to Byzantium" as a prefatory poem, creating a further link between the younger Yeats and the Yeats of *The Tower* (Foster *Life II* 326-327). In Part III of "The Tower", we are also reminded, by form and language, of the writer who composed "The Fisherman" in 1916. For all the poet's apparent desire to consult the local ghosts who appear in Part II of the "The Tower", the real ghosts gathering around him are his own earlier selves, and the possible selves that he could have grown into. In a solitude becoming ever more complete, then, it is not surprising that the poet has difficulty in identifying his beneficiaries and shapes them out of his own past, the various selves that he became and the potential selves that he did not. The poet has seemingly reached a condition best described in the words of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen":

A man in his own secret meditation

Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made

In art or politics;

(69-71)

Arrows of Time: Chronology and Sequence

When “The Tower” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War” are read in the volume order, the reader moves backwards in time and history, leaving behind the troubled, ghostly figure of “The Tower” to encounter the worldly figure of “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, still concerned with family, friends and the events of Ireland’s civil war. However, going back to the “puzzle of sequence”, the use of end-dates to inscribe the poems within calendrical time brings the reader up short at the end of each poem. The calendar is precisely what allows us “to traverse time in two directions” (Ricoeur *T&N3* 106) and each date functions as a sign-post. Once inscribed in calendrical time, the poems of the Tower Sequence can be read in either direction, from 1927 to 1919 or from 1919 to 1927. A reader nearing the end of the volume order (i.e., at the end of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”) is at the beginning of the chronological order which he or she can follow by turning back at the end of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and following the chronological arrow of time all the way back to “Sailing to Byzantium”. This reversal of perspective occurs at the end of the Tower Sequence, but it also happens, as an intermediate step, at the end of each poem. If we read the poems in the volume order, we can pause when we encounter any of the

end-dates and turn back to the first line of the immediately preceding poem, following the chronological order. Encountering this sign-post at the end of each poem, the Tower Sequence takes on the shape of a series of concentric circular forms, as if each poem as it appears in the volume order is wrapped around the poem that precedes it. Going back to the language of "The Second Coming" (1919), the Tower Sequence does indeed take on the shape of the falcon's widening gyre. In the diagrams of *A Vision*, the reader is shown the gyre side-on. In the Tower Sequence, it is reconstructed in the mind's eye from the point of view of the falconer, as each poem spirals around the poem that precedes it in the volume order (see figure 1 below).

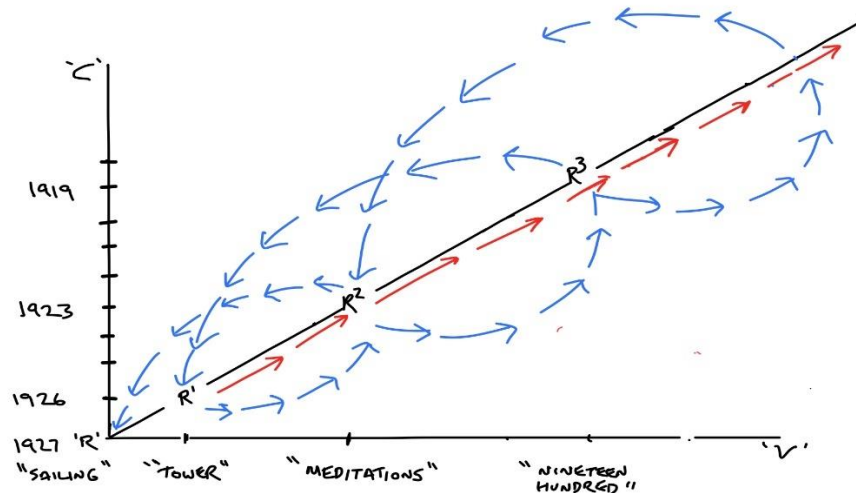


Figure 1: The Tower Sequence as a Spiral Form.

In this graph, the reader is positioned at 'R'. The chronological order of the Tower Sequence is marked on the 'C' axis and the volume order is marked on the 'V' axis. The broken red line marks the reader's passage along the volume order, and the broken blue line shows what happens to a reader who follows the chronological order. For example, at

'R¹', the reader has reached "The Tower", and at 'R²', the reader has reached the end of "The Tower" and is at the beginning of "Meditations in Time of Civil War". If the reader positioned at 'R¹' was to follow the chronological order, that would lead the reader back to the next poem in the chronological order, which is "Sailing to Byzantium". The increasing length of the interval between the poems – one year, three years, four years – produces a "widening gyre" effect by making each successive loop slightly bigger than the one before it.

Without reading "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" as closely as the two poems that precede it in the volume order, and Michael Wood's exemplary book-length study obviates the need for any such reading, it is still possible to say that it continues the movement evident in the volume order in its attention to the world in which the poet lives, its mess and violence. Several of Wood's insights corroborate the argument that Yeats is trying to replicate the dynamic geometry of *A Vision* in the poetry of the Tower Sequence. Wood shows how this works in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen". When he reads it, he appears to find that the poem itself is shadowed by another version, at odds with the words on the page. If he stabilizes his position by reference to one element of the poem's structure, he hears something that undermines that stability:

It looks then as if the rhymes and alliterations in the poem largely reinforce the visible, stated meanings, while the line divisions often complicate and threaten to unravel whatever argument is going on. (*Violence* 126)

And again:

The metre and rhythm of the poem, we now see (or hear) turn out to work in some of the ways the rhymes and line divisions do. They reinforce meanings available otherwise, and they complicate and unsettle those meanings. They also do something else. They organize the music of the poem, and they gesture to what is not music in it, to whatever there is in the poem that escapes music. They tell a story of their own, parallel to the visible plot of the poem (*Violence* 136).

Parallel to the *visible* plot of the poem. What Wood describes, it seems to me, is a formal representation of something that Yeats described in *A Vision*: the “oscillation, a revolution of the horizontal gyre” (*CW13* 159). The “horizontal gyre” is a movement that is the inverse of the movement most obviously visible. If Yeats was attempting to find poetic form for the dynamic geometry described in *A Vision*, and bearing in mind Yeats’s dictum that every movement in feeling or thought prepares “in the dark” (*CW5* 14) its own executioner, it would be utterly in keeping with those patterns that one should hear, as Wood does, something in the background noise of the poem that tells a story of its own, “parallel to the visible plot of the poem”.

Wood also gives evidence of finding, when he completes his reading of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”, that the reader has been brought not to the end of something but to a condition of anticipation:

We don’t know what we are waiting for, and we don’t know how to wait for it. And even when we see the fiend and the love-lorn lady, and hear the emphatic stresses

of the last line, we are still waiting perhaps, because we may feel they are not it,
whatever it is. (*Violence* 137)

We are still waiting, perhaps, because Yeats is deliberately putting off narrative closure. And if we are still waiting, it is because the restlessness of these poems is such that the reader is expected to keep shuttling backwards and forwards between them. In looking at the trope of inheritance, I have read the poems in the direction that shows a movement in which the poet takes leave of one field of reference (historical, familial, material) to move towards another (spectral, solitary, immaterial). And it is the dynamic relationship between the poems that unifies the symbols that Yeats uses. This is most obviously apparent in the way in which the tower itself registers these changes.

As the central image in the Tower Sequence, the fabric of Thoor Ballylee reflects the temporal currents of the Tower Sequence. It is not the same tower in each poem, and the poet who occupies it changes too. In the first stanza of Part II of “The Tower”, tower and poet are imagined in vigorous language:

I pace upon the battlements and stare
On the foundations of a house, or where
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth;
And send imagination forth
Under the day’s declining beam, and call
Images and memories
From ruin or from ancient trees,

For I would ask a question of them all.

(17-24)

The “battlements” place the tower in the era of those rough men-at-arms, cross-gartered to the knees. Similarly, the use of “loophole” rather than “window” reminds us that the narrow aperture once allowed the tower’s defenders to launch arrows from protected positions. The semantic recognition of these features as “battlements” and “loopholes” simultaneously registers the *old age* of the tower by reminding the reader of the centuries that have passed since those words were appropriate (or timely, to use Edward Said’s term) and brings into the present an image of the tower in its *youth*, when it was inhabited by men-at-arms. In the careful selection of an untimely noun, Yeats concentrates the dual time-world of the entire Tower Sequence in a single word.

For contrast, the reader can look at the final poem of “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, where the line that opened the second poem of the “The Tower” is transformed to suggest both physical weakness in the poet, and the corresponding dilapidation of the tower. We move from:

I pace upon the battlements and stare (17)

to

I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone, (VII. 1).

As the tower is his primary symbol, the poet changes as it does. In “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, the commanding necromancy assumed by the poet of Part II of “The Tower” is gone, and the poet is forced to suffer an uncontrollable flood of unwanted guests:

Frenzies bewilder, reveries perturb the mind;
 Monstrous familiar images swim to the mind’s eye.

(VII. 7-8)

This loss of narrative control is analogous to the lapse into trance-like reverie that takes place in *The Trembling of the Veil* and in the ambush that Yeats suffers in “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited”.

In “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, the tower doubles as a place of retreat (“I . . . / / . . . turn towards my chamber, . . . /” (V. 11-14), “I turn away and shut the door, . . . /” (VII. 33)) and of physical and intellectual confinement (“We are closed in, and the key is turned / on our uncertainty; . . . / (VI. 6-7)). If we follow the chronological arrow of time, this ending prepares us for the solitude of the poet of “The Tower”, who identifies with the bankrupt confined to the tower. At the end of “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, the reader takes leave of a poet who seems to be the opposite of the truculent abstraction-hating poet who opens “The Tower”:

The abstract joy,
 The half-read wisdom of daemonic images,
 Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy.

(VII. 38-40)

I am saying, then, that in the poems of the Tower Sequence, Yeats has used the volume order and the chronological order to embody two movements, the “double cones”. Going back to his image from *A Vision*, of a being racing into the past through a being racing into the future, the structure of the sequence is such that Yeats has cast his reader as the being racing into the past, passing through the figure of the poet, racing into the future. Ultimately, it is the act of reading that completes the figure (hinted, perhaps, in the insistence, in both “Sailing to Byzantium” and “The Tower”, on “study” and “studying” as generative activities). And the future into which the poet races culminates with “Sailing to Byzantium”.

“Sailing to Byzantium”: Lovely Ingenious Things

I have been arguing that the structure of the Tower Sequence gives form to the complex temporality of Yeats’ gyres “which for simplicity of representation we may place end to end though they are in reality one within the other” (*CW13* 109). We can bring this view of Yeats’s enriched temporality to bear on Helen Vendler’s reading of “Sailing to Byzantium”, a reading which is particularly relevant here because Vendler dwells on the specific issues of sequence, form and temporality. After noting that each stanza is identical in form and separated from the others by Roman numerals, Vendler effectively asks whether Aristotelian poetics can be applied to this type of lyric structure:

Is there a reason for the order of the stations in Yeats's Roman-numeraled poem? Or could the stations of "Sailing to Byzantium" be shuffled into a different order? Especially when all the stations are equal in weight, this question becomes inevitable. (*Secret Discipline* 30)

The question could be asked of many lyrics. In "The Wild Swans of Coole", Yeats did change the stanza order of a supposedly finished poem. Terence Brown asserts that "the fact that the stanza order could be altered without breaking a sequence of logic, alerts us to its liquid, brooding introspection" (*Life* 236). But it may also be a measure of its purity of a lyric in its ability to remain coherent while undergoing this type of re-ordering, something that should be harder for a structure more reliant on narrative form. Vendler starts to answer the question by reference to time and space:

Since poetry is a *temporal* art, we tend to feel that there exists a temporal advance in a poem: first this, then this, then this. Although this is so, poems are also structured *spatially* (as when stanzas behave like "rooms," as their name implies, or exist on different "levels" – heaven, earth, hell). Temporality and spatiality both contribute to the "argument" or set of successive implicit assertions in any poem. Having the "last word" is important in a poem, as in life. (*Secret Discipline* 30, emphasizes in the original)

Vendler turns to the act of reading or recital to justify a narrativizing methodology. Because a reading or recital takes time, the poem too will "advance". (This approach proceeds by ignoring, for so long as the narrative is being constructed, the use of rhythm,

refrain, and rhyme – repetition in a variety of guises – all of which formally obstruct or resist the idea of progress.) Vendler’s argument leads her to conclude that, in the third stanza, the poet is offered a place in the artifice of eternity, which, in the fourth stanza, he rejects in favour of the artifice of time. Her explication of “the artifice of eternity” is based on the relative representative capacities of two different art forms:

I take it that “the artifice of eternity” represents the effort to render visible in some art-form the invisibilia of the eternal; its counterpart, “the artifice of time,” is the effort to render in art intelligible temporal events. (*Secret Discipline* 33)

Poetry is a temporal art: “first this, then this, then this”. What is interesting in Yeats’s poetry of this period, however, as with his autobiographical writings, is his struggle to overcome the temporal aspects of poetry that are incompatible with his vision of time, his desire “to break the teeth of Time” (4), as he puts it forcefully in “The New Faces” (1922). In this respect, his poetry seems to court another level of reading, described by Northrop Frye in *The Great Code*:

Reading words in sequence, however, is the first of two critical operations. Once a verbal structure is read, and reread often enough to be possessed, it “freezes”. It turns into a unity in which all parts exist at once, which we can then examine like a picture, without regard to the specific movement of the narrative. We may compare it to the study of a music score, where we can turn to any part without regard to sequential performance. The term “structure”, which we have used so often, is a metaphor from architecture, and may be misleading when we are speaking of

narrative, which is not a simultaneous structure but a movement in time. The term “structure” comes into its proper context in the second stage, which is where all discussion of “spatial form” and kindred critical topics take their origin. (62-63)

Frye’s comments on architecture and metaphor seem particularly relevant in view of Yeats’s choice of symbol in the tower. In “All Souls’ Night”, Yeats put the second part of Frye’s critical operations in the following terms:

Such thought – such thought have I that hold it tight
 Till meditation master all its parts,
 Nothing can stay my glance
 Until that glance run in the world’s despite
 To where the damned have howled away their hearts,
 And where the blessed dance;
 Such thought, that in it bound
 I need no other thing,
 Wound in mind’s wandering
 As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound. (91-100)

In other words, the temporal constraints that permeate and order the world in which the poem is written are resisted by the world of the poem, and that resistance grows in proportion as the world of the poem is modelled on spatial form.

In “The Tower”, one of the tenets of the faith proclaimed in Part III is that man made “sun and moon and star”, the bodies by which the most objective form of time,

cosmological time, is measured. In the Introduction, I argued that this claim is an example of the poet conducting a raid on the field of physics, an attempt to overcome what Ricoeur calls the *aporia* between cosmological time and phenomenological time by making the outrageous claim that man made the cosmos and is therefore the sole author of time. The poet of “The Tower”, a lifelong student of Blake and of Renaissance magic, is unlikely to settle for anything less than some measure of divinity²⁹. This suggests that Yeats, in these poems, is not in a mood to settle for a small place in the great scheme of things. And this helps to explain why, when Vendler places weight on the “last word” in the shape of the final stanza, it is the apparent triviality of the poet’s aspirations in the final stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium” that troubles her:

At first, to come down from the sublimity of eternity to a mere earthly dwelling
(even if a palace) causes in the speaker a self-deprecation and a sense of diminished

²⁹ It is beyond the scope of this study to address Yeats’s occultism. However, the reference, in “Meditations in Time of Civil War” to Milton’s *Il Penseroso* certainly suggests that there is an occult current in these poems. Quoting the passage from *Il Penseroso* describing what happens at midnight in Milton’s “high lonely tower”, Frances Yates says that the lines “brilliantly suggest the atmosphere of the Hermetic trance, when the immortal mind forsakes the body, and religiously consorts with demons, that is to say, gains the experience which gives it miraculous or magical powers” (*Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. 1964. Routledge Classics, 2002. p.308)

function, as the little bird sings not to praise God but “to keep a drowsy emperor awake.” (*Secret Discipline* 34)

Unlike Sturge Moore, who felt that the poem’s ambition was undone by the poet’s apparent come-down in the world (Foster *Life II* 401-402), Vendler does her best to convince us that the poet in the fourth stanza is better off, having awoken from the mistaken ambition of the third stanza and taken the correct measure of his possible achievement. However, this is another of those instances where it helps to read the Tower Sequence according to Yeats’s definition of sequence, as an arrangement in which each part is related to another part and where it is the sum of the relationships that really matters. A different reading is suggested by one of Michael Wood’s insights into “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”. Wood speculates that it is not necessarily the great monuments that tell us most about what time does to human achievement. The Parthenon may still astonish in its ruined form (and certainly more than would Yeats’s Ballylee in its damp, dilapidated and flood-damaged condition), but it is really the lovely ingenious things that deserve our attention:

The ingenious lovely things are the reverse of monuments: fragile instances of the art of an ancient time, a statue made from an olive tree, carved ivories, grasshoppers and bees made of gold. These things lasted, not forever, but for a spell, because they were, it seems, magically protected ‘from the circle of the moon | that pitches common things about’. They were delicate and lovely, and the surprise is not that they are gone, but that they should have lasted beyond their own cultural moment at all. (*Violence* 37)

To the extent that “Sailing to Byzantium” does represent the culmination of one movement in the Tower Sequence, it is a movement that re-instates, against the regressive movement of history experienced in the reader’s progress through the volume order, the older definition of progress as a process of spiritual ascent rather than a movement forward in time. Reinhart Koselleck describes it in the following terms:

In places where theologians spoke of *profectus*, less often of *progressus*, this progress . . . referred to the soul’s salvation. In this way, Augustine, using a biological metaphor, compared the people of God to a human being reared by God. From age to age, the people of God would advance over time – and upon this the metaphor turns – rising from the ephemeral to the experience of the eternal, ascending from the visible to the invisible. (223)

Yeats would not have agreed with the exclusively Christian implications of this definition, but the process of spiritual ascent is common to most of the magical traditions with which he was familiar.

In Vendler’s comprehensive rewriting of “Sailing to Byzantium” as a narrative, the desires expressed in the third stanza are presented as mistaken and excessive. The fourth stanza sees the recovering poet back on *terra firma*, so to speak. But if she is right, why then would anyone who has read her analysis ever need to read the poem again? The reader will know in advance that the poet is going to make a mistake, which will be corrected before the end, with a general sense of let-down. That is the type of reading to which Jonathan Culler objects in his study of lyric. The poem loses some of its value by being forcibly

narrativized. Yeats's own comment on his reading of Blake might be apposite here. If we follow Yeats's own lead, and give up a narrativizing approach, we can start to see the four stanzas not as consecutive stations, to use Vendler's term, but as co-present in the way that Frye describes. If we extend Frye's "spatial" approach to the entirety of the Tower Sequence, we see "Sailing to Byzantium" at the apex of one of the cones, the most spiritual, least worldly. This is confirmed by the language of the poem where there are no longer any explicit references to the poet's life, whether in the restricted terms of "The Tower" or the more expansive terms of "Meditations in Time of Civil War". And if we remember that, in the chronological order, the poem follows "The Tower", where the poet struggled to rid himself of the difficulties of narrative – the "first this, then this" of all those rambling stories – we will be better prepared to meet a poet and a poem no longer constrained by narrative forms, a pure lyric. And in the last lines, the poet's choice of form is deliberately set against mimesis, against the very idea of representation. This is not a bird that anyone has ever seen: "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing," (25-26). And its song is not mimetic of any chronology that can be represented by narrative (first this, then this, then this). It sings of temporal categories that are exclusive of one another or disconnected from one another – "what is past, *or* passing, *or* to come" (32, my emphases). The implication is that the same song can be taken for any one of those categories, there no longer (in the realm he aspires to inhabit) being any difference between them.

"Sailing to Byzantium" can be read as the beginning or end of the Tower Sequence, depending on whether the poems are read in the volume order or chronologically. In the

poem itself, the poet never achieves release from the natural world that he wants to leave. As with much of Yeats's work in this period, it ends on an anticipatory note. Just as the poet of "The Tower" contemplates, in its final lines, everything but his own death, in the final lines of "Sailing to Byzantium" the poet is still in nature, dreaming of supernatural form. The poem continues Yeats's resistance of formal closure, of the satisfactory ending promised by narrative form.

All four poems, then, explore the idea of timeliness, as Said defined it, in terms of balance. In "The Tower", the problem is framed within a single life-span, in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" as a generational problem. In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen", the poet explores the end of temporal cycles, when it becomes apparent that the past thought to be leading to one end was preparing for its opposite. In "Sailing to Byzantium", he comes close to leaving behind the world of the "dying generations", but he goes only so far as articulating his desire.

Taken together, as explorations of temporality and timeliness, a "sequence" as Yeats defined it emerges from the poems. The organization of the sequence, the counterpointing of volume order and the chronological order (as adjusted by Yeats), generates the tension necessary to embody the double cones of Yeats's geometry.

The inverted chronology of the Tower Sequence is one example of a technique that pervades Yeats's late work. I would argue that he achieves some of his most important poetic effects through this process of inversion, of putting things in an order which is precisely the opposite of normal expectation. We have seen, in the last chapter, how *The*

Trembling of the Veil ends in a reversal of historical narrative as the poet traces events backwards in history. Another example from the last chapter suggests how this gradually became a settled aspect of Yeats's practice. "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited" commences with Yeats responding to a set of paintings on subjects of Irish history – soldiers and pilgrims, flags and priests and so on – before concentrating his attention on John Synge and Augusta Gregory. However, in the prose piece that accompanied the first publication of the poem, he narrates his visit to the gallery in an order that is almost exactly the opposite of the order in which the poem develops. For the precision with which it recapitulates the poem, with the difference that the paintings are seen *in reverse*, it is worth quoting at length:

For a long time I had not visited the Municipal Gallery. I went there a week ago and was restored to many friends. I sat down, after a few minutes, overwhelmed with emotion. There were pictures painted by men, now dead, who were once my intimate friends. There were the portraits of my fellow-workers; there was that portrait of Lady Gregory, by Mancini, which John Synge thought the greatest portrait since Rembrandt; there was John Synge himself; there, too, were portraits of our Statesmen; the events of the last thirty years in fine pictures: a peasant ambush, the trial of Roger Casement, a pilgrimage to Lough Derg, event after event: Ireland not as she is displayed in guide book or history, but, Ireland seen because of the magnificent vitality of her painters, in the glory of her passions. (CW1 686-687, n. 354)

To the extent that the arrow of time is aligned with the direction of the sentence and, by implication, with every discourse formed out of sentences, so that each sentence points to the future, it becomes apparent that one of the recurring temporal structures of Yeats's late work is the deliberate inversion of this norm, so that the movement forward is resisted by a movement in the opposite direction, every step forward a step backwards.

This technique of temporal inversion underlies at least one of the poems in the Tower Sequence, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen". In another of his insights, Michael Wood, thinking about the way that Yeats often conflates the times of "just before" and "long enough after for hindsight", notices that the entire poem is, in temporal terms, back to front:

'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' is poised between these two times, *in reverse order*: first the aftermath of the wrecking event, then the waiting for immediate ugly revelation. (*Violence* 14, my emphasis)

This seems to repeat the structure of "The Second Coming" (1919). In the first part of that poem, anarchy has already arrived and innocence has already drowned in the blood-dimmed tide. But that is merely a prelude. In the second stanza, the reader is taken back to the moment of revelation, when it is still possible to speculate about what might be coming.

It is even arguable that Yeats uses this technique of inversion to structure some of his most striking metaphors and similes. For example, in the third stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium": "O sages standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall," (17-18). Although there is no movement of time in these two lines, simply an address to the sages in

real time, it is unsettling because a reader would expect “the gold mosaic of a wall” to be something that might cause the poet to look for an extravagant simile or metaphor, and “God’s holy fire” to be that linguistic extravagance. But here the relationship is the other way around, God’s holy fire is taken as the normality which calls for hyperbolic comparison, which Yeats finds in the far less exotic form of a gold mosaic.

The inversion of temporality is repeated in the chronological trajectory of *The Tower*, which begins in 1927 and ends in 1920. The end-date appended to “All Souls’ Night” in both versions of *A Vision* was omitted from the editions of *The Tower* published before *The Winding Stair*, finding its way back into the text in 1933 in the *Collected Poems* published that year, as though the importance of the temporal co-ordinates of *The Tower* became apparent to Yeats as he devised ways to “pair” the two volumes. And it is necessary to look at some of the ways in which these two volumes relate to each other in order to trace the kind of unity that Yeats saw in the image of the “double cones”.

The Tower and The Winding Stair

Although I would not go as far as David Young, whose *Troubled Mirror: A Study of “The Tower”* (1987) argues strongly for a whole-book design, with no poem’s inclusion or placement less than significant, a brief look at the relations between *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* should give some sense of the extent to which Yeats may have attempted to replicate the kind of experimental structure of the Tower Sequence on a larger scale.

The thematic and structural similarities between the two volumes have been widely noted. I want to consider the spatial arrangement between them. If for no other reason, this is justified because the two titles suggest that the two volumes of poetry should be considered as spatial rather than temporal forms. Yeats's winding stair is situated *within* his tower, not *before* or *after* it. The image of one world within another is an integral part of the language of *AVA*: "two worlds lying one within another" (*CW13* 121). Having established the care with which Yeats selected the opening and closing poems of each volume, I will look at the implications of those choices.

The Winding Stair opens with "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz", to which Yeats has affixed the date "October, 1927", this time more or less truthfully. The poem was written in 1927, as was the poem which concludes the volume, "From the 'Antigone'". The date appended to the Gore-Booth elegy precedes the publication date of *The Tower*, and coincides with the year, at least, of the poem that opens the earlier volume. In its rare use of a month as well as year, it also references the closing poem of *The Tower*, which was written in October 1920³⁰, although it refers to season rather than month in its end-date. Remembering that the entire contents of *The Winding Stair* are bounded at their outer limits by two poems that are joined temporally and thematically, the entire contents

³⁰ There are conflicting accounts of the date of composition. Ann Saddlemyer cites a letter from Yeats to Ezra Pound, sent before the trip to Dublin described in Chapter 2, in which Yeats mentions the "long poem, 100 lines" that he had just completed (265).

of the later volume can then be seen, both temporally, as well as spatially, as contained by the earlier volume.

If we assume that Yeats, following the system, habitually thought of interlocking structures in the form of cones, gyres or spirals, one moving within the other, and treat the opening and closing poems of each volume as the base of one of Yeats's cones, and the central poems as the apex of that cone, other correspondences emerge. In *The Tower*, "Sailing to Byzantium" is situated at the base, as configured by opening and closing poems. In *The Winding Stair*, "Byzantium" was moved by Yeats so that it is situated towards the centre, or apex. In the earlier volume, the Ballylee poems are close to the base, positioned within the opening sequence, whereas in *The Winding Stair*, "Coole Park, 1929" and "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" are situated closer to the apex. At the apex of *The Winding Stair* are two poems that combine a small movement *forward in time* (1929 to 1931) with a small movement in *space* from *west to east* (from Coole Park to Ballylee), in opposition to *The Tower's* base, which combines a large movement *backwards in time* (1927 to 1920) with a large movement in space from *east to west* (from Byzantium to Oxford).

In "Coole Park, 1929", Yeats wrote of "The intellectual sweetness of those lines / that cut through time or cross it withershins" (23-24). When applied to *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, I would say that the line that cuts through time is the synchronic line at the base of *The Winding Stair*, and the line that cuts it withershins, or counter-clockwise, is the timeline of *The Tower*, of the opening sequence, and of the volume in its entirety. In combination, the co-ordinates of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* establish a model of

what Yeats described in *A Vision* as “time externally perceived” (CW13 142), and even if the model is approximate, a closer look at the opening and closing poems of *The Winding Stair* will show how this type of model brings out temporal implications that might otherwise remain in obscurity.

“In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz” and “From the ‘Antigone’”:

Composition of the elegy for the sisters was prompted by the death of Constance Markiewicz on 15 July 1927 at the age of 59. She had been predeceased by her younger sister, Eva, who died on 30 June 1926 at the age of 56. The poem attracts interpretations concerned with Yeats’s attitude to the sisters’ politics and to women more generally. In these readings, it belongs with poems such as “A Prayer for my Daughter”. Because of the sisters’ background, it is frequently read in the context of Anglo-Irish identity, the big house and Ascendancy-related guilt. In this light, it belongs with poems such as “Ancestral Houses” from “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, “Coole Park, 1929”, and “Coole and Ballylee” (1932). The implications of the formal properties of the poem have been thoroughly considered by both Bornstein and Vendler (*Secret Discipline* 222-231). I propose to consider how the language and structure of the poem contributes to an exploration of temporal complexities, and to read it in relation to “From the ‘Antigone’”, the poem that closes *The Winding Stair*.

So far as the grammar of time and tense is concerned, it is immediately striking that there is no verb in the quatrain that opens the poem. The text resembles stage directions, the careful placement of the elements in a set awaiting action. When language is used like this, it is hard for the reader, when describing it, to resist metaphors drawn from painting. As we saw in Chapter 2, this is the approach that Helen Vendler takes, describing these lines as “the stilled verbless tableau with which the poem opens (a painting presented through nouns – *light, Lisadell, windows, girls*) . . .” (*Secret Discipline* 226). George Steiner, in his consideration of verb forms in *After Babel*, articulates the question prompted by these four lines:

Does the past have any existence outside grammar? . . . No raw data from the past have absolute intrinsic authority. Their meaning is relational to the present and that relation is realized linguistically. Memory is articulated as a function of the past tense of the verb. (138)

Without a verb, there is nothing to indicate whether this is an act of remembrance, a ritual of naming or, in the time-world constructed within the poem, both at the same time, bringing a memory into existence by naming the elements out of which it is being composed. Thereafter, Yeats begins to build another of his doubled or reflected worlds. In such a short poem, a mere 32 lines, it is remarkable how many pairs Yeats manages to include. Apart from the two sisters of the title, we are given light and shadows, autumn and summer, older and younger, mansion and gazebo, right and wrong, innocent and beautiful.

When the poem's topographical focus leaves Lisadell, the "girls" are separated in space (both within the poem, where specific lines are devoted to each, and in the world to which the poem refers, where each takes up different activities) and discriminated by age ("older" (7), "younger" (10)). After the opening quatrain, verbs are used only in the present tense. In Vendler's schema, the first part of the poem is stationed in real life ("the active worldly life historically led by the sisters") and the second in the afterlife ("the imaginative plane of an afterlife sage-realm where the sisters, now shades, dwell") (*Secret Discipline* 228). In the terms of "Sailing to Byzantium", these are the worlds of gold mosaic and holy fire respectively. However, Vendler's narrativizing approach doesn't fully account for the way in which the tense takes the poet's voice through the sisters' lives. Vendler's analysis reads a past tense ("led") back into the poem. There is no past tense in the poem. If the poem were untitled, there would be nothing in the first part of the poem to indicate even that the sisters were dead. It would read as if the poet were calling to mind some friends with whom he had lost touch, reminding himself that he habitually ("Many a time" (14)) thinks of calling on them. If we update the painting metaphor to take in cinematic technique, the first part of the poem is like a single tracking shot that moves with the sisters as they live and act, without ever over-taking the sisters to occupy a vantage-point from which the past tense can be used. There is no reference to the sisters' deaths in the poem, merely a silent break between two modes of utterance. In the terms used by Jonathan Culler, this is an exemplary lyric in that it exists wholly in the present and in the present tense.

The second part of the poem is markedly different from the first. If the *abba* rhyme-scheme gives each quatrain a chiasmic or reflexive structure, this same structure is impressed upon the content of the poem. The first part of the poem is written as though the sisters are living, but is marked by the poet's lack of contact with them. He speaks to himself. In the second part, this is reversed. The sisters belong now to the realm of the dead ("shadows" (21)) but the speaker addresses them as if living.

In the second part of the poem, the present tense comes to life in immediate speech. As said above, in relation to the second poem of "The Tower", the poem gives us another example of Yeats's one-sided necromancy, where he speaks to the dead but they never respond. In the Gore-Booth elegy, rather than ask a question, he seeks a command, authorization to light a match to start the fire that will burn down time. Unsurprisingly, in a poem of pairs and doubles, the poet makes his request twice, first in lines 26-27 and again in line 32. His first request joins the language of resurrection ("Arise") with the language of destruction:

Arise and bid me strike a match
 And strike another till time catch;
 (26-27)

The poem closes with the poet's unanswered cry. The language presses on the edge of the future, a future that would be embodied in the shades' response, if it ever came, but it never comes. If the poem opens without a past, it ends without a future. In the middle ground, there is only an endless waiting in the present tense.

There are other linguistic echoes in the second stanza. The word “fire” is withheld in these lines; it is suggested by the references to matches and conflagration. In a moment of proleptic imagination, the poet considers what he would have the shadows do, in the event of the wished-for conflagration:

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.
 (28-32)

The combination of sages and fire, and the poem’s position as the opening poem of the volume, establishes a clear relationship with “Sailing to Byzantium”. In “Sailing to Byzantium”, the aging poet hopes for a gathering into the “artifice of eternity” (24). As noted above, the closing line of the poem caused Yeats much afterthought. Foster’s biography recalls T. Sturge Moore’s objection that a world in which a golden bird sings of what is past and passing and to come seemed no less in thrall to time than the world of “dying generations” (3) the poet was seeking to escape (*Life II* 401-402). Yeats set himself to revisit the earlier poem when he wrote “Byzantium”. However, the Gore-Booth elegy responds, albeit more obliquely, to the earlier poem, suggesting why it earned its place at as the opening poem in the volume. No longer is the poet in thrall to the sages, awaiting instruction. Now he has something to tell them, albeit indirectly, *via* the Gore-Booth sisters.

In the earlier poem, the poet cedes to the sages control of the “artifice of eternity”. If the submerged dialogue between the two poems suggests anything, it is that there is a correspondence between the “the artifice of eternity” (24) of the earlier poem and “the great gazebo” (30) of the later. What he seems to want to tell them, is that eternity, as a dimension of time, is a human creation, a function of grammar, and can be made and unmade by language. No longer a bird that sings of what is past or passing or to come, the Gore-Booth elegy is the proof he would put to the sages that time is made by the poet’s language. He can eliminate past and future at will.

If the poem responds to “Sailing to Byzantium”, it has another counterpart in “From the ‘Antigone’”. Both poems are concerned with the choices made by sisters, in context of personal and public spheres. George Bornstein, in his introduction to the facsimile edition of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, comments on the symmetry:

In the case of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, Yeats not only composed the opening “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz” and closing “From the ‘Antigone’” at nearly the same time but even used the same manuscript pages for some of the drafts. So if the ordering [of poems within the volume] is not chronological, what is it? It is usually both thematic and formal instead, and often displays a dynamically developing argument in which poems interact with and “correct” one another. (xii-xiii)

The symmetries between the two poems are obvious. Each is concerned with the cost of disrupting the public order, each has two sisters. The asymmetries are more telling, and

suggest why they are set in opposition to one another, and separated by the entire contents of the volume, when they had once been paired on a single page of the draft manuscript.

The Gore-Booth elegy begins with a present tense narration of action and ends with an invocation (to the sisters). “From the ‘Antigone’” begins with an invocation (to Eros or love, the unnamed addressee) and ends with a present tense narration when the speaker watches as Antigone “Descends into the loveless dust” (16). In the first poem, the purpose of the speaker’s invocation is to seek the command that will destroy time. In the second poem, the speaker’s invocation is directed at the overthrow of space:

Overcome the Empyrean; hurl
Heaven and Earth out of their places,
(7-8)

If the wishes expressed in the two poems were fulfilled, the order of creation would be reversed. In the Augustinian model of creation, time did not exist before God’s creative act, and creation, in the Biblical tradition, is achieved by *fiat*; divine utterance, divine breath. In the poet’s use of his own *breath* – “Bid me strike a match and blow” (32) – the process, if it could only be initiated, would reverse the unfolding of creation to a point where time was not. In the later poem, the poet asks love to act as the overwhelming force. The ripples of destruction will flow outwards in space, from the human (“rich man” (3), “Mariners, rough harvesters” (5)) to the divine (“Gods upon Parnassus” (6)) to the very conditions that organize and regulate spatial form (“Empyrean” (7), “Heaven and Earth” (8)). I have said

above that when Yeats uses the word “glory”, it is often connected with the apparently permanent monuments of human achievement, with Lady Gregory’s house and gardens as the most obvious example. In this poem, the word is used to reflect the exact opposite of that permanence, as the force that will destroy families and cities:

That in the same calamity
 Brother and brother, friend and friend,
 Family and family,
 City and city may contend,
 By that great glory driven wild.

(9-13)

The Gore-Booth elegy and “From the ‘Antigone’”, originally drafted on a single manuscript sheet³¹, are separated in a textual version of what George Steiner, in speaking of Parmenides’ model of cosmological origins, calls “parthogenetic self-scission” (*Grammars* 30). Their thematic and formal similarities suggest a possible unity. A single poem, *in potentia*, is split into twin poems, one concerned with time, one concerned with space, placed at the outer limits of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*. However, this centrifugal disintegration and separation is resisted by the unanswered prayers embedded in the poems, prayers for a centripetal reversal of the process that initiated the process of separation and individuation conditioned by time and space, a return to an original unity, a version of Parmenides’ sphere, in which time and space are no longer perceptible. Yeats

³¹ Reproduced in “*The Winding Stair* (1929): Manuscript Materials”, edited by David Clark, pages 2 and 258.

had asked, in *The Trembling of the Veil*, whether it was up to him to “reverse the cinematograph” (CW3 166). In these two poems, that reversal is raised to cosmic levels.

I have described the opening and closing poems of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* as the cardinal points of what were printed as two separate volumes but which really form a single structure. What then of the last of these cardinal points? “All Souls’ Night” anchors both versions of *A Vision* and occupies the same position in *The Tower*. It must have had some supreme importance for Yeats, over and above its own subject. As a poem set on the night when two worlds and orders of time meet and mingle, I would suggest that it is an image of the unity represented by the double cones, Parmenides’ sphere, the unbroken egg. This is exactly what Helen Vendler sees in the form of the stanza that Yeats invented for the poem:

Graphically, the stanza as a whole begins broadly in pentameters, narrows to a trimeter, broadens again, narrows to trimeters again, and ends in a pentameter:
broad, narrow, broad, narrow, broad – a double gyre. (*Secret Discipline* 69)

In the poem, Yeats is wrapped in mind’s pondering, withdrawn from time, absorbed in complete mastery of the system. As such, it is a kind of Aladdin’s lamp from which the entire world of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* emerges and back into which, if Yeats did achieve his ambition to reverse the cosmic cinematograph, the world projected by those volumes would be withdrawn.

And the Future?

As we saw, after the birth of his daughter Anne, Yeats had been overcome with optimism and saw the future opening before him. The poems of the Tower Sequence show how short-lived that optimism was. And late in 1927, when the sense of mortality that suffuses the poems of the Tower Sequence was sharpened by severe illness, George decided that Yeats would recover more quickly in the warmer air of the Mediterranean. They sailed to Gibraltar, spent some time in Seville, and made their way to Cannes, where they spent the winter. In Cannes, Yeats found time to read Wyndham Lewis's *Time and Western Man* (1927). He was delighted with it. On 29 November 1927, he wrote to Olivia Shakespear:

I am reading "Time & the Western Man" with ever growing admiration & envy - what energy & I am driven back to my reed-pipe. I want you to ask Lewis to meet me — we are in fundamental agreement. (*CL InteLex* 5055)

Foster qualifies this effusive praise, noting that Yeats and Lewis were "separated by as much as united them" (*Life II* 356). Lewis's work is a polemic against everyone – writers, philosophers, and scientists, he is fighting a broad front – he sees as being obsessed with time at the expense of space. Yeats may have believed himself to be exempt from this opprobrium because he never lost sight of space. In his system, the absorption into time at Phase 15 is merely one of twenty-eight phases and space grows in importance as one moves further away from that phase. But in his treatment of historical cycles, he does seem to belong with those lambasted by Lewis. Lewis needs to preserve the integrity of the open future, in which anything might happen, as the site of his own brand of programmatic

modernism. Commenting on the type of radical contemporaneity forced on the historical characters by Ezra Pound's poetry, a contemporaneity very like the forced occupancy of phases of Yeats's *Great Wheel* by individuals widely separated in time and space, Lewis noted:

The circular, periodic imagery does knock out a good deal the sense of the 'future'. For, far enough back, it also is the 'past'. The idea of periodicity so used (of a spiral formation it usually is, with repetitions on higher planes) leaves, no doubt, some margin and variety to play with, but very little. (24)

He might have been describing *A Vision*, although clearly Yeats didn't see it like that.

Elsewhere, Yeats tried to find ways to keep alive the possibility of novelty in the system. In *AVB*, for example:

The particulars are the work of the *Thirteenth Cone* or cycle which is in every man and called by every man his freedom. Doubtless, for it can do all things and knows all things, it knows what it will do with its own freedom but it has kept the secret.
(*CW14* 219-220)

The readings of the poems of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* in this chapter show that, for Yeats in the 1920s and 1930s, the future is, in an important sense, already here, somewhere at the edge of what we habitually think of as the present, as the past gradually and slowly turns itself inside out. Jonathan Culler says that "the present tense is the dominant tense of lyric" (*Lyric* 283), and it is in the combination of lyric with the intertextual quasi-spatial use of sequence and position that the Tower Sequence (and, by

extension, *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*) embodies the temporality of Yeats's system.

The poetry fosters double vision in the reader. As Yeats puts it, in a suitably cosmological

metaphor:

O may the sun and moonlight seem

One inextricable beam,

For if I triumph I must make men mad.

("The Tower" 54-56)

Chapter 4. “My plot is my meaning”: Killing Time in *Purgatory*

A Night at the Abbey

Purgatory was performed for the first time on 10 August 1938, as part of the Abbey Theatre Festival, before an audience that included Yeats himself, who had made his way into the city from his home in Rathfarnham, despite spending the day in bed suffering from swollen ankles (*CL InteLex 7287*). In the play, an old man tells the story of how and why he stabbed his father to death, shortly before using the same knife to murder his son. A critic sent by *The Irish Times* was unimpressed:

In his maturity Mr. Yeats has no hope to offer to adventuring mankind: apparently the only consolation that he has to offer is that the world must continue to suffer purgatorial pains for the sins of its earlier inhabitants. That is a philosophy of despair; but it may be that what Mr. Yeats intends to offer is a statement that purgatory is really the present life.

And then the critic took out his own knife:

Drama and poetry were absent, so that the little piece did no more than hint at departed glory. (*IT 11 Aug. 1938 6*)

Whatever the merits of the play, Yeats must have been aware that his choice of title would wake sleeping dogmatists. Since the Reformation, purgatory had been a territory under siege, held and controlled largely by the Catholic Church³², and Yeats's interest was unwelcome. In the following week some members of the offended laity directed their objections to the letters page of *The Irish Times*.

Yeats's antagonists seemed most annoyed by what they saw as the play's obscurity. They wanted the author to come out into the open where he would be easier to bring down. The short-lived controversy was initiated by a visiting American priest at a discussion that took place on the day after the first performance of the play. The Rev. T. L. Connolly, head of the English Department at Boston College Graduate School, "a smooth rascal" according to Yeats (*CL IntelLex* 7290), challenged the directors of the Abbey Theatre Festival to explain the play's meaning. After F.R. Higgins threw the question back at the questioner, the Abbey actress Shelah Richards reminded him that the Rev. Connolly was a guest in the country and deserved an answer, as if the priest had done no more than ask for directions (*IT* 12 Aug. 1938 7). A photograph of Connolly taken around this time suggests a resemblance to James Joyce, another product of Jesuit training:

³² See, for example, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton UP, 2001) by Stephen Greenblatt, pp. 10-46.



Boston College. John J. Burns Library.

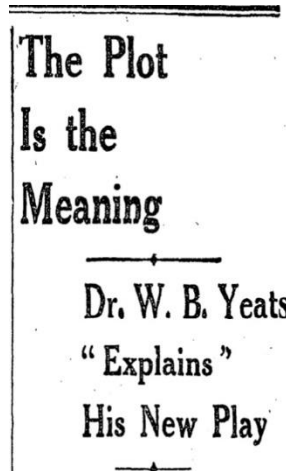
The writer and Abbey Theatre director Frank O'Connor suggested that Connolly was something more than an inquisitive tourist. He had apparently read the play, which was still unpublished. Had the ambush been carefully planned? O'Connor hinted that Connolly had received a copy of the typescript from an Abbey insider (*IT* 16 Aug. 1938 8). He may have been a smooth rascal after all.

A reporter was dispatched to seek guidance directly from the oracle. On 13 August, the interview was published in *The Irish Times*. Yeats had spoken:

There is no allegory in 'Purgatory', nor, so far as I can remember, in anything I have written. . . . Father Connolly said that my plot is perfectly clear, but that he does not understand my meaning. My plot is my meaning.

(*IT* 13 Aug. 1938 9)

The Irish Times used a pair of carefully-positioned quotation marks as the textual equivalent of raised eyebrows:



The Irish Times, 13 August 1938.

A couple of days after this interview was published, the newspaper carried a letter from John Lucy of Glenageary, County Dublin³³. Lucy had taken the time to read *A Vision*, and he noted the correspondences between *Purgatory* and Book III of *AVB*, “The Soul in Judgment”. He was serious-minded, and offered justification for Connolly’s intervention: “The Catholic priest, educated by a Church cognisant of erring human thought and of many heresies must up and enter the lists to guard the human mind”. He suspected that there

³³ It is highly likely that this is John Francis Lucy (1894-1962), who left Cork in 1911, joined the British Army, fought in both world wars, and defended Trinity College, Dublin from rebel attacks during the 1916 Rising. He was a friend of Frank O’Connor and Sean O’Faolain (buying the latter his first typewriter). Lucy published a war memoir, *There’s a devil in the drum*, in 1938. (*Cambridge Dictionary of Irish Biography*)

must be something dangerous to the human mind in Yeats's play, but he couldn't quite see what it was. And Yeats, in the interview published on 13 August, had not bothered to explain to his inquisitors how his version of purgatory compared to theirs. This is what really drew Lucy's ire:

It is futile and a little cowardly for any poet or writer to deceive himself into believing that he has the sole right to choose his ground, and to hope that he may guard it by silence or evasion. That is impossible, particularly when he enters the region of the human spirit common to all men.

Ouch! And perhaps Yeats was living in the past, Lucy speculated, and was unable to see that Ireland was experiencing "a new period of hard-thinking" (*IT* 15 Aug. 1938 5). As the week went on, the controversy flared up and died down in a tit-for-tat of earnest interventions and witty rejoinders: "A Firbolg" reminded readers that the concept of re-incarnation, although usually associated with Hinduism, was also part of Druidic traditions (*IT* 17 Aug. 1938 5), "W.H.W." from Offaly mysteriously claimed "to know all that can be known about 'Purgatory'" (*IT* 18 Aug. 1938 5), and an eighteen-year-old Maurice Craig, later better known as the architectural historian, finely wrote:

The discussion about the meaning of Mr. Yeats's play has started from the unsound assumption that the play and its meaning can be separated. They cannot. Like the sculptor who "could only think in bronze" in Wilde's celebrated prose-poem, Mr. Yeats, *qua* dramatist, can only think in terms of his drama, and we have no right to push the question further. (*IT* 18 Aug. 1938 5)

After almost eighty years, the issues raised in the correspondence are still valid. Readers of *A Vision* will have to face the question asked by John Lucy: is Yeats's system coherent even in its own terms? And if the system does not stand up to "hard thinking", are the poetry and plays that it generated flawed in some way? Was Maurice Craig's approach, taking a strict line on "form and content", an adequate response to Lucy's question? Whether he knew it or not, Craig's letter echoed something that Samuel Beckett had written of *Finnegans Wake* in 1929:

Here form *is* content, content *is* form. . . . His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*. (SW IV 503, emphasis in original)

From this perspective, Yeats thought the system in poetry and in drama as much as he described it in the discursive prose of *A Vision*. His poems and plays may even take the reader deeper into the system than *A Vision* does. In the last chapter I argued that Yeats used sequence and position in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* to give form to the emerging temporality of the system. Standing on either side of those two volumes of poetry are *AVA* and *AVB*. In Chapter 1, in agreement with Margaret Mills Harper, I said that *AVA* is forward-looking and anticipatory, whereas *AVB* is backward-looking, a codification of the system as it was clarified in the intervening decade. To adapt Beckett's formula, *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* do not simply reflect that clarification, they produce that clarification. Written after *AVB* had been published, and performed for the first time just five months before Yeats's death, *Purgatory* is a late work in every way, and it shows how Yeats's

imagination continued to be absorbed by the temporal implications of the system to which he had supposedly given a final textual polish in *AVB*. More specifically, it dramatizes the situation of an individual who is trying to unite the worlds described in “The Great Wheel” and “The Soul in Judgment” respectively. This takes Yeats further than he had ever gone before. On 15 March 1938, when he first mentioned the play, in a letter to Edith Shackleton Heald, he said that he could “never remember the dream so deep” (*CL IntelLex 7201*).

Purgatory has attracted a wide range of critical readings because of its centrality to any discussion of Yeats’s late politics, particularly when paired with the belligerent late broadside, *On the Boiler*. In an Irish context, it generates dramatic energy from its treatment of the end of the “big house” and of the Ascendancy class. In its seemingly frank endorsement of eugenics, it belongs in the darkest currents of twentieth century European thought. Neither of those aspects of the play is, except incidentally, the subject of this chapter. In the context of Yeats’s own work, the play’s explicit reference to the relations between the living and the dead immediately brings it within the gravitational field of *A Vision* and that text’s description of the path of the soul between death and birth, as John Lucy had correctly observed. But taking *A Vision* as the starting point against which the play can be assessed for orthodoxy has some drawbacks. *A Vision* can have the destructive gravity of a black hole, absorbing and destroying everything around it. More importantly, it is clear from his correspondence in early 1938 that Yeats was engaged in something more than the simple translation of settled thought into new forms: “My recent work has greater strangeness & I think greater intensity than anything I have done . . .” (*CL IntelLex 7201*). I propose to defer consideration of the play’s relation to *A Vision* until after a reading of

Purgatory on its own terms, paying close attention to the strangeness and intensity of its plot which is, I will argue, deeply concerned with questions of temporality.

Although it runs to just 223 lines, it will become clear that *Purgatory*, as befits its subject, is haunted by numerous ghosts, past and future, and that it generates a power that exceeds its specific content from the brief glimpse it gives of a spectral community comprised of numerous archetypes. After a provisional exploration of the development of plot in *Purgatory*, I will use Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Aristotle's *Poetics* to explain what is peculiarly modern about time and narrative in *Purgatory*, before turning back to the plot of *Purgatory* and exploring how the suspense of its ending brings the audience up against the limits of Yeats's system.

Study That Tree, Study That House

When the play begins, an Old Man and a Boy, his son, are on a stage emptied of everything but a ruined house and a bare tree. The Old Man lectures and questions the Boy. The early exchanges make clear the nature of their relationship. They are fractious and weary of one another, and it is not easy to see why they stay together. The Old Man first calls attention to the ruined house – “Study that house.” (CW2 537 4). He is quickly distracted by the other of the two components of the stage setting – “study that tree, / What is it like?” (CW2 537 15-16) – but the boy's impertinent answer – “A silly old man” (CW2 538 16) – ends the possibility of fruitful dialogue. And the Old Man continues in a

story-telling mode, compelled by the story itself rather than any real interest taken in it by the Boy:

OLD MAN. It's like – no matter what it's like.

I saw it a year ago stripped bare as now,

I saw it fifty years ago

Before the thunder-bolt had riven it,

Green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter,

Fat, greasy life.

(CW2 538 17-22)

From the outset, his story prompts questions that are never properly answered. Why not tell us *now* what the tree is like? (He does tell the audience much later). And why was he there a year ago? Does he go there every year? And why wasn't the boy with him on that occasion? He seems to have been on his own – why else share the information with the Boy? – but their relationship suggests that once parted, they would never want to find each other again. While an audience might be scrambling to keep up, the Old Man turns his attention back to the ruined house. Initially, his story is narrowly focused on his own parentage, but the personal quickly gives way to the historical as he situates the house in a *longue durée* that reaches back to the battles at Aughrim and the Boyne, and forward from those battles to colonial expansion and imperial rule.

The facts of the Old Man's life are simply told. His mother died giving birth to him. His father survived her by sixteen years. Then, two events are conflated. The father, so the Old Man says, set fire to the house while drunk, and the Old Man killed him in the burning building. The body was so badly charred that it was impossible to determine the precise cause of death, but some of the father's drinking companions were determined to bring the parricide to account, and he escaped with the help of a gamekeeper. He became a peddler and fathered a son, the Boy, now sixteen years old.

The Old Man and the Anniversary

At this point, the sudden sound of hoof-beats changes everything. In the ruined house, a window is lit up to show the figure of a "young girl". Immediately, the Old Man starts to describe the events that are unfolding before them. He recognizes the night as an anniversary, even if he is unsure what exactly it is the anniversary of:

OLD MAN. Beat! Beat!

This night is the anniversary

Of my mother's wedding night,

Or of the night wherein I was begotten.

(CW2 541 114-117, my emphasis)

This is the point at which the single plane of temporality on which the play has advanced begins to break up. Yeats finds the right word for the mysterious intersection of two orders

of time: anniversary. More than the operation of memory, which can be involuntary and irregular, the designation of a day as an anniversary calls for the evacuation or subordination of a present here and now so that another event with a separate set of chronological co-ordinates can establish partial occupation of a new here and now. The event's claim on the present is based on the recurrence of one of its original chronological co-ordinates: day, month, year, or century. Most anniversaries are reserved for momentous events, their pulse is felt in years or centuries, but in the hazy grammar of time the most colloquial expressions can assume uncanny properties: *it was at just this time that . . . , right now you would have been . . . , this time next week, we'll be . . .* The idea of an anniversary suggests that the normal discrimination we make between past and present and future may not be valid. It implies that something is happening that should not be happening *now*, that two sets of temporal co-ordinates are being superimposed. And it is closely associated with ritual practice: *do this in memory of me.*

In *Purgatory*, the event which is the subject of the anniversary is given literal representation on stage in the figures that appear in the lit-up windows of the ruined house. The mingling of different chronologies is complicated further because when the Old Man speaks in the present tense about "this night" being an anniversary, it is hard to decide if he is *witnessing* an anniversary or *participating* in one. Does the "this" of "this night" refer to the time-world shared by him and the Boy, or that shared by the ghosts of his mother and father? The deeper implication is that this type of distinction cannot be sustained, that neither the living nor the dead have exclusive possession of the time. The confusion is increased in a more specific way in that the Old Man does not seem to know exactly what is

happening. Is it his mother's wedding night or the night in which he was conceived? He wouldn't have been present on either occasion, so how can he judge? Later, he remarks with wonder that his father is better looking than he remembered him, before he had been disfigured by a further sixteen years of hard living (CW2 542 171). He must be guessing at what he is witnessing. The choice that he makes between the two possibilities might not seem to signify much but I will argue that the unresolved confusion about the specific content of this anniversary shadows the remainder of the play, and that much of the drama is generated by the Old Man's deliberate evasion of the implications of his ignorance.

(As both acts – marriage and conception – involve mother *and* father, he must also decide which of his parents is now the active agent in re-living the event. In his vision of purgatory, guilt is purged individually, not collectively. I will return to this.)

If the sin is the marriage, then the Old Man does not necessarily carry the trace and taint of that crime. He was a possible, not inevitable, consequence of the marriage. If it is the act of procreation, then the Old Man, as the necessary consequence of that act, is implicated in the crime that he is witnessing. This is the option that he chooses. Why would he incriminate himself in this way? It may be the inevitable consequence of his narrative of his own past acts. In the monologue that he delivers before the first appearance of the ghosts, he convicts his father of the "capital offence" (CW2 539 75) of killing the house. In treating this earlier murder as judicial execution, the Old Man is assuming the right to punish his father for a crime against history. By his own logic, and before any appearance of the ghosts, he had already helped his father to purge his crime. But there's a problem. By

acting in this way, he made his father a party to another crime, the crime of conceiving a murderer. Up to the Old Man's sixteenth year, his father may have been guilty of debauchery and drunkenness, and he may have taken on the crimes of history, symbolically, as the Old Man sees it, but he had not fathered and raised a murderer. But now he has. And as he dies in the moment when his son becomes a murderer, there is nothing he can do in his earthly life to purge the crime.

The Old Man does not explain why he decides it is his conception that he is witnessing. But the story of how he has tried, convicted and punished his father for the "capital offence" of killing the house, with the implication that, by so acting, he has himself brought a new crime on his father's head – the crime of begetting a murderer – creates a secondary momentum that seems to drive him inexorably towards an obsession with the act that engendered him. The later crime begets the earlier. And this is where he starts to get confused by the labyrinthine intricacies of his own story. If he can trace the crime to the moment of his conception, so that his whole life becomes imbued with the taint of criminality, in a version of the doctrine of original sin, logic suggests that he should take his own life – as the living embodiment of the crime – to bring the crime to an end. Instead, he kills his son, reasoning spuriously that he himself is now too old to procreate. He identifies "conception" with "consequence" but he fails to bring the idea of "consequence" under any kind of firm conceptual control. The Old Man, I will argue later, is trying to adopt a perspective that allows the entire sequence of possible consequences to be compressed into a single moment. This would allow him to atone for the criminal moment by a single act that itself would take no more than a moment, the symmetrical negation of the moment of

conception. But his failure suggests that consequences are produced in time and that purgation will take more than a moment.

The Old Man's difficulty in understanding the interaction of time and consequence is reflected in an important detail that echoes an earlier crime and punishment in Yeats's work. His reflection on his mother's knowledge – "But now she knows it all, being dead." (CW2 539 59) – calls to mind a similar line from "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz": "Dear shadows, now you know it all," (21). In that poem, the poet pleads for the command to start a fire that would destroy time. If the Old Man is an avatar for Yeats, as some argue, he may also be an avatar for the would-be arsonist who speaks in the poem. It is at least possible, then, that the blaze that destroyed the house in *Purgatory* is the conflagration so fervently wished for in the earlier poem, and that the audience is now witnessing the aftermath, a world no longer bound by the temporality that the Old Man's earlier avatar wanted to destroy. This conjunction of poem and play would then reflect the general remark that Michael Wood makes with respect to time in Yeats's work: "This is one of two key moments in Yeats' poems: just before. The other moment is not exactly symmetrical, since it is not 'just after' but long enough after for hindsight to claim that the intervening event has wrecked the whole earlier world" (*Violence* 14).

Both poem and play are more concretely linked by the strange inversion of cause and effect buried in their semantics of crime and punishment. In the poem, the poet declares: "They convicted us of guilt" (31). This makes no sense as those words are ordinarily used, because "guilt", whatever it might be, is not an indictable offence; neither

an event nor a chain of events, it is a judgement reached *ex post facto* on a preceding event or chain of events. It is a consequence. And in *Purgatory*, the Old Man transgresses the normal sequence of event followed by judgement followed by punishment when he says:

OLD MAN. . . . to kill a house
 Where great men grew up, married, died,
 I here declare a capital offence.
 (CW2 539 73-75)

He is deliberately and consciously (“I here declare”) enacting a law with retrospective effect. The Old Man works backwards, creating by *fiat* the offence for which he handed out summary punishment some fifty years earlier. In this respect, the play echoes the earlier poem in another example of what I identified in the last chapter as one of the characteristic techniques of Yeats’s late work, the inversion of the arrow of time. If time flows backwards, effect would appear to precede cause. History can be re-written so that a past act, however innocent it might once have been, can be stamped with the character of a crime, and the “past” is continually altered by the “future”. The Old Man’s father and mother first conceived a son and, sixteen years later, conceived a murderer, and, some fifty years further on, as we shall see, conceived a double murderer. As the temporal implications of that act of conception begin to obsess the Old Man, he acts as though it is possible to see, in the moment of conception, consequences that are unlimited in or by time.

The same crux is at the heart of another of Yeats’s important late works, “Leda and the Swan” (1924). That poem concerns itself with the meeting of two incommensurable

worlds, human and divine, and asks whether one can share properties of the other, whether Leda can assume knowledge of historical consequence in the moment of conception:

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?

(9-14)

In "Leda and the Swan", the description of the destruction of Troy is used as a metaphor for the sexual act, with hymen ("broken wall") and phallus ("burning roof and tower"), so that the historical consequence is present in the moment of conception *and* functions as a metaphor for the sexual act that engenders it. In *Purgatory* and in "Leda and the Swan", there is a deep preoccupation with the idea of history and of historical time being seen completely in originary moments. Time is compressed and pressurized, and each instant of conception is imagined as the splitting of an atom, releasing the chain reaction of historical time.

The Old Man and the Identity of the Dreamer

We do not know if Leda ever did “put on” divine knowledge, but the Old Man of *Purgatory* believes himself to be in possession of that gift. When he continues his narration (no longer attended with as much attention by the boy, who is now thinking of making a break for it, taking their money), he dwells on his own “begetting” (CW2 542 156).

Extraordinarily, time seems to proceed in this other world at the same pace as it does for the Old Man and the Boy, because the Old Man breaks off his narrative while his father and mother are supposedly engaging in the act of procreation, taking the time to consider Tertullian. He is concerned by the possible co-presence of remorse and pleasure in the renewal of the sexual act. What he and Tertullian have identified as a problem in re-living the past as part of the process of expiation is the difficulty of making one order of time (the time of pleasure) subordinate to the other (the time of remorse). When anniversaries occur, events are doubled in time, occupying two sets of chronological co-ordinates. But if the event is re-constituted with complete identity, there is no surplus of time available for the operation of reflection or remorse. If there is to be remorse, the anniversary cannot be allowed to erase entirely the distance between act and re-enactment. In Chapter 3, I referred to a note that Yeats made in *AVA*, in which he defined “recurrence”, on the advice of his ghostly instructors, as “an impulse that begins strongly and dies out by degrees” (CW13 162), but he never explained why it should die out by degrees. In his need to seek

guidance from Tertullian, the Old Man suggests that Yeats had never satisfactorily explained this to himself.

It is at this point that the identity of the dreamer is brought into sharper focus and assumes greater significance. As mentioned above, both possible subjects of the anniversary – marriage and conception – are acts in which mother and father must be equally culpable. However, without any evidence, the Old Man decides that it is his mother who is re-enacting her past sins. Certainly, she is first to appear at the lit-up window. But this is a world in which, as seen with respect to crime and punishment, the very idea of priority is being undermined. When the ghost of his father appears, he dismisses the possibility that it has the same status as the apparition of his mother:

OLD MAN. And yet
 There's nothing leaning in the window
 But the impression upon my mother's mind,
 Being dead she is alone in her remorse.

(CW2 543 183-186)

But the Old Man is on shaky ground. He has always wanted to believe it is his mother's dream and hers alone. When he refers initially to the possibility that the night is the anniversary of his parents' wedding, he uses the words "my mother's wedding night" (CW2 541 116), as if his father had no part in it. And he ignores the fact that the Boy is unable to

see the woman (the Old Man's mother) at the window and that he can see the man (the Old Man's father), which would seem to make it more likely that he is witnessing his father's dream. There is a strong Oedipal sub-text, but the result is that the Old Man never pauses to consider what kind of purgatorial suffering his father might be enduring. It is as if the Old Man imagines that his murder of his father retrospectively eliminated him from history and from purgatory.

If the mother is to purge her sin by re-living it, she is forced "to commit the crime once more", as it is put in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1929) (32). But the renewal of pleasure negates or defers the experience of remorse, compelling only further re-enactment, endlessly. How can she make the experience of remorse eliminate the experience of pleasure? Each anniversary begets another. Cause and effect do not make up a progressive sequence; they are two aspects of a single state.

While the Old Man is distracted by this abstruse point of theology, and calling for Tertullian to work it out, the audience might be growing restless at the thought of an impending lecture on theology. Just in the nick of the dramatic time, the Boy eyes up the Old Man's bag of money. And a row blows up between them. "You never gave me my right share", says the Boy (CW2 542 161). When the Old Man says that he would only have spent it on drink, the Boy replies, "What if I did? I had a right / to get it and spend it as I chose" (CW2 542 164-165). That there is money to be divided and, more significantly, that the Boy claims that he had a right to come by that money however he chose, suggests that the money is stolen, that the Old Man and the Boy are thieves. (In the dark atmosphere of the

play, the Rev. Connolly might have been reminded of another two thieves.) After the Boy insists on his right to his share of the money, he makes the fateful pronouncement that if sixteen was the age at which the Old Man killed his father, he is now old enough to kill the Old Man. His threat introduces a different kind of recurrence in which an earlier event might be re-enacted not as identity but as succession.

As he makes his threat, the window is lit up once more, showing a man pouring whiskey into a glass. The Old Man identifies the figure as his father. (As we have seen, he treats this apparition as a secondary emanation of his mother's dream, but it is just as real to the audience as the apparition of his mother, and more real to the Boy, who cannot see the apparition of his "grand-dam" (CW2 539 46)). In this moment, with the image of the two thieves dimly evoked by the words of the Boy hovering in the background, the simultaneous appearance of the three related male figures conjures up the three members of the Christian trinity: father, son and (unholy) ghost. And the mystery of the order of procession in the Christian trinity supplies a grammar with which to re-configure the relations between the play's male characters. The Old Man is a witness to his own conception, which is to say that, in the space of the theatre, he pre-exists the moment of his incarnation. In the language of Christian theology, this is the difference between the Word and the Word-Made-Flesh, between *Logos* and Christ. And in his plea to his mother not to procreate with his father, the Old Man is wishing that the word (his Word) will never become flesh. But the Old Man's incarnation has already brought sin into the world. Because he is unable to undo that act, the Old Man gives up *his* only son, the Boy, to take it away. And the Boy achieves his only flight into any kind of visionary speech with the recognition that he is seeing

something wondrous, three adjectives to describe three aspects of a single person: “A dead, living, murdered man” (CW2 543 181).

It would be too much to say that there is a deliberate or precise re-distribution of the roles of the Christian trinity in *Purgatory*. But these echoes bubble up out of the language of the play. It could hardly be otherwise in a drama centred on sin, ritual sacrifice, and the possibility of salvation, of redemption from history. The violence of *Purgatory* is generated by the Old Man’s radical equation of the moment of conception with the time of historical consequence, and his inability to think of this new fusion of times in any form other than consubstantiality. Having identified the moment of procreation with all that it has engendered, is engendering, and will engender, the Old Man’s use of language transforms and elevates those consequences so that they become a figure for history as a totality. (An important aspect of the Old Man’s degradation is linguistic incontinence: he thinks of himself as “mankind” in the final lines of the play (CW2 544 221).) The Old Man thinks of this new totality in terms of consubstantiality, which means that, for him, it can be overcome only at the cost of killing his father and his son. This is a trinity in which the rigorous separation of roles in the Christian trinity breaks down so that each character can take on aspects of any other member of the trinity, and the Old Man’s murder of father and son can be read as an attempt to concentrate all power in his own being.

In Chapter 2, I showed how Yeats had configured his own generation in *The Trembling of the Veil*, the “tragic generation” of Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson *et al.* I highlighted the fact that Yeats had constructed a generation marked by a general failure to

create or procreate. Paul Ricoeur argues that the concept of the generation is an important aspect of the way in which human beings stitch human cycles into cosmological cycles, sustaining the idea of the continuity of time in the form of a “succession of generations” (*T&N3* 110-112). Yeats’s tragic generation was designed to interrupt that succession. In the same way, I would argue that the Old Man’s killing of his father and son, coupled with his equation of his own being with all “mankind” is designed to bring an end to the “dying generations” (3) of “Sailing to Byzantium”.

If his violent assault on historical time in the form of his father and son reprises this time-destroying aspect of Yeats’s work, the Old Man’s insistent focus on his mother can be understood as an attempted escape from the complexities of the mysterious trinity formed by conception, consequence, and consubstantiality. He hopes to see her as a “purified soul”, re-instating, for her, a condition of immaculate conception so that she, at least, can prove that there is an escape from purgatorial suffering. Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus would have understood the motive for this turn from the mysteries of the trinity to the figure of the mother:

Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery and not on the madonna which the cunning Italian intellect flung to the mob of Europe the church is founded and founded irremovably because founded, like the world, macro and microcosm, upon the void. . . . Who is the father of any son that any son should love him or he any son? (*Ulysses* 170)

From this angle, *Purgatory* might be viewed as part of a trilogy with *Calvary* (1920) and *The Resurrection* (1931)³⁴, and the sacrifice of the Boy, which is motivated by redemptive intention, as an image of the crucifixion. But *Purgatory* should not be restricted by this resemblance. As his other Christian plays demonstrate, Yeats did not seem to think of the Christian narrative as something to be affirmed or denied but as something to be adapted for his system, and as potential drama. In its lack of any promise of redemption, *Purgatory* may be better read as a new version of the story of Abraham and Isaac, in which there is no God to restrain the father from killing the son (the Old Man having already killed the father-figure). But other murderous father-son combinations flicker through the forms of the Old Man and the Boy: Synge's Christy and Old Mahon, Yeats's own Cuchulain and Son, and Sophocles' Oedipus and Laius.

³⁴ Yeats sailed closer to the winds of theological orthodoxy in those two plays, particularly in *Calvary*. But there are reasons why those plays did not produce the kind of controversy that arose with respect to *Purgatory*. *Calvary* was never performed in his life-time. *The Resurrection* is the more orthodox of the two explicitly Christian plays, but its depiction of the frightened apostles and its merging of Dionysian and Christian sacrifices would have brought trouble to his door. Controversy was avoided, so Yeats believed, because of a newspaper strike that prevented the publication of all newspapers and reviews, including the religious papers (CW2 906).

Purgatory and Macbeth: Studies in Time and Consequence

In identifying the moment of his conception as a fissure which released terrible consequences, the splitting atom of historical time, the Old Man wants to go back and bundle it all up again. His elimination of his father and of his son stand on either side of another method by which it might be sealed off, equally doomed to failure. He calls without success on his mother and implores her not to allow his father to touch her. This moment echoes many of the tropes found in Yeats's late work and explored in earlier chapters. There is the desire to "reverse the cinematograph" (CW3 166), in this case by rewinding time to the moment before his mother and father conceived him, and having his mother choose another course of action, history-altering, history-redeeming. There is the failure of necromancy, the impossibility of communication with or intervention in the realm of the dead, something also seen in the second poem of "The Tower" and in the Gore-Booth elegy. More generally, in the figure of the Old Man, there is another example of the kind of free-wheeling, improvisatory style that I have argued is characteristic of the voice deployed in the second poem of "The Tower" and in "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited", the late style described by Edward Said as "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" (7). And in its language of conception and birth, the play calls to mind another aspect of Yeats's poetry, which is the way beast is associated with birth when divinity procreates with humanity. In "The Magi", there is the "uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor" (8), and in "The Second Coming", a "rough beast" (21) makes its way towards its birth. In the play

written immediately before *Purgatory, The Herne's Egg* (1938), a donkey appears at the crucial moment of conception. And in *Purgatory*, after the sexual act (or what the Old Man imagines to be the sexual act), the Old Man says of his father: "He leans there like some tired beast" (CW2 543 180). He uses the word again when he is at the point of killing his son: "That beast there . . ." (CW2 543 189). When he describes his mother as "grand-dam" to the boy, he is using a term, "dam", that is more usually applied to animals. Although this reinforces the suggestion that the Old Man is dimly aware of his participation in a deformed version of the Christian trinity, it also expresses a sense of horror at any birth that brings ugliness into the world.

In the plays that precede *Purgatory* in the 1930s, there is undoubtedly a growing revulsion for births that engender undesirable consequences, coupled with a desire to turn back the clock and eliminate the birth: *Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus* (1934): "My birth was horrible" (CW2 406 150); *A Full Moon in March* (1935): "My origin more foul than rag or flesh" (CW2 503 49); and in the last line of *The Words upon the Window-Pane*: "Perish the day on which I was born!" (CW2 479 467). In the last of these plays, Swift is represented as the opposite of the Old Man and his father, someone who refrained from procreation because of some fear (or knowledge) of what would ensue. Unsurprisingly, these lines attract eugenicist readings, given Yeats's interest in the subject during the 1930s. Without excusing or judging his attitudes to eugenics, what I want to suggest is that the subject seemed to prompt Yeats to think more deeply about the meaning of "consequence" in terms of temporality. By the time he had come to write *Purgatory*, Yeats seems to have become troubled by a further paradox: one cannot renounce life without renouncing the

voice that utters the words of renunciation. To understand the nature of this paradox, I am going to look at the way in which similar questions are treated in a tragedy that has, I will suggest, a close kinship with Yeats's play, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Ghostly apparitions, murders of fathers and sons, obsession with lineage, misreading of supernatural signs: these are all elements common to *Purgatory* and *Macbeth*, even if, in Yeats's play, they appear with what he might call a "reversed attribution" (CW14 141). *Macbeth* and Lady Macbeth have no living children and the line of descent that Macbeth wants to obliterate is the parallel line of Banquo and his descendants. Macbeth is shown the future in a procession of kings; the Old Man is shown the past in the apparition of his dead progenitors. They do share a tragic experience of oracular or supernatural signs: Macbeth takes too literally the words of the weird sisters, and the Old Man, as I will argue later, builds a prison for himself out of his reading of the signs manifested in the apparitions of his progenitors. These correspondences point to a deeper concern shared by the two plays. Both *Macbeth* and *Purgatory* stage failed attempts to master the time of cause and effect, designated in both plays by the same key word: "consequence".

Frank Kermode remarked of *Macbeth* that it is "greatly preoccupied by time . . . and there is lasting concern about lineal descendants" (*Shakespeare's Language* 202). He identified an obscure desire, on Macbeth's part, to live outside the law of ordinary temporality. Macbeth wants to stage one intervention in time present – kill Duncan and take his crown – and have all future time comprehensively subordinated to that act. Instead of being the cause of future effects, it is as if he would prefer that all that happens in the

future be arranged in advance to acknowledge and legitimate his right to the crown, almost as if those future effects could be transformed into causes, the spring and source of his actions, the time of consequence flowing in reverse:

MACBETH. If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
 It were done quickly: if th'assassination
 Could trammel up the consequence and catch
 With his surcease success: that but this blow
 Might be the be-all and end-all – here,
 But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
 We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
 We still have judgement here, that we but teach
 Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
 To plague th'inventor: this even-handed justice
 Commends th'ingredients of our poisoned chalice
 To our own lips.
 (*Mac.* I.vii. 1-12)

Kermode highlights the innovative force of Shakespeare's language in this soliloquy:

It is curious that we should have made a proverb of the expression 'be-all and end-all'. It was not proverbial for Shakespeare – he invented it; it grows out of the theme and language of the play. To be and to end are, in time, antithetical; their identity belongs to eternity, the *nunc stans*. . . . Macbeth would select one aspect of the

equivocal future and make it a perpetual present, and Shakespeare gives him the right crisis-word, the see-saw of be-all and end-all. (SE 85-86)

The Old Man in *Purgatory* reprises this aspect of Macbeth. He similarly hopes to use “assassination” to “trammel up the consequence”. But where Macbeth looks forward – as Kermode says, the play is “uniquely concerned with prophecy” (SE 83) – the Old Man looks backward, as he must, intuiting that he himself is already an integral part of the consequence that obsesses and enrages him. The Old Man keeps probing at time and consequence at ever greater cost to himself and others. He has killed his father. It was not enough. He kills his son. It is not enough. In the interim, he begs his mother to avert the moment of conception. When he implores her not to couple with his father – “Do not let him touch you!” (CW2 541 139) – he expresses a willingness to renounce all that the act engendered. Or nearly all. In his attempt to eliminate this one act from the past, and but retain in his own person what he gained from that act, the Old Man wants from the past what Macbeth wants from the future. He wants to bring the possibility of consequence to an end. He attacks it in the form of consubstantiality, hoping to establish his own presence as absolute (making it a part of the *nunc stans*, in Kermode’s words) by extinguishing the life of his father (representing the past) and that of his son (representing the future). He carries this sense of his own absolute (and atemporal) being into the request that he makes of his mother.

If she could hear him, and if she could act as he asks, he would not exist to demand his own non-existence. Without the denial of his desire never to have been born, the Old

Man would not have the voice with which he would renounce his own life. He is trying to perform the kind of magic trick that concludes “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”, when the poem that the reader has just read seems to disappear in the poem’s last line, as described in Chapter 2, to be and not to be. The inescapable circularity of this paradox reflects the deeper paradox embodied in his mother’s seemingly inescapable oscillation between the time of pleasure and the time of remorse.

If *Purgatory* is, in this thematic respect, a reflection of *Macbeth*, this is amplified by the way in which a second order of time is superimposed on the ordinary time of the play’s action. In his essay “On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*”, Thomas De Quincey noted how great occasions establish their own temporality, a temporality dissolved by some accidental noise which signifies the “recommencement of suspended life. . . . making known that the transitory vision was dissolved . . .” (6). De Quincey wrote:

In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers, and the murder, must be insulated – cut off by an immeasurable gulph from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs – locked up and sequestered in some deep recess: we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested . . . time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. (6)

This is the world inhabited by *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth*, and the audience, until the knocking at the porter’s gate. At that sound, says De Quincey, “the pulses of life are

beginning to beat again" (6). In *Purgatory*, the sound of the hoof-beats inverts this relation between the ordinary time of human affairs and the extraordinary time of transitory vision. In De Quincey's terms, *Purgatory* is back-to-front. The first sound of the hoof-beats is the signal that we are leaving "the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs" and, unlike *Macbeth*, we never return to it. At the end of the play, the returning sound of the hoof-beats tells the audience that it is now trapped within an accelerating cycle of repetition. There is no return to the world that has been made to disappear by the beating of the hoofs. In *Purgatory*, the exultant "Beat! Beat!" (CW2 541 114) of the first occurrence, when the Old Man still has hopes to relieve his mother's suffering, gives way to a fearful recognition of the sound's true meaning:

OLD MAN. Hoof-beats! Dear God

How quickly it returns – beat – beat -

(CW2 544 214-215)

In their readings of *Macbeth*, Kermode and De Quincey help us to understand the strange paradox at the heart of the Old Man's attempted mastery of time and consequences. Far from being able to manipulate – or better, eliminate – the time of sequence and consequence, the Old Man is trapped in a time-world over which he has no control. And if he is himself living in an order of time in which events repeat themselves *ad infinitum*, how does he know that he is not himself in purgatory? This is something that the *Irish Times* reviewer proposed, that Yeats had meant to suggest that we are all living in purgatory. It seems unlikely that the reviewer meant anything more than that we suffer in

this world too. But the ending of *Purgatory* forces this question on its audience in deeper ways.

Purgatory and *Poetics*: The Old Man's Recognition Scene

The strangely unsettling condition evoked by the ending of *Purgatory* is partly induced by the failure to return the audience to what De Quincey called "the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs" (6). But it is also induced by the play's suggestion of proximity to a moment in which the course of history could have been altered, when its anti-hero believes himself capable of reaching out to his mother and turning her away from the act that will engender him. It is clear from a brief survey of Yeats's plays, beginning in 1916 with *At the Hawk's Well*, that many of the late dramas are organized around these moments of significant possibility.

At the Hawk's Well, first produced in 1916, dramatizes Yeats's lasting concern that all life may be a preparation for something that never happens. An old man "all doubled up with age" (CW2 299 42) has spent "fifty years" (CW2 299 41) waiting to experience a moment that will redeem lost time and give him immortality. But the passage from anticipation to retrospection is seamless. *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919) is another play about something that never happens. Diarmuid and Dervorgilla long for a moment of forgiveness that will redeem seven hundred years of suffering. The play is closely related to *Purgatory* in its presentation of a scenario in which the living can assuage the suffering of

the dead. For Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, a moment of forgiveness, by a single person, would be sufficient to purge their sin. But the Young Man, the source of possible redemption, leaves them to suffer. *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919) differs from those two plays in that the transformative moment is staged. A moment's renunciation, on Emer's part, will bring Cuchulain back from the Sidhe, and she chooses to renounce Cuchulain rather than surrender him to the Sidhe. A single speech act – "I renounce Cuchulain's love for ever" (CW2 327 297) – is sufficient. This is the kind of moment missed in *At the Hawk's Well* and withheld in *The Dreaming of the Bones*, but the moment of renunciation rescues Cuchulain *for time*, whereas in *Purgatory*, as we have seen, the Old Man's renunciation of his own life would have erased the moment (conception) that gave birth to historical time (consequence) which is embodied in the lineage that joins the Old Man to his father and his son (consubstantiality).

Michael McAteer has remarked on how often Yeats's drama is concentrated "upon a single instant", and he argues that what "is striking about *Purgatory* is its refusal to accord any transformative power to the intensity of the single moment" (190). But in these earlier plays (with the exception of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*) transformation is often withheld. The difference is that, in *Purgatory*, the withholding increases the tension and the plays ends in a kind of temporal claustrophobia, whereas, in the earlier plays, it simply re-instates the *status quo ante*.

Terence Brown says that the play is "far from giving us . . . a cathartic release", instead leaving its audience "in a state of stunned horror" (*Life* 373). Brown's reference to

catharsis summons up the spectre of Greek tragedy. And Richard Cave, too, is drawn in that direction: “Comparison with the Greek tragedian [Sophocles] is not to Yeats’s detriment” (376). It is not surprising to find the shadow of Greek tragedy falling on Yeats’s penultimate drama. He had published *Sophocles’ King Oedipus* in 1928 and finally completed *Sophocles’ Oedipus at Colonus* in 1934. Fragments from Sophocles (“From ‘Oedipus at Colonus’” and “From the ‘Antigone’”) are situated at load-bearing positions close to the end of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* respectively, and one of these poems contains the kernel of *Purgatory*:

Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say;
 Never to have drawn the breath of life, never to have looked into the eye of day;
 The second best’s a gay good night and quickly turn away.
 (“From ‘Oedipus at Colonus’” 10-12)

How, then, does the ending of *Purgatory* justify comparison with Greek tragedy? Taking Aristotle’s *Poetics* for a guide, *Purgatory* seems lacking. Aristotle says tragedy is the imitation of an action that is “admirable, complete and possesses magnitude” (*Poetics* 10), whereas the action in *Purgatory* is shocking, complete only in its suggestion of endless recurrence, and lacks magnitude (there being no “religious expansion of awareness at . . . [the hero’s] death” (Brown *Yeats* 373)). Furthermore, for Aristotle, although character is subordinate to plot, it is still necessary that the audience recognises the principal characters of tragedy as being “better than we are” (*Poetics* 25), but the Old Man is (one hopes) worse than most members of an average audience. For Aristotle, characters like the Old Man and the Boy should probably belong to comedy, which is “an imitation of inferior people” (9),

and it may be that part of the unsettling effect of *Purgatory* is produced by this inversion, making comic archetypes (drunkards, arsonists, murderers, vagabonds) assume tragic roles. An Aristotelian plot should include reversal (from, say, good fortune to bad) or recognition (of hidden or mistaken identity), or both. But instead of reversal, from good fortune to bad, everything in *Purgatory* goes from bad to worse. Either the comparison is unwarranted, then, or the play makes up for this lost ground in some other way. I will suggest the latter, and that it relies heavily on the complex temporality of the closing recognition scene to achieve effects of tragic intensity.

In some respects, *Purgatory* is nothing more than a series of recognition scenes. The Old Man is engaged in a general struggle to recognize what is happening. He must decide if the anniversary is that of his parents' marriage or of the night in which he was conceived (he chooses the latter). He must decide if he is witnessing the dream of his mother or of his father (he chooses the former). But these are narrative choices rather than recognition scenes. The real recognition scene arrives after he kills his son. Earlier in the play, before either of the ghosts appears to him, he had outlined the last of the play's three binary choices when he explained the difference between a sin which brings consequences only on the sinner and a sin which brings consequences on others. In Yeats's catechism, a past act is the cause of present pain because it offends conscience or vanity. A troubled conscience results from an offence committed against others, injured vanity from an offence against one's own self:

Things said or done long years ago,

Or things I did not do or say
 But thought that I might say or do,
 Weigh me down, and not a day
 But something is recalled,
 My conscience or my vanity appalled.

("Vacillation V", 51-56)

Without making his choice explicit, the Old Man acts as though his mother is trapped by her dream because of the consequences she brought upon others, a matter of conscience rather than vanity. His murder of the Boy should have brought those consequences to an end, thereby releasing his mother from her dream. After he kills the Boy, he justifies himself in these terms:

Dear mother, the window is dark again
 But you are in the light because
 I finished all that consequence.

(CW2 543 201-203)

But when the sound of hoof-beats returns near the play's ending, telling us that we have not returned to what De Quincey calls "the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs" (6), the Old Man knows that the window will be lit again and that the ghosts will appear again. He must, therefore, have misunderstood the reason for his mother's dream-confinement. It was not the consequence of her actions on others that detains her, it is the consequence for herself. In other words, *vanity* rather than *conscience*. As Nicholas Grene observes, this places her transgression "outside history" (*Politics* 188). If this is the case, his

long monologue about history and houses was nothing more than empty breath, and his murder of his son simply added another obscenity to his account. But there are further implications. We have seen that the Old Man has already decided that the night he is witnessing is the night of his conception, and that it is his mother's dream that he is witnessing. This surely means that his existence, of itself, offends his mother's vanity. He had killed twice to prove it otherwise:

Twice a murderer and all for nothing,
And she must animate that dead night
Not once but many times!

(CW2 544 217-219)

In this final reckoning, the Old Man sees his mother truly for the first time and he sees himself as he thinks she must see him, as an affront to her vanity, and the effect does justify comparison with Oedipus.

In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus is the author of his own downfall in that he instigates and pursues the investigation that reveals his identity. His father Laius had tried to avert the prophecy that his son would kill him, by abandoning him to probable death. But Oedipus is rescued and lives in ignorance of his origins. When a second prophecy announces that he will kill his father and marry his mother, he leaves his adoptive home to frustrate the prophecy. But this journey leads him to Laius (he kills him) and his mother Jocasta (he marries her). When his own investigation reveals the truth, he blinds himself and goes into exile.

In *Purgatory*, the Old Man recognizes, at the end of the play, the true reason for his mother's dream-confinement and realizes that his mere existence, rather than any consequence of that existence, must be the source of her pain. So long as he lives, she suffers. The idea that an aged son might be a source of distress to a young mother, simply because of his age and condition, is something that troubled Yeats. It is a significant aspect of "Among School Children". In that poem, Yeats speculates about what a young mother might think of her son if she could see him as an old man:

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
 Honey of generation had betrayed,
 And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
 As recollection or the drug decide,
 Would think her son, did she but see that shape
 With sixty or more winters on its head,
 A compensation for the pang of his birth,
 Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?
 (33-4)

This conjures up a kind of temporal grotesque in which a sixty-year old man sits on the lap of his young mother. It revisits an idea Yeats had expressed in similar terms in one of the opening songs of *At the Hawk's Well*:

What were his life soon done!
 Would he lose by that or win?

A mother that saw her son
 Doubled over a speckled shin,
 Cross-grained with ninety years,
 Would cry 'How little worth
 Were all my hopes and fears
 And the hard pain of his birth!'

(9-16)

It is the Old Man's implicit recognition of himself, in the eyes of his mother, as aged and decrepit, that completes these earlier thought experiments. There is one aspect in which, like Oedipus, he has brought tragedy upon himself. The young mother and the old man can be kept apart from one another only in a temporality founded on linear chronology, the time of sequence and consequence. This is radically enforced in the lives of the Old Man and his mother: she dies giving birth to him. In rejecting the time of consequence, he must reject the temporal boundaries that separate him from her. If *Purgatory* approaches the condition of Greek tragedy in its ending, there is still a considerable difference between Sophocles and Yeats. What seems to make *Purgatory* both ancient and modern is that its drama is produced by narrative choices made by the Old Man as the play develops. The past could have been otherwise (this would never have occurred to Macbeth, which is why his war on time is oriented towards the future), but the Old Man made it what it turned out to be by his insistence that the anniversary was that of his conception and not that of his parents' marriage, and by his insistence that it is his mother's

dream that he is witnessing. He narrated into existence the circumstances that condemned him, whereas Oedipus merely discovered them.

Study that Tree (For the Second Time)

Terence Brown describes the white light that shines on the bare tree towards the end of *Purgatory* as “the strange ‘white light’ of eternity” (Yeats 373). The Old Man had broken off his initial examination of the tree so that the play is largely centred around the symbol of the ruined house. In treating the house as a symbol of “consequence”, originating in the act of conception and finding embodiment in the idea of consubstantiality, the Old Man has tried and failed to find a way to redeem the time of history. The Old Man’s failure seems to reflect a *volte-face* in Yeats’s own thought. On 4 May 1937, in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, he had reflected on his recent re-reading of Mallarmé:

It is not the way I go now but one of the legitimate roads. . . . *He escapes from history you & I are in history* the history of the mind — your ‘Fire’ has a date or dates so has my ‘wild old wicked man’ (CL *InteLex* 6922, my emphasis)

The Old Man is the product of his own history, which is unfolded in the narrative choices that he makes. And he does not escape from history, he is trapped by it. When the tree is illuminated, the Old Man mistakenly interprets it as a symbolic vision of his mother’s “purified soul”. As a formal matter, the Old Man is completing the sentence that he had

broken off much earlier in the play, as though its completion now will help to eliminate all that passed between its beginning and its ending, another way in which he might eliminate, grammatically, all the horror of the interim. But the returning sound of the hoof-beats forces him to recant. He gives up his “study” of the tree and turns to God:

O God!

Release my mother’s soul from its dream!

Mankind can do no more. Appease

The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead.

(CW2 544 219-222)

(If *Purgatory* is read as a passion play concerned with the crucifixion, this is the moment corresponding to Christ’s expression of solitude and abandonment: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15.34))

But the tree does bear further study. In Yeats’s iconography, the tree is used as a symbol of unity of being. The most famous example is probably the “great rooted blossomer” of “Among School Children” which unites leaf, blossom, and bole (61-62). In “Vacillation II”, the tree is used as an emblem of Yeats’s preoccupation with the near-miraculous fusion of incompatible states, of antinomies that sustain each other’s existence:

A tree there is that from its topmost bough

Is half all glittering flame and half all green

Abounding foliage moistened with the dew;

And half is half and yet is all the scene; (11-14)

But there are dead trees in Yeats's woods. As early as January 1909, he had made the following journal entry: "The tree has to die before it can be made into a cross" (*Memoirs* 147). The entry was retained and revised for the publication of *Estrangement* in 1926. This gnomic utterance follows a note that Yeats made for a possible revision of *The Tables of the Law* (1897). He was going to re-write the story so that its old men – the Magi roaming late nineteenth century Paris – are given "a series of seemingly arbitrary commands":

Without the arbitrary there cannot be religion, because there cannot be the last sacrifice, that of the spirit. (*CW3* 344)

This is variously formulated as "the supernaturally sanctioned arbitrary" and "the commanded pose that makes all definite" (*CW3* 344). In the 1909 version, there is a sentence that Yeats left out of the version published in *Estrangement*: "Mere wisdom would die, he [the one recording the message] knows, like any other living breath." (*Memoirs* 147) And then follows the sentence about the tree. What Yeats seems to have meant by this is that all human thought is thought *in* time and therefore subject *to* time. In "Meru" (1934), he says that "man's life is thought" (3). Two meanings of thought are available in that line. As a noun, it seems to reproduce the substance of the Viconian formula, *verum et factum convertuntur*, that (the truth of) man's life consists exclusively of man's thought (what mind

has made)³⁵. And as the past participle of the verb “to think”, it implies that anything produced by man’s mind is produced in time and therefore subject to the laws of time. All productions of time will be subject to the rule expressed in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, “that every movement, in feeling or in thought, prepares in the dark by its own increasing clarity and confidence its own executioner.” (CW5 14). But like the lie told by the fabled Cretan, that rule, if it is true, is bound by its own truth to prepare its own counter-truth. This is another paradox. Yeats seems to escape the paradox by saying that the tree must die before it can become the cross. He implies that there is a radical difference between a philosophy that is produced by thought, which lives and grows in time as a tree lives and grows in time, and an irrational belief that is enforced from beyond time.

In the late plays, the dead trees outnumber the living. And they seem to refer to the possibility of redemption from time offered by Christ’s example, as a sacrifice of the spirit to be accepted or denied. Yeats’s characters seem always to be torn between the promise of redemption from time, and the desire to remain in time. As we have seen, if Yeats’s old men want to avoid the disappointed gaze of their youthful mothers, they must remain in the time of consequence that keeps them safely distant from one another. The Old Man of *At the Hawk’s Well* wants immortality in *this* life rather than the type of redemption from time promised by Christ’s sacrifice, and in the last line of the play, a musician sings, in words that seem to refer to the cross on which Christ was crucified, “Who but an idiot would praise / a

³⁵ See *Three Critics of the Enlightenment; Vico, Hamann, Herder* by Isaiah Berlin (Pimlico, 2013, pp. 37-51) for a discussion of Vico’s formula.

withered tree?" (CW2 306 279-280) Against this backdrop, the bare tree in *Purgatory* seems to offer the path of the cross as the way to achieve redemption from time. Part of the play's unsettling final effect is that it is impossible to decide if the bare tree, as an image of the cross, is there to tempt or taunt the Old Man, who is caught, like Buridan's ass, between the surrender to God and the desire to live in history, even if the latter comes with the price of enduring endless *consequence*. The Old Man's agony is that he is fully conscious of the impossibility of having a home in either, so that he is denied the kind of peace that Yeats, in his *Pages from a Diary in 1930*, imagined a man like Plotinus must have found in the notion of complete re-absorption into God:

Plotinus calls well-nigh the most beautiful of Enneads *The Impassivity of the Unembodied* but, as he was compelled to at his epoch, thought of man as re-absorbed into God's freedom as final reality. The ultimate reality must be all movement, all thought, all perception extinguished, two freedoms unthinkably, unimaginably absorbed in one another. Surely if either circuit, that which carries us into man or that which carries us into God, were reality, the generation had long since found its term.

(Explorations 307)

Running Out of Time

If Yeats absorbed the principle of re-incarnation so completely that he never appears to long for personal immortality like the Old Man of the *Hawk's Well*³⁶, his work does seem to express a sense of loss at the thought that, in any one life or incarnation, we are unable to remember other lives or incarnations, so that we only ever have partial experience of our whole being. Early essays like "Magic" try to overcome this limit by imagining multiple minds merging into one. In *A Vision*, the *Great Wheel* makes up for the deficiency by generating a model in which all possible incarnations, past and present, could be extrapolated from any given position. Yeats might be limited to Phase 17, but the *Great Wheel* would allow him to project the dimensions of his past lives and of the lives he had yet to live. But his later work, as I have argued in relation to *The Tower* and *The Winding*

³⁶ He does recognize such longings as being deeply human and pours vitriol on the philosopher F.H. Bradley for his stubborn refusal to admit to any longing that death might ever be cheated: "Professor Bradley believed also that he could stand by the death-bed of wife or mistress and not long for an immortality of body or soul. He found it difficult to reconcile personal immortality with his form of Absolute idealism, and besides he hated the common heart; an arrogant, sapless man" (*CW14* 159n).

Stair, tends towards a re-imagination of the dimensions of time so that it becomes a dynamic relationship sustained within a quasi-spatial form. Such movement as is possible is possible only within what seems to be a closed circuit, up and down the winding stair inside the tower. To borrow from the language of physics, this quasi-spatial form is analogous to the “block universe” in which time and space are merged:

The picture of the history of the universe, taken as one, as a system of events connected by causal relations, is called the *block universe*. The reason for that perhaps peculiar name is that it suggests that what is real is the whole history at once – the allusion is to a block of stone, from which something solid and unchanging can be carved. (Smolin 59)

If “Dove or Swan” is an attempt to imagine all past and future configurations of history, and the combination of “The Great Wheel” and “The Soul in Judgment” an attempt to imagine all past and future configurations of individual lives, *AVB* begins to resemble a possible blueprint for the block universe. Its occult code would only find adequate projection in four dimensions. And this is not too far removed from the kind of (purgatorial) world Samuel Beckett sees emerging from *Finnegans Wake*. In the 1929 essay from which I have already quoted, he wrote:

A last word about the Purgatories. Dante’s is conical and consequently implies culmination. Mr. Joyce’s is spherical and excludes culmination. . . . In the one, absolute progression and a guaranteed consummation: in the other, flux – progression or retrogression, and an apparent consummation. In the one movement

is unidirectional, and a step forward represents a net advance: in the other movement is non-directional – or multi-directional, and a step forward is, by definition, a step back. . . . In what sense, then, is Mr. Joyce’s work purgatorial? In the absolute absence of the Absolute. Hell is the static lifelessness of unrelieved viciousness. Paradise the static lifelessness of unrelieved immaculation. Purgatory a flood of movement and vitality released by the conjunction of these two elements. (SW IV 509-510)

In addition to Dante, Beckett’s essay linked Joyce with Giordano Bruno and Giambattista Vico. Yeats has the same kind of speculative imagination as these Italians. But to complete his life’s work, Yeats would have had to unite his vision of historical time with the time lived by individual beings. Furthermore, and this is where he runs into difficulties, he would have had to resolve the dilemma that confronts the Old Man in *Purgatory*, to understand the complex interaction of time in the world of the living and time in the world of the dead.

Yeats himself was running out of time, and he did admit, close to the end of his life, that the system was deficient, and that the deficiency lay in the human dimension rather than in the historical dimension. In a letter of 9 October 1938 to Ethel Mannin, he wrote:

My “private philosophy” is the material dealing with individual mind which came to me with that on which the mainly historical Vision is based. I have not published it because I only half understand it. (CL *InteLex* 7312)

I want to use the remainder of this chapter to specify with more precision where Yeats failed to unite his vision of time, but also to explore how certain poems suggest the direction in which resolution might be found.

The public aspect of Yeats's philosophy can help to show what might be lacking or unresolved in the private aspect. The difficulty arises from the fundamental difference between history and human life: history does not die, but human beings do. In "Dove or Swan", Yeats found a model of time that allowed history to be configured and re-configured in perpetuity. But a single model of time would not work for human being because that it is interrupted by death, and split between the passage from birth to death, and the passage from death to rebirth. As discussed in Chapter 1, the first of these worlds, the world of the *Great Wheel*, is essentially a synchronic world, even if it is retrospectively animated by the model of historical time that Yeats brings to fruition in "Dove or Swan". In Yeats's model of historical time, each historical period is made up of four interacting historical periods, which are "co-existent", and "as seen in time we explain their effect by saying that the spirits of the three periods that seem to us past are present among us, though unseen" (CW14 187). This quadrilateral geometry is used in a different way in for incarnate and disincarnate beings. The incarnate are configured by the four *Faculties*, but the wider cycle that comprises both incarnate and disincarnate beings is organized by the four *Principles*. Yeats assigns a temporal category to each of the *Principles*: past, present, future, timeless. This helps to make the temporality of incarnate being analogous to the temporality of historical periods, because only one of the four categories, the present, is ever usually visible. We may say of the other categories that they "are present among us, though unseen". But in

making these categories aspects of the *Principles*, Yeats implies that both incarnate and disincarnate beings share a common temporal medium. However, as we have seen, Yeats had largely eliminated time from the incarnate world of “The Great Wheel” while making the disincarnate world of “The Soul in Judgment” a kind of poly-temporal wonderland.

With such a deficit on the one side, and a surplus on the other, Yeats’s spinning-top system is in danger of toppling over for want of balance, and it is kept in motion only by the operation of the *Principles*, concerning which Yeats admitted significant doubts explicitly in *AVB* (*CW14* 140-141). Everything that I have said in this chapter about *Purgatory* points to the conclusion that the Old Man is trying to reconcile these different visions of time by establishing some form of symmetry between the two worlds. This helps to explain why it is the Boy’s reminder that he is now the same age as the Old Man had been when he killed his father that seems to direct the Old Man towards homicide. His immediate fear that history is fated to repeat itself seems to be joined by an obscure desire for temporal symmetry, finding an outlet in his allotment of sixteen years to the amount of time he will share on earth with his father, first, and then with his son. But that kind of symmetry is a poor substitute for the kind of metaphysical symmetry that he really seems to crave.

It is a fundamental aspect of the system that the world of the incarnate and the world of the discarnate communicate with each other, and *Purgatory* dramatizes the difficulty of acting in one world with a vision of temporality conditioned by the other. For the Old Man, it is as though all four quadrants of the *Principles* are being rapidly lit-up by alternating currents:

(past, present, future) = house/history = Man

timeless = tree/cross = God

The Old Man's mode of thought, in its treatment of the family as the model of a rapidly accelerated history, moving from a single act of conception to all conceivable historical consequence, is conditioned by apprehension of the complete cycle of the *Principles*, of life between birth and death and of life between death and birth, but he belongs in only one of those worlds, the world between birth and death. Far from productive communication, the dual temporality of the system is being pressed to breaking point. Either the *Principles* are wrong, and there is a fundamental difference in time, so that the incarnate and disincarnate worlds are separate from each other. Or the *Principles* are right, and there is no fundamental difference in time, so that the world of incarnate and disincarnate being should be more symmetrical, more like one another.

If the system can be saved only at the cost of making the world of incarnate and disincarnate being conform to a common temporality, then, the further implication is that some of the differences between the living and the dead must be erased. Incarnate being must resemble disincarnate being. And it can, if we imagine that, moment by moment, we become ghosts to ourselves. Recurrence (in the form of affront to conscience or vanity) is a feature of both worlds. Escape from recurrence (and the consequent possibility of rebirth) is always at hand. The living experience escape or re-birth in the form of those rare moments of self-forgiveness when they are free from the compulsion to keep connecting thoughts and actions in sequence. In the letter to Ethel Mannin quoted above, Yeats seems to have said something of this sort, that we do not have to wait for death as if it were a single

isolated event but rather that it is a condition for which we prepare by stages and degrees, that we live and die continually:

In my own philosophy the sensuous image is changed from time to time at predestined moments called Initiatory Moments. . . . One sensuous image leads to another because they are never analysed. At The Critical Moment they are dissolved by analysis & we enter by free will pure unified experience. When all the sensuous images are dissolved we meet true death. (*CL Intellex* 7312)

To avoid being haunted by our past selves (Yeats uses the term “sensuous images” and in *AVB* an object is “sensuous” if it is something that we relate to ourselves (*CW14* 64)), we must “dissolve” the images of those selves “by analysis”. If we meet “true death” only when this process is complete, we must meet lesser deaths along the way.

Yeats may have said that he tried to keep his private philosophy out of his work as he only half-understood it, but it seems to be present nonetheless in poems that he may himself have only half-understood. The initiatory moments that he described to Ethel Mannin seem to generate the experience of ecstasy found in a poem as early as “The Cold Heaven” (1912), an experience which returns with greater force in some of the poems included in *The Winding Stair*. “The Cold Heaven” expresses a sense of rapture as a momentary release from the remorse that articulates the structure of consequence:

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
And thereupon imagination and heart were driven

So wild that every casual thought of that and this
 Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season
 With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,
 Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
 Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
 By the injustice of the skies for punishment?
 (1-12, my emphasis)

In this poem, an experience of incarnate being immediately prompts thought of
 disincarnate being, and both are coupled with the suggestion of re-birth: taking “blame”
 from “sense and reason” leave the poet rocking to and fro like an infant in the cradle. At the
 time that he wrote “The Cold Heaven”, Yeats’s system was a long way from construction.
 But the poem ends with the kind of question that “The Great Wheel” and “The Soul in
 Judgment” were supposed to answer.

By the time he was writing the poems that were collected in *The Winding Stair*, he
 was describing this experience with a greater sense of personal agency and with more
 coherence. In “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” (1929), for example:

I am content to follow to its source
 Every event in action or in thought;

Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

(65-72)

But a being that can follow every event in action or in thought to its source, and to measure the lot, forgive the lot, is doing what the disincarnate are supposed to be doing, rather than the incarnate, who are supposed to be no more than a specific configuration of the *Four Faculties* on the *Great Wheel*. In the fourth poem of "Vacillation" (1932), also included in *The Winding Stair*, Yeats gives one of his most personal and memorable expressions of this experience:

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.

While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less

It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.

(35-44)

This short poem is densely packed with reference to Yeats's late works. His age links him to the old men of *At the Hawk's Well* and *Purgatory*, each of whom broods on the changes brought by fifty years. The reference to London – a name used sparingly in the *Collected Poems*, only appearing again in the elegy for Alfred Pollexfen – summons up the spectre of the poet who wrote "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", one of a small number of Yeats's poems in which the city is manifested as a significant location. As Yeats described it in *The Trembling of the Veil*, his early poem was rooted in the experience of looking in the window of a shop in Fleet Street (CW3 139). In one way, then, the later poem partners the earlier: the younger Yeats on the London street gazing into a shop is a ghostly presence in a poem that situates the older Yeats in the London shop gazing out onto the street. Solitude is an important aspect of both poems, as though the deep experience of time requires a retreat: from society, and from the shared time of generations, and from history. And "Vacillation IV" is one of a sequence of poems that are all concerned with the simultaneous co-presence of seemingly incompatible states, whether physical, spatial or temporal. Does the blazing moment of the later poem derive its power from a momentary trans-temporal recognition scene in which the older poet comes face-to-face with the ghost of younger self? It is at least possible, in the terms used in the letter to Ethel Mannin, that this poem describes one of those initiatory moments in which a specific sensuous image is dissolved by analysis. The experience generates the conditions in which the self is momentarily disconnected from

past, present, and future of phenomenological time, making this kind of experience possible. Moreover, it seems to figure the kind of symmetrical inter-penetration of different orders of time that should mediate between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

In the geometry of being that Yeats uses in *AVB*, the present is opposed to the timeless and the past is opposed to the future. In “Vacillation IV”, Yeats seems to describe a moment when the quadrants representing an immediate past and an immediate future are momentarily darkened and the timeless and the present are lit up so that he experiences a brief glimpse of eternity. In this construction of time, eternity is not thought to be the unimaginable extension of chronological time, an immensity in which the idea of years and centuries loses all meaning, it is the momentary and fragile escape from chronological time, and it is experienced in this life, not in some great beyond. There is some evidence that Yeats had realized this many years earlier. Out walking with Cecil Salkeld, during the time that Yeats spent at Maud Gonne’s cottage in Glenmalur, in October 1920 – the same visit described in Chapter 2, just one week after the instructors revealed to Yeats and George that their future son, the “Black Eagle”, was “to change the quality of the idea of time in men’s minds” (*YVP* 3 53) – Yeats had shared his thoughts on the nature of eternity:

To my great surprise, Yeats, who appeared shortly, obviously preoccupied and absent-minded, asked me if I would walk up the glen with him. We walked, treading our way among boulders and small stones along the river bank for nearly half an hour in silence. By that I mean no word was spoken; but, all the while, Yeats kept up

a persistent murmur – under his breath, as it were. Suddenly, he pulled up short at a big stone and said: ‘Do you realize that eternity is not a long time, but a *short* time . . .? I just said, I didn’t quite understand. Yeats said, ‘Eternity is in the glitter on the beetle’s wing . . . it is something infinitely short. . .’ (Hone 326-327).

Eternity, or timelessness, is simply another of the lovely ingenious things that appears fleetingly, no more capable of lasting occupation than any of the other dimensions of time.

In Chapter 1, I argued that *AVB* tends to use textual and narrative coherence to disguise a lack of conceptual coherence. The extent to which Yeats was trying to bring the principles of *AVA*, as later amplified and consolidated by *AVB*, to bear on the personal experience of life was the subject of Chapter 2. I argued there that Yeats’s use of “simplifying images” allowed him to substitute fixed portraits for lives lived in time, and that he constantly tried to evade narrative closure in his own life-writing practice, and that his difficulty in recognizing his own life as something that was taking on a fixed shape in time contributed to the crisis than animates “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited”. I tried to show his difficulty in aligning his life-writing practice with a vision of incarnate being conditioned by the mode of thought that produced “The Great Wheel”, which is dominated by a synchronic model of time. I argued, in Chapter 3, that Yeats used *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* to generate a model of time and history that was close to the formulation that Beckett used to describe *Finnegans Wake*, in which “a step forward is, by definition, a step back” (*SW IV* 509). In these volumes, as I demonstrated, both individual poems and the structure of the volumes reveal a deep preoccupation with temporal symmetry, and Yeats

marshalled the full range of formal and technical means at his disposal to explore new models of temporality.

And *Purgatory* generates even greater intensity from the sense it conveys that there were difficulties he could not resolve before his death, but only by his death. His correspondence in late 1938 is increasingly concerned with funeral arrangements and the composition of suitable epitaphs. He could feel the shadows lengthening. He admitted the limit to which his kind of system-building was subject, the limit of human thought, in one of his final letters, to Lady Elizabeth Pelham, on 4 January 1939:

I am happy, and I think full of energy, of an energy I had despaired of. It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put all into a phrase I say, 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.' I must embody it in the completion of my life.

(*CL IntelLex 7362*)

The Old Man's Afterlife

When the controversy following the first performance of *Purgatory* had died down, the Rev. Connolly resumed his duties in Boston. He had fired a warning shot across Yeats's bows. But Yeats had little time left for the kind of fight he would once have enjoyed. "I will not use up my frugal energies on impermanent writing", he wrote to Edith Shackleton Heald on 15 August 1938 (*CL IntelLex 7289*). He was amused, though, by one letter of support. On

18 August, M. E. Lucy, wife of John Lucy, whom Yeats had identified as the most able of his critics (*CL InteLex* 7295), responded to her husband's letter, describing herself as "one who has read [Yeats's] philosophy with both profit and pleasure, and seen his play, 'Purgatory', without encountering the difficulties complained of by your other correspondents" (*IT* 18 Aug. 1938 5).

And if the Rev. Connolly's intervention failed to catch fire, another member of the play's first audience would have found much that was stimulating in the play. Samuel Beckett was in Dublin in August 1938. On 4 August, his mother had visited the Dublin Horse Show, and she returned home with a copy of the program for the Abbey Theatre Festival. Beckett had spent that afternoon with Jack B. Yeats, looking at some of his new paintings (*Letters I* 636-637). He may have been more interested in the work of the younger brother, but in a letter to George Reavey of 5 August, he said that he hoped to see Yeats's *Purgatory* the following Wednesday (*Letters I* 640). And he stayed in Dublin, according to the editors of his letters, attending the premiere on 10 August (*Letters I* 578). As we have seen, Beckett had already given the subject of literary purgatories considerable thought. Unlike more theologically minded critics, he is likely to have been struck by Yeats's appropriation of the title of the second part of Dante's *Commedia*. Beckett is properly invoked as inheritor of Yeats's last dramatic works. The comparison can be justified by reference to what the *Irish Times* reviewer called the "philosophy of despair". Beckett was unlikely to have needed much assistance from Yeats in developing his philosophy, but the ghost of *Purgatory* does seem to haunt his own plays in more specific ways. It is visible in Hamm's confinement of his mother and father, Nell and Nagg, to their bins in *Endgame*, and in his vicious desire to

end the possibility of human generation. Beckett plays this for laughs when he has Hamm express horror at the appearance of a flea: "But humanity might start from there all over again. Catch him, for the love of God!" (SW III 113). In the history of theatrical production, Yeats's play may not have reached as many audiences as Beckett's, but anyone who has seen *Endgame* has heard the ghost of the Old Man of *Purgatory* in the words Hamm uses to attack his father: "Accursed progenitor!" (SW III 96).

Conclusion: Yeats's Astounding Stories

In the last chapter, we left Yeats in the Abbey Theatre, forming part of an audience that included Samuel Beckett, at the first performance of *Purgatory*. As the play nears its end, the Old Man, its principal character, recognizes the sound of beating hooves as a sign of recurrence:

OLD MAN. Hoof beats! Dear God,
 How quickly it returns – beat – beat -
 (CW2 544 214-215)

But what, in this context, is signified by “it”? At the most literal level, the “it” of this exclamation might refer to the ghost of the horse that carries the ghost of his father back to the ruined house. In view of the bestiality he associates with his father, “it” might be intended to refer to the monster that he believes his father to be. However, in view of the play’s concern with anniversaries and the way in which they make way for the repetition of events, “it” seems to connote more than the physical manifestation of a single entity. It seems to imply the return of a sequence of events. Specifically, “it” seems to refer to the sequence of events that the audience has just witnessed, and this is supported by the Old Man’s recognition that his actions have failed to release his mother from her part in the dumb-show witnessed by the audience in the Abbey Theatre.

At this point, the Old Man puts off, finally, his role as unreliable narrator, and the audience is forced to make the “return”, to configure in imagination the content of the time-loop indicated by the sound of the hoof-beats and the words of the Old Man. For the

audience, the time-loop must incorporate not only the Old Man's narrative of the past, but what the audience has just witnessed on stage. Unless the audience can erase its memory and return to the beginning of the play, it must add its own presence as witness to what it knows has already happened. The audience has been incorporated into the time-loop. The play breaks off at the precise moment when the loop is about to be repeated, sparing the audience the heady experience of a temporal roller-coaster in which it would encounter itself as a witness to the Old Man's killing of the Boy. In fact, what happens is that the narrative is re-set at the beginning, the following night, when the actors take the stage once more, as if the previous night had never happened. The Boy has been brought back from the dead. Each performance of the play will repeat the same loop. The "audience" is no longer the specific configuration of named individuals – Yeats, Beckett, Connolly – who took their seats on 10 August 1938 but a wholly new entity with no memory of what happened on the opening night. This re-setting of the time-loop is built into the very idea of the theatrical "run".

Long before he wrote *Purgatory*, Yeats had already taken tentative steps in the direction of representing time-loops on stage. In her reading of *Calvary* as a passion play, Alexandra Poulain makes the point that a small detail at the beginning of the play transforms everything that follows into the repetition of something that has already happened:

Christ is dreaming back his own death from beyond the threshold, so that the whole play seems caught in a paradoxical time loop, perpetually performing two

contradictory movements, forward (toward the moment of death) and backward, from beyond death back to the final moments of life, the live man hurrying to his death, the dead man dreaming it back. What lies beyond can never be represented, because the experience of death consists in returning to the threshold of death: combining stasis with circularity, the structure of the play sacrilegiously suggests a sort of purgatorial vicious circle, anticipating such Beckett shorts as *Not I* and *Play*.
(58)

In Poulain's reading of *Calvary*, the narrative structure embeds two movements in opposite directions, another example of the structure used in the four-poem sequence that opens *The Tower*.

It might be objected that *Purgatory* falls some way short of the classic time travel story, because the Old Man himself lives and acts in linear chronology. However, *Purgatory* hints that the Old Man is himself caught in a time-loop. At the outset, he tells us that he has been in this place "a year ago" (CW2 538 18), and he refers to the night being an "anniversary" (CW2 541 115). He seems also to apprehend what is about to happen. He breaks off the sentence about the tree, a sentence that he does complete later in the play, as if he knows that he is repeating something, but that he has not yet reached the right point at which to deliver his line. Before he can complete that sentence, there is something that must happen first. And in telling us that the dead must relive their transgressions many times, he lets us know what he is facing. He will have to relive his transgressions, not once but many times, and, like his mother, he will not know, when he is doing so, that he is doing

so. In a play that seems intent on collapsing the chronological order of time, the Old Man may be doing more than merely observing the repetition of another's crime, he may be repeating his own crime, the murder of his son, a crime that happens to incorporate his observation of the images of his mother and father at the windows of the ruined house, their recurrent appearance being a time-loop within a time-loop. The play is called *Purgatory*, after all, suggesting that the audience is not just glimpsing purgatory through the lit windows of the ruined house, but in everything that happens on stage. If this is the case, the audience is unknowingly drawn into a time-loop from the outset, and not merely when the Old Man starts to explain what he believes is happening in the ruined house.

In *Purgatory*, the action is suspended just as the rift in time would open. Yeats may have paused at this moment because he had reached a generic limit. This would partly account for the Old Man's desire to establish that it is his mother's dream that he believes he is witnessing. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the Old Man never shared time with his mother; their life-times were consecutive and exclusive. In watching her dream, he can never come face-to-face with himself because she never encountered him, as infant, boy or old man. If he had been watching his father's dream, on the other hand, he may be observing a world in which he could encounter himself. It is possible that what impedes him is the formal problem of how to stage a meeting with his earlier self. Could they talk to each other? Or would one merely observe the other? Could such an observer influence the actions of the observed in any way? In *Purgatory*, these possibilities are not realized, and it may have been that the stage drama, for Yeats at least, was not ready for a narratological move that would be realized more fully in the complex time travel stories, novels and films

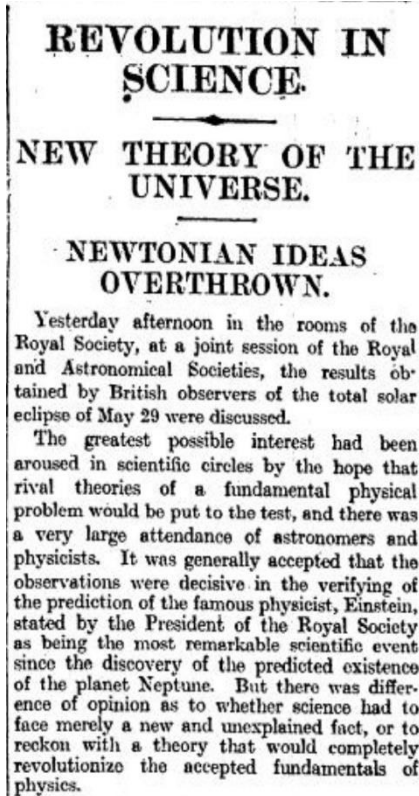
of later decades. One form of narrative was on the point of giving way to another. But those narratives have at least one possible common touchstone: Einstein. To place *Purgatory* more securely in its historical context, I propose to look at Yeats's own engagement with Einstein, and then at some other narratives that owe structural debts to the new physics, in order to demonstrate some of their affinities with *Purgatory*.

Although the snappy title of Daniel Albright's *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism* (1997) suggests that it will explore the extent to which each of the poets read, understood, and used the new physics, Albright uses the new physics largely as metaphor, re-reading each poet's work in the light of a wave/particle division of modernist literature. But Albright does note that Yeats was keen to engage with secondary popularisations of Einstein's theories (13). Yeats's library included primers on Einstein and relativity. He had Bertrand Russell's *The ABC of Relativity* (1925), Lyndon Bolton's *An Introduction to the Theory of Relativity* (1921) and Aleksandr Vasiliev's *Space Time Motion: An Historical Introduction to the General Theory of Relativity* (1924). In an essay published in 2014, Katherine Ebury regrets the fact that so little critical attention has been paid to Yeats's engagement with the implications of relativity, and argues that Yeats was not uniformly against science, engaging positively with science if it seemed to him to provide support for his own views. Her reading of the extent to which *A Vision's* cosmology might be viewed as anti-Newtonian – and it would be difficult to reconcile the “Seven Propositions” described in Chapter 2 with a Newtonian universe – but not necessarily anti-Einsteinian is consistent with Roy Foster's suggestion that Yeats was willing to use Einstein as corroboration for the system. He quotes Oliver St. John Gogarty on reading *A Vision*:

Gogarty presciently called it ‘a geometrical rendering of the emotions; a mixture of Einstein and myth’; probably to him, as to Gregory, WBY had claimed affinities between Einstein’s demonstration of relativity and his own attempt to destabilize the positivist universe. (*Life II* 280)

Foster also cites an entry from Gogarty’s journal for 15 June 1923 in which he records how Yeats went up to his study to write, but returned in a state of excitement, having found that Einstein’s theories utilized spirals like those of his own philosophy. According to Gogarty, Yeats asserted that Einstein had “done away with materialism” and was consequently banned in Russia” (*Life II* 717 n106). By the time that Yeats was revising *A Vision* in the 1930s, Foster asserts, the system more explicitly concerned itself with time-space relations, and “what he knew of Einstein”, a formulation that registers Foster’s doubts about the extent to which Yeats had understood Einstein’s theories.

Yeats was hampered by his inability to understand the physics, but he may well have gleaned as much as some of his contemporaries. It is hard to determine precisely how and when different writers might have encountered and absorbed the new physics, partly because the subject, unlike a novel or poem, was diffused through multiple channels over a long period of time. But the subject was given a considerable boost in terms of popular awareness after 1919. In that year, on 7 November, an eye-catching leading article appeared in *The Times*:



The Times, 7 November 1919

The article was occasioned by the publication of Arthur Eddington's observations of the solar eclipse in May that year, which provided objective proof that light rays are deflected by the gravitational field of the sun. A growing body of empirical data, confirming Einstein's predictions, was making relativity theory credible. It also allowed Einstein to make the claim that, on questions related to the nature of time, philosophy should give way to physics; the conventional understanding of past, present and future – which concealed the true nature of time – could be studied and explained by psychology. The popularization of Einstein's theories would explain Gogarty's account of Yeats's study of Einstein in the early 1920s. Furthermore, even though Yeats was generally antipathetic to scientific research, the sheer scope of the *Vision* project must have lowered his resistance to the rival discipline.

Fredric Jameson has written of the ambitious scope of modernist literature, the attempt to represent totality, to achieve something which is, in some way, unsurpassable. He calls this the “Book of the World”, and he argues that it “includes . . . the epistemological dimensions of the world itself” (*Modernist Papers* 117). *A Vision* and *Finnegans Wake* would both belong to this category, of which Jameson says, in an essay on Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*:

Indeed, the Book of the World wishes to be cosmological as well as historical and psychological; it wishes to devise an instrumentarium such that physics and chemistry, the subatomic and the dust of the galaxies, can be registered and “set to music.” From Dante to Joyce, such works scarcely rise to the occasion unless they make an effort to envelop and include the science of their period. (*Modernist Papers* 122)

There is a suitable recognition of writers’ limitations in the suggestion that they should only “make an effort”. It is not necessarily the case that the writers who employed experimental forms to disrupt the common understanding of time and space understood Einstein any better than those who used more traditional narrative forms. This is an argument advanced by David Wittenberg, who says that it is impossible to measure the degree of imaginative energy that might be released by a small quantum of technical understanding. Yeats’s shaky grasp of mathematics might have forced him to abandon his study of Einstein’s physics, but Wittenberg argues, in the context of time travel stories, that fidelity to the hard facts of the new physics – mostly consumed as texts published by “a series of popularizers with varying

degrees of fidelity to the underlying physics or mathematics” – was often less important than the imaginative impetus it provided:

Hence the impact of relativity upon time travel stories is perhaps different from what one might expect. Within time travel fiction, the inheritance of the Einstein theory, for all its vast importance within the physical sciences themselves, is not primarily physical at all but rather psychological and characterological and, ultimately, narratological. (55)

In the case of Yeats, there may be a tendency to place the subject beyond critical interest because it seems to be incompatible with the normal perception of a poet regarded as firmly wedded to an anti-science of occult magic. It is to be expected that the impact of Einstein’s theories will be felt more in studies of science fiction, as demonstrated by Wittenberg’s exemplary study of time travel fiction. But the maintenance of overly strict lines of generic demarcation between science fiction (of which time travel stories form a distinct sub-genre) and other forms of narrative, including those employed by writers such as Yeats, may obscure the extent to which they share common traits. Ultimately, Wittenberg concludes that time travel stories tell us something about all narrative forms because they take narrative structure and understanding for their very subject. In the Introduction, I showed how *The Wanderings of Oisín* might be read as an allegory of the way in which the poly-temporal world of the early nineteenth century was gradually replaced by a mono-temporal world in which time was unified and standardized. By looking at some time travel narratives that are more overtly influenced by the implications of

Einstein's theories, I will suggest how *Purgatory* might be numbered among those time travel narratives that responded to the changed perception of time that followed popularization of Einstein's theories in the 1920s and 1930s.

We don't have to look further than Yeats's own publisher, Macmillan, to find just one example of the kind of story that embodied new approaches to temporality. In 1933, which saw the appearance of *The Winding Stair*, Macmillan also published *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton. This is the novel that gave birth to the legend of Shangri La. It was made into a film directed by Frank Capra, which received an Oscar nomination for Best Picture in 1937. Hilton's novel belongs to the genre of utopian romance, but it is unusual in that it combines both temporal and spatial dislocation. A plane with four passengers is hijacked and flown to a remote mountain range on the Tibetan border. There, the passengers are sheltered in a monastery. It gradually becomes clear that a different order of time prevails. The occupants of the monastery are not immortals, but they live longer than those at lower altitudes. (It is not hard to spot trace elements of Theosophy in this setting.) If they descend and return to the world, they will age quickly and die. The High Lama is a Christian missionary who had settled in Shangri La in 1734, at the age of fifty-three. In a conversation with the novel's hero, Conway, he tries to persuade Conway to stay, listing the benefits of prolonged residency: "And, most precious of all, you will have Time – that rare and lovely gift that your Western countries have lost the more they have pursued it" (149). Even if, like many other texts, it is impossible to trace precise lines of influence, the physics of *Lost Horizon* seems to

be indebted to Einstein in that it depicts a world in which time does not pass at the same rate in all places³⁷.

Lost Horizon is not a masterpiece, but it is a reminder that the maintenance of rigid generic discriminations between texts regarded as “literary” and “high-brow” and those treated as “popular” or even “pulp” could obscure the extent of their common borrowing from the science of the period. In Dante, it is possible to see an example of the way in which the language of poetry might describe the new physics even in circumstances in which technical understanding is necessarily absent. According to the Italian physicist, Carlo Rovelli, taking justifiable pride in his national poet, Dante uses language in *Paradiso* that anticipates geometry discovered by Einstein. Rovelli describes Einstein’s concept of the shape of the universe as a 3-sphere, two balls or spheres, each of which “surrounds and is

³⁷ Einstein would have picked holes in the internal physics of *Lost Horizon*. According to his theories, time passes more slowly at sea level than it does at altitude. A person who lives in the mountains will age more quickly than one who lives at sea level. However, this means that, as physicist Carlo Rovelli puts it, there is “more time” (*Order of Time* 10) at altitude, which would justify the High Lama’s claim, and explain the sudden aging of anyone who returns to the world below. It is only upon re-entry to the lower world that the age of the mountain-dweller becomes visible. In its partial adoption of the new physics, the novel is a good example of the way in which at least some familiarity with Einstein’s work could generate imaginative narratives.

surrounded by the other” (*Reality* 79). He credits Dante with a vision of this shape six hundred years before Einstein:

Here are Dante’s verses from Canto XXVII of the *Paradiso*. *Questa altre parte dell’Universo d’un cerchio lui comprende si come questo li altri*: ‘This other part of the universe surrounds the first in a circle like the first surrounds the others.’ And in the next canto, still on the last ‘circle’, *parendo inchiuso da quel ch’elli inchiude*: ‘appearing to be . . . enclosed by those that it encloses’. The point of light and the sphere of the angels are surrounding the universe, and at the same time they are *surrounded* by the universe! It is an exact description of a 3-sphere!

(*Reality* 82, emphasis in the original)

Dante could be described as “ahead of his time”, and Hilton “in tune” with his. In time travel stories, it is those very conceptions of an unalterable “place in time” that are subject to investigation. Neither Dante nor Hilton attempts to tell a story in which a character leaves one period of chronological time and enters another. This is the essence of the time travel story. The first wave of time travel fiction is categorised by David Wittenberg as a variant of “utopian romance” in which time travel was melded with notions of Darwinian evolution to picture socio-political dreams (79). Wittenberg places *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells in this category. William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890) is another example, and Yeats sees it as such in *The Trembling of the Veil* (CW3 135). Wittenberg admits a degree of arbitrariness in his periodization of time travel fiction. He does not, for example, mention *The Year 2440* (1770) by Louis-Sébastien Mercier, which

German historian Reinhart Koselleck describes as a “futuristic novel, . . . probably the first in world literature” (84). Koselleck argues that the mapping of the globe in the age of exploration eliminated the empty *spaces* where utopias could be conveniently situated, leading writers to situate them in other *times*. And when utopia was temporalized in this way, it became necessary to invent fictional devices to reach it. This is Wittenberg’s starting point; he takes up the story in the late nineteenth century. The utopian romance was rapidly overtaken by stories less interested in utopian or dystopian societies in themselves and more interested in working out the implications of meddling with time itself:

In the 1920s, a second phase of time travel fiction commences, largely also as a compromise between plausible realism and popularized science. With the rise of relativity theory in the 1920s and with the increasingly widespread identification of physics as a definitive ground for the natural sciences, time travel fiction is lent a new conceptual basis, as well as a variety of newly legitimized plot tricks. I have identified this second phase of time travel as that of the paradox story, and suggested that it culminates in the early 1940s with a spate of “closed loop” narratives epitomized by [Robert] Heinlein’s “By His Bootstraps”. (80)

Wittenberg makes a connection between time travel fiction and modernist experimentation:

Einstein offers to time travel writers a repertoire of new opportunities for experiments in storytelling, and, with this repertoire, the imprimatur of demonstrable physical rigor. With the increasingly well-established authority of the vocabulary of relativistic spacetime, if not, strictly speaking, with the mechanics and

mathematical formalisms of relativity theory per se, time travel fiction discovers its most stimulating inducement to formal radicalism, indeed its primal modernist moment. (55-56)

One aspect of the new physics that seems relevant to a reading of *Purgatory* is Einstein's theory that the conventional idea of simultaneity is an illusion. If what we take to be simultaneous and non-simultaneous events are allowed the same ontological status, new narratives become possible, even if they could never be replicated as physical experiment. For example, an old man might witness his own conception.

In the Heinlein story that Wittenberg cites, published for the first time in 1941, just three years after *Purgatory*, a character named Bob Wilson is in a locked room trying to complete a thesis:

He *had* to – tomorrow was the last day for submission, yesterday the thesis had been no more than a title: "An Investigation into Certain Mathematical Aspects of a Rigor of Metaphysics."

Fifty-two cigarettes, four pots of coffee, and thirteen hours of continuous work had added seven thousand words to the title. As to the validity of his thesis he was far too groggy to give a damn. Get it done, was his only thought, get it done, turn it in, take three stiff drinks and sleep for a week.

(50)

He is interrupted by the appearance in his room of another man, who turns out to be another version of himself (although he does not know this). The second man is followed by a third. Both have gained access to his room through a mysterious disc of light. Another man calls him on the telephone. By passing through the light disc, he gains access to a region where he gradually understands what is happening. Each man is a slightly later version of a single self, and each becomes progressively “later” by proceeding through the same sequence of events with an ever-increasing consciousness of the roles played by all the others. The “latest”, most-conscious version of “Bob Wilson” tries to find a way to unify the partial selves to form a single being. In its way, the novella is concerned with the problem described in Chapter 2, Yeats’s attempt to account for the continuity of personal identity in time. Heinlein’s story dramatizes a situation in which four “phases” meet rather than remaining hermetically sealed in their own containers. By transforming the ensuing dilemma into a time travel story in which different versions of the same being can encounter each other, the early science fiction writers, as Wittenberg shows, found a new way to examine a host of old problems:

What physics finally enables within science fiction is a metaliterature of Oedipus and Narcissus, a literature about encountering (or reencountering) oneself, about meeting (or remeeting) one’s progenitors, about negotiating (or renegotiating) one’s progenitors, about negotiating (or renegotiating) one’s personal and historical origins. It takes many years for time travel writers to discover the psychological implications of the narrative possibilities opened by the new physics, but once they do, these *topoi* effectively conquer the thematic terrain of time travel fiction as

effectively as the metaphors of Darwinistic evolution had done within utopian romance a generation earlier. For the rest of its history as a narratological laboratory . . . time travel fiction is a genre of psychological implication, a scenography in which selves meet themselves, kill their progenitors, and plumb the significance of their own histories for their present instantiations or avatars. (64)

Remarkably, Yeats's short play seems to foresee nearly all the possibilities of time travel fiction described by Wittenberg. When the Old Man urges his mother to abstain from the procreative act of which he is the product, he is at the extreme edge of the paradox fictions that began to dominate science fictions in the 1930s and 1940s: "The essence of a paradox story is interference in the past and the potential irreconcilability of lines of events that such interference sets up" (Wittenberg 66). In one of its aspects, then, *Purgatory* is an exotic variety of the type of time travel paradox story published in magazines like *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Science Fiction*.

Most of Wittenberg's historical analysis is based on short stories and novellas. Over the course of the twentieth century, time travel fiction increased and multiplied, in length and variety. However, what is of more interest, with *Purgatory* in mind, is the swerve that Wittenberg makes in the direction of visualization. Wittenberg bases his theorization of time travel fiction on a striking insight: as time travel fiction becomes more and more concerned with the concrete representation of the *means and consequences* of time travel, it begins to describe the mechanics of narratology and the act of reading (and visualizing) a story, the construction of what he calls a "viewpoint over histories" (148-177). He argues

that the tendency of these increasingly elaborate stories is to generate what he calls a “hyperspace and hypertime of narration” (99), a space outside conventional time and space, which the reader must both imagine and occupy so that he or she can perform the work of co-ordination that the story seems to demand. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur writes of “narrated time” as the site of configuration, in which the episodic aspect of narrative is subject to “retrospective arrangement”. Wittenberg describes the ways in which time travel stories try to represent the site of this narrated time, almost as if it were a place that the writer vacates, after completion of the story, to make room for the reader. In *Purgatory*, the theatre space is a “hyper-space-time” of the type that Wittenberg describes (101). Now this is partly true of any theatre and any play, in any place and in any time. What is peculiar to *Purgatory* is that the “hyper-space-time” that the audience occupies is doubled on stage, as the audience see the Old Man negotiate his way through the past, and interpret the signs presented to him on stage, in the present. He is trying to follow a story that he is making up as he goes along, and the audience is watching him do this. And, as I said above, the audience is forced, at the end of the play, to occupy a position in which, if it commits itself fully to the the world projected by the play, it must imagine a repetition of what it has just witnessed, with the new knowledge that the Old Man is himself trapped in a time-loop of which he is only dimly aware. We have seen how Alexandra Poulain reads *Calvary* as a narrative that embeds a time-loop. As that play appeared in 1920, Poulain’s observation also highlights the extent to which Yeats’s use of the stage to explore the temporal possibilities of the system may have led him to narrative possibilities explored in

Einstein-influenced science fiction *before* relativity theory became popular and fashionable in the 1920s.

J.G. Ballard's "Escapement" (1956) is a later example of the time travel paradox fiction in which the writer finds a solution to the problem of visualizing the convergence of separate time-lines. In the story, Harry Bartley and his wife Helen are watching a television play. Harry notices that a scene he has watched is being repeated, and he assumes that there has been a technical error. His wife hasn't noticed. Paying closer attention, he finds that the play jumps back a second time. It happens a third time. His wife is too preoccupied with her sewing to notice. Harry calls on a neighbor and telephones a friend from work. There is nothing wrong with their sets. He gets increasingly frantic, but there seems to be no doubt that he is caught in a time loop while the others continue to live in ordinary time. He knows that he can leave traces behind, that the past loops are not simply erased. A crossword puzzle that he is working on gets closer to completion with each return. And the pace of return is increasing. Similarly, at the end of *Purgatory*, the Old Man notes that the recurrence is speeding up: "How quickly it returns" (CW2 544 215). The incipient paradox seems to generate its own sense of urgency, as if the narrative itself wants to find out what is going to happen. Each jump-back occurs slightly before the time of the immediately preceding jump-back and he finds himself returning to a time slightly later than the last time:

The merry-go-round was closing in. I thought the jump-back had come sooner than I expected. At least two minutes earlier, somewhere around 9.13.

And not only was the repetition interval getting shorter, but as the arc edged inwards on itself it was uncovering the real time stream running below it, the stream in which the other I, unknown to myself here, had solved the clue, stood up, walked over to the mantelpiece and filled in 17 down.

I sat down on the sofa, watching the clock carefully.

(25)

As the intervals shorten, and the pace increases, Ballard must abandon the story (as Yeats does) or describe the moment when the jump-back and the return coincide. Ballard resorts to a technique of visualization. The text becomes a picture:

to walk over to her

ver to her

er (28)

The sentence decomposes into a single syllable (“er”) that brings together two moments otherwise separated by the articulation of the full sentence: “He walked *over to her*” (28, my emphasis).

In “Escapement”, one stream of time flows under the series of time-loops. The story tries to reconcile what happens within the loop with what happens outside the loop. And Ballard’s rigorous follow-through, to the point of having one character understand what another character will experience, and how that character will return to ordinary time,

confirms another of Wittenberg's observations: that time travel paradox fictions are often concerned with narrative conservation, which means that they find ways to suture whatever rifts in time they have opened to leave the reader with some sense of a story that somehow hangs together, in temporal logic. This principle of narrative conservation also explains the failure of the Old Man to achieve his aim of eliminating his own conception. If he had succeeded, the play itself would have to disappear, and the audience – as witness to what never happened – would have to disappear with it.

I have said that, in *Purgatory*, Yeats seems to be pressing against the limits of genre. In "Dove or Swan", in a passage that describes a change of historical gyre, Yeats seems to hint at the pressure that was being felt more generally, as well as generically:

I . . . think of famous works where synthesis has been carried to the utmost limit possible . . . and I notice that when the limit is approached or past, when the moment of surrender is reached, when the new gyre begins to stir, I am filled with excitement. I think of recent mathematical research; . . . I can recognise that the limit itself has become a new dimension, that this ever-hidden thing that makes us fold our hands has begun to press down upon multitudes. (*CW14* 218)

Yeats was reaching the end of his own attempt to find narrative forms for new dimensions. But he had started long before the other writers mentioned above (with the obvious exception of Dante). Hilton, Heinlein and Ballard were all born in the twentieth century, and Yeats belonged to an earlier generation. Before any of them were born, in February 1894, Yeats had visited Paris and stayed for a few weeks as the guest of

MacGregor Mathers, who had established a Golden Dawn temple in the French capital.

Mathers was married to Moina Bergson, sister of Henri Bergson. According to Yeats's brief account of the relationship between MacGregor Mathers and Bergson, the occultist seems to have brought the full weight of his powers to bear on his philosopher brother-in-law, but without success:

. . . Bergson came to call, very well dressed and very courteous. He was but an obscure professor and MacGregor Mathers was impatient. 'I have shown him all that my magic can do and I have no effect upon him.' (*Memoirs* 73)

In the same city, on 6 April 1922, the now-famous Bergson faced a more formidable opponent in the person of Albert Einstein. In the effect that his words subsequently had on Bergson's reputation, Einstein proved to have stronger magical powers than Mathers. The protracted debate between the Frenchman and his Swiss nemesis is described in Jimena Canales's *The Physicist and the Philosopher: Einstein, Bergson and the Debate that changed our Understanding of Time* (2015). On the night that they met, Einstein showed a flair for striking rhetoric:

The philosopher was by then much more senior than Einstein. He spoke for about half an hour. . . . The physicist responded in less than a minute – including in his answer one damning and frequently cited sentence: "*Il n'y a donc pas un temps des philosophes.*" Einstein's reply – stating that the time of the philosopher did not exist – was incendiary. (Canales 4-5)

Bergson did not let it rest, going on to publish a book in which he marshalled his objections to Einstein's theories, but Einstein was determined to have the last word:

Einstein fought back with all of his energy, strength, and resources. In the years that followed, Bergson was largely perceived to have lost the debate against the younger physicist. The scientist's views on time came to dominate most learned discussions on the topic, keeping in abeyance not only Bergson's but many other artistic and literary approaches, by relegating them to a position of secondary, auxiliary importance. . . . It marked a moment when intellectuals were no longer able to keep up with revolutions in science due to its increasing complexity. (Canales 6)

One of the benefits of Paul Ricoeur's work in *Time and Narrative* is that it explains why neither Einstein nor Bergson could tolerate the other's claim to priority. For Ricoeur, a philosopher in the phenomenological tradition, the time of physics will never be reconciled with the time of phenomenology, although narrative enables humans to construct a productive bridge between the two models of time. As Canales says, though, along with philosophers like Bergson, Einstein claimed priority over artists and writers, who couldn't possibly know what they were talking about. With the publication of his work on special and general relativity, in 1905 and 1916 respectively, Einstein effectively challenged the right of *all* other provinces of discourse (theology, philosophy, history, literature) to speak authoritatively about the nature of time. He published his theories in a form intended to reach a wider readership. His aim, as he put it in the preface to the 1916 publication, was to explain relativity to "readers who, from a general scientific and philosophical point of view,

are interested in the theory, but who are not conversant with the mathematical apparatus of theoretical physics” (ix). There is an explicit rejection of the merit of the text as literature:

The author has spared himself no pains in his endeavour to present the main ideas in the simplest and most intelligible form, and on the whole, in the sequence and connection in which they actually originated. In the interest of clearness, it appeared to me inevitable that I should repeat myself frequently, without paying the slightest attention to the elegance of the presentation (ix).

Einstein is saying that the language of physics (the “mathematical apparatus”) is the best approximation of reality, and that translation of mathematical equations into verbal form is a fall from a higher to a lower form of representation. Einstein pre-empts any criticism of his use of language by making clear that the sole purpose of language is to guide readers towards a basic understanding of what the higher form of representation can reveal. Thus, apart from the challenge that the content of his theories makes to other disciplines, there is an implied challenge to the only executive means available to those disciplines.

Not all physicists have followed Einstein in this. In *Time Reborn: From the Crisis in Physics to the Future of the Universe*, Lee Smolin advances the view that the privilege accorded to mathematics in physics emerges from a preference for the existence of timeless laws that apply regardless of whether one is living in the eighteenth or the twenty-first century:

John Archibald Wheeler used to write physics equations on the blackboard, stand back, and say, “Now I’ll clap my hands and a universe will spring into existence.” Of

course, it didn't. Stephen Hawking asked, in *A Brief History of Time*, "What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?" Such utterances reveal the absurdity of the view that mathematics is prior to nature.

Math in reality comes after nature. It has no generative power. Another way to say this is that in mathematics conclusions are forced by logical implication, whereas in nature events are generated by causal processes acting in time. (245-246)

While Bergson and Einstein were confronting one another in Paris, Yeats was at Ballylee. If he had been aware of their meeting, he might have reminded himself of something he had written a few years earlier, in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*:

We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves,
poetry. (CW5 8)

Since his marriage to George, he had become more preoccupied than ever with his vision of human life and human history. He speculated on the nature of time as the force that animated both. In his poetry and his plays, he *would* breathe fire into the "desert geometry" (CW13 97) of the system. The first intimation of the mission of the Black Eagle, "to change the quality of the idea of time in men's minds" (YVP 3 53), had been revealed to Yeats only after he had subdued the spitting, snarling cat that took possession of George on 8 October 1920. Another wild cat appeared at the outset of one of the sleep sessions a month later, on 20 November, and Yeats was forced to devise ever more inventive ways to placate the furry antagonist. The opening words of the entry for the night of 21 November have a resigned tone: "Cat trouble again." (YVP 3 55). It seems not to have occurred to Yeats that cats prey

on birds, even if the visitant might have been nothing more than the ghost of a feral Oxford cat. In any case, a few days later, Yeats made the following entry in the dream notebook:

Walking back from Bridges yesterday by light of the moon George saw a very large bird in the sky. She said "I thought at first it was an aeroplane". Dorothy Pound and I saw nothing. (*YVP* 3 56)

Perhaps the Black Eagle was already beating its wings, years of rapturous flight ahead of it.

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