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YEATS'S RE-ENCHANTED NATURE

Seán Hewitt

In his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), W. B. Yeats charted his generation's "defeat" of Victorianism. Amongst the charges held against nineteenth-century literature, he tells us, the poets of the 1890s levied "scientific humanitarian pre-occupation, psychological curiosity, [and] rhetoric" (*OBMV* xxvi). However, Yeats frames these as symptomatic of a deeper flaw, which he traces back to the Enlightenment, during which the natural world began to be seen as "steel-bound or stone-built" rather than as a constant "flux" (*OBMV* xxviii). "The mischief began," he suggests, "at the end of the seventeenth century when man became passive before a mechanized nature" (*OBMV* xxvii). This railing against a disenchanted natural world was one of the constants of Yeats's literary career, and was pithily summed up in his diary for 1930: "Descartes, Locke, and Newton took away the world and gave us its excrement instead" (*Ex* 325).¹ Yeats's image of post-Enlightenment mankind as "passive" before nature hints at his interest in magic and mysticism, as well as his desire to search in and through nature and its "great memory" for deeper, original truths (*Ec&I* 28). However, the statement also posits his work, and the work of his contemporaries, as an attempt to combat and reconfigure a mechanized nature, and to reformulate it as something active, mysterious and, in many ways, occult.

Recent criticism has begun to reassess the "secularization thesis" associated with modernity, which characterizes modernization as coterminous with increasingly rational modes of thought and with the rejection of spirituality.² Revealing a re-enchantment with both the natural world and the mind in early and high modernist writings, this turn has emphasized the rejection of Enlightenment values in the art of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth- centuries. Indeed, Yeats's attraction to occult spirituality has been central to such understandings of modern writing. Timothy Materer has traced clearly Yeats's rebellion against his father's positivistic skepticism, and the foundational work of earlier scholars such as Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper has been harnessed in recent criticism to situate Yeats's anti-Enlightenment philosophy in the broader context of modernist enchantments.³ Fundamental to this new interest in magical or occult thought in modernist writings is the fascination with reimagining the world in ways contrary to post-Enlightenment positivism. Yeats's assertion that his generation combatted a vision of "mechanized" nature places him firmly within this active reimagining.

If, as Wilson suggests, “positivism asserts the inert nature of objects in the world” and, viewing “the operations of nature from a distance [...] sees nothing but the mechanical operation of forces on objects,” then the project of re-enchantment suggests both that it is possible to act within, and to be effected by, an animated and spiritualized nature.⁴ Unfortunately, despite the renewed interest in modernist re-enchantments, there has been little explicit focus with regard to the work of Yeats on the changed relationship to the natural world which such re-enchantments precipitate. However, this changed relationship is fundamental to Yeats’s poetry, philosophy, and self-mythology. The imposition of rationalism onto the natural world during the scientific upheavals of the seventeenth century led, as Rupert Sheldrake has shown, to nature being “denied the traditional attributes of life, the capacity for spontaneous movement and self-organization.” More specifically, “the souls that animated physical bodies in accordance with their own internal ends were exorcized from the mechanistic world of physics,” leading to a world of inanimate and passive matter governed by overarching scientific laws.⁵ If the Enlightenment was in part a process which effected the disenchantment of nature (as Yeats recognized then, and a number of philosophers have suggested since), then a reassertion of faith might simultaneously advocate a counter-Enlightenment literature and a revised vision of the natural world and mankind’s place within it.⁶

As Jane Bennett summarizes:

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment sought to demystify the world according to faith, where nature was God’s text, filled with divine signs, intrinsic meaning, and intelligible order. In the face of belief in an enchanted cosmos, the Enlightenment sought to push God to a more distant social location; in the face of unreflective allegiance to tradition, it sought self-determination and self-conscious reason; in the face of a view of knowledge as mysterious divine hints, it sought a transparent, certain science; in the face of a sacralized nature, it sought a fund of useful natural resources.⁷

Reacting in part against the rationalism of his father, who had rejected Christianity and “adopted the methods and conclusions of Mill, Comte, and Darwin long before they had become fashionable among the intellectual community,” Yeats propounded an extensive anti-materialism and anti-rationalism in his poetry and his critical writings, positing symbolism, mysticism and occult knowledge as a modern antidote for the mechanization of nature in the post-Enlightenment worldview.⁸ At the heart of his literary project, then, is a re-conception of nature as by turns animate, symbolic, and imbued with divine immanence. The common conception that disenchantment and secularization followed modernization is countered by Yeats and other proponents of occult religions at the *fin de siècle*. His artistic philosophy, by his own account, is

rooted in a changed experience of the natural world which came via the rejection of materialism and rationalism.

Despite this, there has been significant critical disagreement with regard to what constitutes this new vision of nature, and how Yeats situates poetry, and the poet, within it. Richard Ellmann, for example, notes Yeats's early Romantic dream to live "not in unnature, but in nature," and emphasizes Yeats's constant negotiation between the material and spiritual worlds.⁹ Ellmann's double negation—"not in unnature"—deftly draws our attention to a key tension in Romanticism between appreciation of the physical world (as in Wordsworth) and a disdain for it (as in Blake), suggesting that, in his early life at least, Yeats was more attracted to the idyll, the Romantic landscape, than to a Blakean world of symbolic "unnature." George Bornstein, however, insists on a closer application of the contrary pairing of art and nature in Yeats's works. Referring to Yeats's relationship to Romanticism, Bornstein argues that, just as Blake saw physical nature as a "Delusive Goddess," an "antagonist to imagination," Yeats "took over Blake's projection of nature and art or intellect as contraries or antimonies."¹⁰ In one of the most memorable instances of this, in "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats's speaker asks to be taken "out of nature" and "Into the artifice of eternity" (VP 408). For Terry Eagleton, Yeats's symbolism effects a bypassing of physical nature, revealing it as merely representative, rather than actual. Eagleton quips that Yeats is often to be "found cavalierly converting the real to the symbolic, turning a swan into an emblem the instant it glides into view."¹¹ However, from the earlier poetry of the 1890s (especially his verse play *The Shadowy Waters*) onwards to his last poems, the natural world is not so easily escaped, nor is the desire to escape it left unquestioned. As Yeats himself asserts, "Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed" (VP 556): there is a constant relationship between physical and spiritual, between symbol and symbolized, which is an enduring fascination for the poet.

Yeats's early attraction to the physical, natural world is reflected in his youthful enthusiasm for natural history. The poet was a keen naturalist in his youth, shocking his classmates by proclaiming himself to be an evolutionist, writing a school essay on "Evolutionary Botany," and reading the works of Darwin, Tyndall, Haeckel, and Huxley.¹² However, Yeats was soon to reject materialist science in favor of a pervasive spiritualism, seeing the two as innately antagonistic. As in the "Autobiography" of his contemporary, J. M. Synge, Yeats's early encounter with natural science is repositioned in the author's self-mythology as a moment of initial deprivation which led to a more far-reaching sense of spirituality. After reading a book by Darwin, Synge tells us, the younger writer eventually "renounced Christianity" and "made [himself] a sort of incredulous belief that illuminated nature and lent an object to life without hampering the intellect."¹³ Implicit in this statement is Synge's life-long belief in the truth of

evolutionary theory and natural history, and his successful reconciliation of a spiritualized natural world with the revelations of positivist science. Yeats's account, however, is much more openly antagonistic towards those scientists whose theories he had held faith with in his younger years, combatting what he would later term the "mechanized nature" of post-Enlightenment thought with a mystical world based on folklore, poetry and the imagination:

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 [...] 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" (*Au* 115–16).

Huxley and Tyndall were both proponents of a version of atomic theory based on the concept of solid, indestructible particles of matter which underpinned their materialist worldview. As Alex Owen notes, this particular form of materialism was discredited by the end of the nineteenth century by the discovery of subatomic particles, but late-Victorian occultists (such as Yeats) took as their point of attack the materialist universe of these popularizers of natural science.¹⁴ In the above passage, the move from a disenchanting natural world to the creation of "a new religion" marks Yeats's own sense of the beginning of a literary project of re-enchantment, whereby his negative reaction to materialist science is seen as the starting point for a new ascendancy of thought based in mystical experience and original or "instinctive" truths. The "imaginary people," figures out of folklore, myth and memory, are linked directly to the creation of a new religion, itself rooted in a view of nature as animate and symbolic, and this connection is elaborated over the course of Yeats's career.

In this way, Yeats diverges significantly from his Blakean model, though his critical writings on his "master" (*UPI* 273) often suggest a confluence rather than a divergence of approach. Sinéad Garrigan Mattar characterizes Yeats's essay, "The Symbolic System," which was his contribution to his joint edition with Edwin Ellis of the *Works of William Blake* (1893), as an "extraordinary, vicarious expression of his antimaterialist manifesto," and indeed we must be careful to emphasize the presence of Yeats's own poetic ideals even as they are presented through the prism of Blake.¹⁵ Indeed, as Billigheimer shows, "Yeats derived inspiration from Blake but much of it was his own invention."¹⁶ The key point of divergence between Yeats and Blake (though it is usually underplayed or hurried over by the later poet) are their contending views on nature. On Blake's part, he makes it clear that the natural world is a

reflection, a corresponding symbol of realities which exist beyond it: he characterizes it, therefore, as a delusion, an antagonist to true vision. Though Blake asserts that "There exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature," he also rejects the natural world as a source of true knowledge.¹⁷ Distinguishing himself from Wordsworth, who displays the "Influence of Natural Objects In Calling forth and strengthening the Imagination," Blake writes that "Natural objects always did & now do weaken, deaden & obliterate Imagination in me."¹⁸ Rather than opening up to the influence of physical nature, Blake seeks a visionary state which sees through the "glass" to "the Permanent Realities." In other words, unlike his Wordsworth, Blake rejects a sense of natural objects as "enchanted," denying their ability to "influence" his imagination.¹⁹

In the critical introduction for the 1893 edition of Blake's *Works*, Yeats and Ellis both demurred to and subtly diverged from Blake's view:

Nature, he tells (or rather he reminds) us, is merely a name for one form of mental existence. Art is another and a higher form. But that art may rise to its true place, it must be set free from memory that binds it to Nature.

Nature,—or creation,—is a result of the shrinkage of consciousness,—originally clairvoyant,—under the rule of the five senses, and of argument and law. [...]

In imagination only we find a Human Faculty that touches nature at one side, and spirit on the other. Imagination may be described as that which is sent bringing spirit to nature, entering into nature, and seemingly losing its spirit, that nature being revealed as symbol may lose the power to delude.²⁰

Although Yeats later suggested that his main contribution to the *Works* was the essay "The Symbolic System," the terms used here in the "Introduction" are repeated throughout Yeats's critical writings on Blake, showing familiarity with (if not authorship of) the ideas put forward in this passage.²¹ Here, Yeats and Ellis emphasize Blake's theory as one of non-representational, or at least non-naturalistic art, wherein the imagination sets art free from its connection to nature. To see only phenomenal nature, they suggest, is (for Blake) the result of a "shrinkage of consciousness." However, as Mary Flannery observes, Yeats and Ellis's understanding of the imagination, and its role in relation to the natural world or "creation," is not consonant with Blake's own view. In the above passage, imagination is seen as an enchanting faculty, "bringing spirit to nature, entering into nature"; in other words, the imagination animates, or imbues the natural world with spirituality, thus revealing it to be a symbol of something beyond its material existence. Although this is still an anthropocentric concept, it goes some way to asserting the value of an enchanted nature. Flannery argues that "this represents a definite misunderstanding of Blake, for whom nature

was evil; it is a solidly Yeatsian concept.”²² Later, Yeats would further diverge from the Blakean idea that “creation” was evil, or antagonistic to imagination. Emphasizing the primacy of the imaginative arts as “the greatest of Divine revelations,” Yeats wrote that Blake’s concept of the imagination led to the idea that “the sympathy with all living things, sinful and righteous alike, which the imaginative arts awake, is that forgiveness of sins commanded by Christ” (*E&I* 112). Blake’s “natural objects,” which “weaken, deaden & obliterate Imagination,” are thus transformed in the Yeatsian concept of the imagination into forms of empathy, whereby art encourages an ecological consciousness of an animate and sentient world, rather than a natural world which is solely a “delusion” and something to be rejected by the true mystic.

Indeed, Yeats’s theory of magic, as outlined in his 1901 essay on the subject, places such ideas at the center of its exposition. Taking cues from folkloric motifs and cures, Yeats insists on the hidden properties of natural objects, and on their essence as a portion of, or access point to, the “Great Mind” of nature. He begins the essay by outlining his belief in three central “doctrines” of magic:

1. That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
2. That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
3. That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols (*E&I* 28).

Yeats’s conception of magic, therefore, helps to distinguish his relationship to nature from that of Blake. Whereas, for Blake, the natural object is a delusion, a hindrance to imagination, and an obstacle to true vision, for Yeats the comingling of the human mind with the mind and memory of “Nature herself” is effected through natural objects, and through symbols especially: “Such magical symbols as the husk of flax, water out of the fork of an elm-tree, do their work, as I think, by awakening in the depths of the mind where it mingles with the Great Mind, as is enlarged by the Great Memory, some curative energy, some hypnotic command” (*E&I* 50). This sense of latency, of something inherent (and occult) in natural objects is pervasive in Yeats, so that the physical world becomes, in many ways, a source of (rather than an impediment to) mystical potential and poetic inspiration.²³

For Yeats, the mind becomes porous, open to the influence of nature on the imagination. This is contrary to the secularization thesis propounded by a number of twentieth-century philosophers. Charles Taylor, for example, emphasizes the development of a “buffered” mind as a result of disenchantment. Rather than a world in which external agents (natural objects in particular) were often seen

as the locus and agents of spirituality (as in Yeats's early work), secularization results in a worldview in which "the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans [...]; and minds are bounded, so that [...] thoughts, feelings, etc., are situated 'within' them."²⁴ In the enchanted world, however, "the meaning is already there in the object/agent, it is there quite independently of us; it would be there even if we didn't exist."²⁵ Hence, "To be a buffered subject, to have closed the porous boundary between inside (thought) and outside (nature, the physical) is partly a matter of living in a disenchanting world."²⁶ Yeats's conception of magic as an act of re-enchantment creates a sense of communion and of communication with nature at large, in which there is (in his paraphrase of Swedenborg) "a continual influx from God to man" (*Ex* 38). Rather than nature being an obstruction, the mind of the enchanter allows for it to be conceived as porous: in other words, it is reconfigured from the "stone-built" and "mechanized" nature which followed the Enlightenment and is cast once more as constant "flux" (*OBMV* xxviii). Mankind, likewise, is made again an active rather than a passive component. Thus, Yeats's ecologies run contrary to any proposed progression from the animistic to the secular, the "porous" to the "buffered" self.

The immanence of spirituality in nature, and the poetic potential of this, was central to Yeats in his prose writings, letters, and reviews, and can be traced throughout his poetic work. In common with Yeats, Blake saw "the ancient Poets" as animators of the natural world and held this as a symptom of the "enlarged & numerous" senses of these writers. The root of the modern priesthood, Blake saw, was in the severance of the imagination from the object, so that animistic thought was eventually harnessed by men as a method of control and restriction.²⁷ Yeats was quite persistent in attributing a sense of inherent divinity, even poetic imagination, to animals and plants, and he used this to underpin his revised vision of the natural world. However, if poetry is, for him, an imaginative art that encourages "the sympathy with all living things, sinful and righteous alike" (*Ec&I* 112), it is also rooted in his early feeling for the *difference* of nature as something separate from (and thus more valuable to) mankind.²⁸ In an early letter to Katherine Tynan, written on April 20, 1888, Yeats records watching robins and sparrows making their nests in the garden underneath his window, and asks, "I wonder what religion they have." He continues:

When I was a child and used to watch the ants running about in Burnham Beeches I used often to say "what religion do the ants have?" They must have one you know. Yet perhaps not. Perhaps like the Arabs they have not time. Well they must have some notion of the making of the world (*CLI* 63).

This readiness to assign an independent life and thought to birds and insects is continued in Yeats's early poetry. Nicholas Grene, for example, notes the

predominance of instances of animals dreaming in the poems of the 1890s.²⁹ Even if we allow, as Sinéad Garrigan Mattar suggests, that Yeats's engagement with animism was short-lived, this pseudo-animistic tendency in Yeats's early thought is important not simply because it establishes one aspect of Yeats's understanding of his relationship to the natural world, but because its effects are felt throughout his theory and his conception of poetry.³⁰

In his early reviews, Yeats is careful to distinguish between the use of nature in "modern" poetry, and that of an ideal original, written "when the world was fresh." In the second of two articles on Samuel Ferguson, written and published a few months after the elder poet's death, Yeats held up Ferguson's verse as a rare example of poetry in which the natural world remains with its visionary potential intact. Here, anthropocentric Victorianism is avoided, and instead nature is revealed again as immanent with spiritual correspondences:

At once the fault and the beauty of the nature-description of most modern poets is that for them the stars, and streams, the leaves, and the animals, are only masks behind which go on the sad soliloquies of a nineteenth century egoism. When the world was fresh they gave us a clear glass to see the world through, but slowly, as nature lost her newness, or they began more and more to live in cities or for some other cause, the glass was dyed with ever deepening colours, and now we scarcely see what lies beyond because of the pictures that are painted all over it. But here is one who brings us a clear glass once more (*UPI* 103).

Again, Yeats returns to Blake's image of the "glass"; however, here the poem (and not nature itself) is a "glass." Before the Enlightenment, the poem had the power to help the reader to "see the world" because "the world was fresh," and this was reflected in the "freshness" of language and the spiritual capacity of the poet. Rather than being the product of post-Enlightenment "egoism," which resulted in the "sad soliloquies" of nineteenth-century verse, the poem was marked by a more porous subjectivity. Yeats lays the blame on urbanization, on the build-up of cliché and hackneyed language for an unclear vision of the natural world related to a solipsistic "egoism," but what is most important here is the link he draws between the "clear glass" of the poem and the "clear glass" of the natural world (or how it is perceived in the modern West). Ferguson's avoidance of anthropocentric nature description, to the contrary, is characteristic of a revelatory mysticism, of a way of the self being within the world (and a way of the poem being within the world) which reveals, once more, the "newness" of nature, the clarity with which it allows us to see beyond "the pictures that are painted all over it." Thus, it is not physical nature itself that is antagonistic to vision, but the built-up "dye" of associations which have obscured it over the years. Following this, a reimagined poetics is imbued with

the ability to return both writer and reader to an original conception of nature which recognizes its existence outside of the ego of the poet. This is in part an ecocentric ideal which argues for the revelatory nature of a changed understanding of the world in relation to the mind and the imagination.

Yeats's primitivism is latent here: in fact, his description of Ferguson echoes his descriptions of the Irish peasantry in *The Celtic Twilight* and elsewhere, and often aligns with his own self-presentation as both a Celt and a mystic. If, as Edward Hirsch suggests, "The central animating goal of *The Celtic Twilight* was to affirm that the supernatural world exists and to demonstrate that the Irish peasantry had a unique commerce with that world," it also had at heart the goal of revealing Yeats himself as a poet sensitive to the natural world and to supernatural experience.³¹ A storyteller in *The Celtic Twilight*, for example, possesses "the visionary melancholy of purely instinctive natures and of all animals"; an old man "is certain too that the cats, of whom there are many in the woods, have a language of their own"; indeed, "to the wise peasant the green hills and woods round him are full of never-fading mystery" (*Myth* 5, 60, 90). The connection with the peasantry, in this respect, is an implicit measure of sensitivity to the natural world. Later, in comparing the ballad poetry of the Irish peasantry to the poetry of James Clarence Mangan, Yeats again made recourse to his theory that much modern poetry used nature merely as a reflection of "nineteenth century egoism": "Nature with these men was a passion, but in the poetry of Mangan are no beautiful descriptions. Outer things were only to him mere symbols to express his own inmost and desperate heart. Nurtured and schooled in grimy back streets of Dublin, woods and rivers were not for him" (*UPI* 153).³² By contrast, Yeats repeatedly emphasizes his own history in Sligo, his childhood spent in woods forming in him a receptivity (like the peasantry he depicts in *The Celtic Twilight*) to an enchanted Irish landscape.

Yeats often repeats phrases in both his reviews and his literary prose, revealing a connection in his thought between a certain Irish aesthetic and a view of nature that opposes the "mechanized" Enlightenment. Reviewing Lady Wilde's *Ancient Cures, Charms, and Usages of Ireland* (1890), for example, he notes (echoing James Frazer's famous assertion that a primitive person "hardly conceives the distinction commonly drawn by more advanced peoples between the natural and the supernatural"³³) that "In Ireland this world and the other are not widely sundered; sometimes, indeed, it seems almost as if our earthly chattels were no more than the shadows of things beyond" (*UPI* 172). The same phrase is repeated almost verbatim in his short prose piece "Concerning the Nearness Together of Heaven, Earth, and Purgatory."³⁴ Likewise, his comment in *The Celtic Twilight* that, for the Irish peasant, nature is "full of never-fading mystery," is repeated in an article on "Irish fairies," first published in *Leisure*

Hour in October 1890 (*Myth* 90; *UPI* 182). Hence, Yeats continues the work of Matthew Arnold and Ernest Renan in refashioning the Irish as a people particularly sensitive to spiritual influences, and as possessing a tradition which might counter a disenchanted and Anglicized modernity. Furthermore, he extends this to a vision of literature. Not only is a counter-Enlightenment view of nature characteristic of the Irish peasantry, but it is central to Yeats's sense of the aesthetic and philosophical value of Irish writing, too.

Such observations underpin Yeats's own self-image as a poet sensitive to an enchanted nature. His comment, in his *Autobiographies*, that his construction of a new "Church of poetic tradition" led to a renewed belief in the truth of the imagination and the imagined words of "imaginary people," is continually invoked as a means of emphasizing Yeats as a man for whom nature had visionary, even magical potential. As a young child, for example, he tells us that he used to visit the home of his great aunt Mary (or "Micky"), spending much time in the gardens of her house: "Under one gable a dark thicket of small trees made a shut-in mysterious place, where one played and believed that something was going to happen" (*Au* 19). Here, the older writer locates the natural world as central to his poetic vision, being consonant both with his interest in magical experiment (the sense that perhaps "something was going to happen," that his playing might effect a natural or supernatural event), and his insistence on a vision of nature as "mysterious." Such an idea is repeated in "Enchanted Woods," published as part of *The Celtic Twilight*, in which Yeats links himself to an Irish peasant—again, a man whom Yeats is not sure "distinguishes between the natural and supernatural very clearly" (*Myth* 61). Yeats uses this as a stepping stone for his own admission of belief in the enchanted state of the woodland:

I often entangle myself in arguments more complicated than even those paths of Inchy as to what is the true nature of apparitions. But at other times I [...] believe that all nature is full of invisible people [...]. Even when I was a boy I could never walk in a wood without feeling that at any moment I might find before me somebody or something I had long looked for without knowing what I looked for. And now I will at times explore every little nook of some poor coppice with almost anxious footsteps, so deep a hold has this imagination upon me (*Myth* 63).

Returning to Yeats's insistence that a rejection of a positivist, mechanistic view of nature led to his creation of a poetic tradition, and his belief in the original truths of the imagination, this passage reaffirms the link between a re-enchanted worldview and Yeats's own artistic enterprise. Rooted in a vision of folklore as "the collaborative Ur-text of a spiritual and imaginative faith," Yeats insists on his own receptivity to "apparitions," his own blurring of the boundary between

natural and supernatural, not only to claim kinship with a re-imagined Irish identity, but as an anti-materialist protest which places the imagination, and a sense of nature as animated or immanent with spirituality, at the root of his literary and philosophical project.³⁵

The relationship between this re-enchanted nature, the “invisible people,” and Yeats’s poetic endeavors, is particularly pronounced in his play *The Shadowy Waters*.³⁶ This play, which in many versions only thinly veils its autobiographical nature, concerns the magician Forgael, who is sailing on “the deck of an ancient ship” (VP 221) with a crew of sailors, in search of “a woman, / One of the Ever-living” (VP 231). Part and parcel of this quest is Forgael’s aim to pass beyond the self, beyond the material world, and beyond images, into “a place in the world’s core” (VP 231), a source of original light. In this way, he mirrors a Blakean quest for a mystical vision, Blake’s “constant attempt to overcome the material world.”³⁷ “All would be well,” Forgael says, “Could we but give us wholly to the dreams, / And get into their world that to the sense / Is shadow, and not linger wretchedly / Among substantial things” (VP 230). Due to the fact that *The Shadowy Waters* was composed and revised over a number of years, it exhibits many of the formative concerns of Yeats’s work: apocalyptic thought, druid rites, magic, animism, folklore, and occult symbolism all appear and are emphasized in different manuscript drafts. In fact, as A. J. Bate has noted, Yeats wanted to include three versions of the play in the same collected edition in 1907, showcasing the various concerns and themes of each.³⁸ Prior to a major revision in the late 1890s, as many critics (including Yeats himself) have observed, the play became overloaded with symbolism, weighted down by the influence of Maeterlinck and Villiers de l’Isle-Adam and the occultism of MacGregor Mathers.³⁹ Writing to John O’Leary regarding Florence Farr’s desire to stage *The Shadowy Waters*, Yeats termed it “a wild mystical thing carefully arranged to be an insult to the regular theatre goer who is hated by both of us” (CLI 384); however, he perhaps worried that the “insult” might, in fact, fall flat under its weight of “legendary detail,” making it so abstract as to be “unfit for any theatrical purpose” (CLI 407). The struggle to be concrete in a play about the struggle to leave the substantial world hints at a key tension in Yeats’s work during this period, which William O’Donnell has suggested separates Yeats from his protagonist, Forgael: the former being an artist, the latter an adept proper. Whereas Forgael wishes to leave nature behind, Yeats (as an artist) feels compelled towards it.⁴⁰

The earlier, Blakean versions of the play feature a backstory, in which the Children of Aoifu have performed two tasks for Forgael (robbing hazels from a tree overhanging Connla’s Well and stealing leaves from a northern oak tree); later, Forgael himself performs versions of these labors, penetrating Connla’s Pool and sailing under the roots of the oak tree, which is said to divide the

Place of Briars from the Place of Stones. In these early versions, the oak and the hazel “symbolize [...] the unreality of the created world,” and thus align the play with a Blakean vision of nature (*DC* 10, 22). In fact, Forgael explicitly refers to physical nature as the fragmented version of an original unity, seeing creation itself as a series of clothing, masks, and costumes which, like the occult adept, he is able to control.⁴¹

All things among the winds waters, & all things ^{that ha}
 That hang among the winds, & all that
 Among the winds, all things that build the fire
 All they that build the fire & all things that life
 That wander [?] in the woods & water & woods or hang
 Among the winds have perished
 In water & woods or
 All ^{For all} souls that build the fire. & all things ^{souls} that life ^{live}
 Wrapped up in fur or ^{and} feather & bright with scales
 Are but malevolent masks for my own ^{that my} lips press
 And cry through & ^{for} and the woods & waters & winds
 Are robes but the robe I wrap about my head
 And from of old have shaken with my sighing (*DC* 176–77).

In this passage, Forgael is clearly revealed as possessing an ability to manipulate nature; in fact, physical nature itself becomes entirely anthropocentric. Each living thing, and each element, is made a “mask” for Forgael to “cry through,” and Forgael’s emotions are reflected directly in the movements of “the woods & waters & winds.” This is the very antithesis of Yeats’s later accusation that the failings of nineteenth-century poetry were due to mankind being “passive before a mechanized nature”; rather, Forgael is active, commanding nature, even placing himself and his mind as the source of its animation. In this way, Forgael’s divergence is twofold: he is both an active component in the natural world, and an antagonist to any view of it as “mechanized,” or unable to be affected by mankind.

However, Yeats himself, though he may have passingly conformed to this view of the poet as adept, as a master of magical arcana, propounded a view of magic and nature subtly different to that of the protagonist of *The Shadowy Waters*. Whereas Sidnell, Mayhew, and Clark have suggested the correlation between Forgael’s vision of nature as “mask” and Blake’s work (*DC* 29), Yeats’s understanding of the relationship between mankind and nature, discussed in his essay “Magic” and finding fuller form in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917), is less anthropocentric in its conception of visionary art. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, Yeats returns to the “Great Memory” outlined in “Magic,” explaining that the images therein “had a relation to what one knew and yet were an extension

of one's knowledge" (*Myth* 345). Such receptivity in the mind requires not control over nature, but a concentrated awareness of its movements and meanings. The images in *Anima Mundi*, for Yeats, are subject to growth and evolution in the same way as natural objects, and these images (indistinguishable from "apparitions") become "mirrored" in the mind (*Myth* 352). This is a theory of correspondences; however, in this case, the movements of images in *Anima Mundi* are key to the apparently illogical processes occurring in phenomenal nature. Apparent irrationality, Yeats contests, is underpinned by the order and logic of the non-phenomenal world.

From this point, Yeats propounds a vision of an ensouled and spiritualized natural world which (though *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* was written more than a decade later than the final version of *The Shadowy Waters*) is reflected in the correspondences between nature and spirit in his earlier verse play.

The dead living in their memories are, I am persuaded, the source of all that we call instinct, and it is their love and their desire, all unknowing, that make us drive beyond our reason, or in defiance of our interest it may be; and it is the dream martens that, all unknowing, are master-masons to the living martens building about church windows their elaborate nests; and in their turn, the phantoms are stung to a keener delight from a concord between their luminous pure vehicle and our strong senses (*Myth* 359).

The physical world, in this passage, is influenced and expanded by the world of the "Great Memory:" the "concord" between the two creates a form of mystical "delight" between the physical and non-physical worlds and, again, the irrationality or unreason of the material world is rooted in the logic and truth of the unseen. As in his 1888 letter to Tynan, where Yeats wondered about the religion of the robins and sparrows building nests underneath his window, here the poet connects the birds with a dream-world, considering their relationship to some unknown religious entity, though now he goes one step further, suggesting that their nest-building might itself be a reflection of an unseen spiritual order.⁴² Yeats earlier couched *The Shadowy Waters* in such a theory, writing a series of prologues and prefaces to the text, each of which reveals the particular import of the redrafted story to the developing mind of the poet. The earliest version of the play opens with a prologue given by an old man, in which Yeats reveals the visionary intentions of *The Shadowy Waters* as both an attack on "realistic art" and an insistence on the transformative nature of symbolism and archetypes. The old man arrives, dressed in peasant costume, holding a large crystal globe. Behind him, there is a curtain covered with constellations and "representations of all kinds of birds / & beasts & fish." He addresses the audience:

Look children of a day upon
 this globe. In it you will
 see the woods & the hills &
 the heavens & the face of the
 deep & all other things reflected
 as your own faces are to others
 but set apart that you may
 gaze & wonder. Look children
 of time upon the globe of realistic
 art.

O world O Time look upon thy
 face [?] & weep.

(he is bath[ed] in a red light
 He lifts the globe above his head
 He who looks long shall see it
 cloud & then shall the clouds
 break & the woods & the the
 hills & the heavens & the face
 of the deep & the face of man
 shall be seen there again but
 transformed into t by the light of
 the interior spirit change into
 types & symbols & metals[? = elements?] of
 the inferior[?] life. For I labour[?]
 humans carry to[?] the globe of ^{ideal} realistic[?]
 art until[?] the day when all
 Behind all life burns[?] the archetypal
 life & to the archetypes do all
 things return, knocking again & again (DC 38–39).

Here, Yeats calls for *The Shadowy Waters* to be read in terms of symbols and archetypes, to be seen as reflecting on the quest for a transformative and unchanging truth in the symbolic world. Looking long enough at the “mirror” of the “realistic” world, in which all things are “reflected,” the audience is asked to continue their meditation until a visionary state is achieved. The physical world of “realistic art” is revealed to be archetypal, repeating, a reflection only of the eternal symbolic world. Here, Yeats’s prologue reads as a particularly Blakean instruction, though it is of course influenced also by the sephirotic system of correspondences at the heart of the rituals of the Order of the Golden Dawn.⁴³ Requesting the audience or reader to attain a visionary state, Yeats presents his early version of *The Shadowy Waters* as the product of looking past physical nature into the world of archetypes. Later, in one of these early manuscript

versions, Forgael himself curses the hazel and the oak trees: "A bitter dream lay hid in an oak tree / And changed the images to but one image / And now I meet my image, as on water, / When I would meet a music & a light" (*DC* 94). The enchanted world, here, is an agent which actively alters Forgael's quest to escape it. The frustration registered here by Forgael, who tries and fails to escape his selfhood, his connection to physical nature, complicates the request of the prologue. For Forgael as a magician, every animal, element, and natural phenomenon is an emanation of his own selfhood: "All things, all hours, days all destinies / Are burning mirrors & my heart the flame / That mirror casts to mirror" (*DC* 166). Here, Forgael (as with Yeats himself) is constantly seeking to avoid solipsistic anthropocentrism in order to attain a visionary state, though it is the animistic influence of the natural objects, and the porosity of his imagination to their "dreams," that he rails against.

In the more well-known prefatory poem to *The Shadowy Waters*, dated September 1900, Yeats shifts the tone of the piece to one that is more questioning, moving past the Blakean paradigm of his earlier prologue to suggest the power of an animated natural world at the heart of the text. In this poem, which begins "I walked among the seven woods of Coole," Yeats charts the changing sensory details of each different woodland, repeatedly invoking the magical number seven: "Seven odours, seven murmurs, seven woods" (*VP* 218). In fact, the poem itself acts as "a mantra, an invocation, 'sympathetic magic': the world of the woods, being verbally enumerated, is enchanted, and *The Shadowy Waters* is thus framed as the product of a re-enchanted, re-animated nature.⁴⁴ The poem is replete with natural detail ("wild bees fling / Their sudden fragrances on the green air" (*VP* 217)), and returns again to Yeats's self-documented affinity with a spiritualized nature, his receptivity to those "apparitions" which appeared as a result of his shift from a post-Enlightenment to an enchanted worldview. The woods of the prefatory poem (much like the "Enchanted Woods" of *The Celtic Twilight*) are immanent with folklore and magical potential and, as he would later suggest in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, are closely influenced by the "Great Memory," the "dream-martens" as "master masons" of the "living martens" (*Myth* 359).

In "Dim Pairc-na-tarav," "enchanted eyes" have seen "immortal [...] shadows walk" (*VP* 217). Although Yeats never explicitly states who these eyes belong to (perhaps to the peasantry, or perhaps to the various animals who move amongst the trees), he claims the woods of Coole as a source of enchantment, a place of visionary potential where the immanence of the spiritual world can be felt as an influence on the receptive mind. Rather than looking solely beyond the physical woodland, seeing it as valuable only for its symbolism, or regarding it as antagonistic to imagination, this poem foregrounds (as in the

essay “Magic” and *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*) the natural world as a point of communion or harmony with the unseen “Great Memory” of nature itself:

I had not eyes like those enchanted eyes,
 Yet dreamed that beings happier than men
 Moved round me in the shadows, and at night
 My dreams were cloven by voices and by fires; [...]
 How shall I name you, immortal, mild, proud shadows?
 I only know that all we know comes from you,
 And that you come from Eden on flying feet.
 Is Eden far away, or do you hide
 From human thought, as hares and mice and coney
 That run before the reaping-hook and lie
 In the last ridge of the barley? Do our woods
 And winds and ponds cover more quiet woods,
 More shining winds, more star-glimmering ponds? (VP 218)

In a similar way to the mode in which Forgael’s imagination is adversely effected by the “dream” held in the oak tree, so Yeats’s prefatory poem here positions the poet as being sensitive and susceptible to those “imaginary people” who resulted from his radical re-understanding of the natural world: the spiritual “beings” of the wood infiltrate the poet’s dreams, and *The Shadowy Waters* is positioned as a form of emanation from the natural world, represented in “I walked among the seven woods” by the liminality of the phenomenal and non-phenomenal domains. As we have seen, this is conceived by Yeats as peculiarly Irish, primitive, and original. The fluid, Celtic view of nature, what Yeats would term “flux,” is recreated in the sacred space of both the poem and the woods.⁴⁵

The trope of Yeats receiving truths “Out of the forest loam” (VP 439), as he describes in his later poem “Fragments,” or meeting imaginary or visionary images in the woods, as in “Her Vision in the Wood” (VP 536–37), is thus embedded early in the poet’s oeuvre, and is specifically linked to a re-enchantment of the natural world, a revised understanding of the poet’s place within (and relationship to) nature. Just as the symbolism of *The Shadowy Waters* could function as a matrix for Yeats’s quarrel with both naturalistic theatre and mechanized nature, so his project of re-enchantment, his generation’s quest to know the world differently, meant that a reconfigured nature underpinned much of his anti-Enlightenment aesthetics. Moving beyond his Blakean model, though never rejecting it, Yeats emphasizes the poet’s ability to know the world differently, to re-enchant it. This is at first an explicit and then an implicit quarrel with nineteenth-century positivism and a post-Enlightenment view of nature as “mechanized.” By rooting value in the physical world, and by acknowledging the animistic potential of the natural world, Yeats renders nature as an

enchanted subject, a source of influence acting on the mind from without.⁴⁶ A re-enchanted natural world is thus fundamental to his poetical, philosophical and aesthetic project.

Notes

1. For more on the place of Newton and Descartes in relation to literary re-enchancements, see Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 104.
2. See, in particular, Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Erik Tønning, *Modernism and Christianity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
3. Timothy Materer, *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). See also Kathleen Raine, *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes in the Work of W. B. Yeats* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986); George Mills Harper, *Yeats's Golden Dawn* (Wellingborough: Aquarian, 1987). For Yeats's place within modernist re-enchancements, see Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and the Occult* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), or more recently John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
4. Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 30.
5. Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God* (London: Century, 1990), 61.
6. The most famous expression of this maxim comes from Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who asserted in 1944 that "The project of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world." See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), xv.
7. Jane Bennett, *Unthinking Faith and Enlightenment: Nature and the State in a Post-Hegelian Era* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1987), 7.
8. William M. Murphy, "Psychic Daughter, Mystic Son, Sceptic Father," in *YO*, 11–26: 13.
9. Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (London: Faber, 1964), xii.
10. George Bornstein, "Yeats and Romanticism," in Marjorie Howes and John Kelly, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19–35: 25. In a letter to George Cumberland, written April 12, 1827, Blake wrote that "Flaxman is Gone & we must All soon follow every one to his Own Eternal House Leaving the Delusive Goddess Nature & her Laws to get into Freedom from all Law." David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, with a commentary by Harold Bloom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 784. This letter is quoted by Yeats in *E&I*, 138.
11. Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), 309.
12. See John Wilson Foster, "The Culture of Nature," in Foster, ed., *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1997), 597–635: 606, and *Life 1*, 32.
13. J.M. Synge, "Autobiography," in *Collected Works, Vol. II: Prose*, ed. Alan Price (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 3–15: 11.
14. Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 38.
15. Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, "Yeats, Fairies, and the New Animism," *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (2012), 137–57: 144.

16. Rachel V. Billigheimer, *Wheels of Eternity: A Comparative Study of William Blake and William Butler Yeats* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), 2.
17. Erdman, *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 555.
18. Quoted in Hazard Adams, *Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1955), 25–26.
19. For more on the afterlives of Blake’s “vegetable glass” in the Irish Revival, particularly with regards to Synge and Yeats, see Seán Hewitt, “Dialectics, Irony, and J.M. Synge’s *The Well of the Saints*,” *The Review of English Studies* 68, no. 286 (2017), 773–90: 779–81.
20. W. B. Yeats and Edwin John Ellis, eds., *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical, edited with lithographs of the illustrated “Prophetic Books” and a Memoir and Interpretation*, vol. I (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), xxi.
21. See, in particular, “William Blake and the Imagination,” in *E&I*, 111–15.
22. Mary Catherine Flannery, *Yeats and Magic: The Earlier Works* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1977), 43–44.
23. Helen Vendler has even suggested that Yeats’s concept of latent powers in non-human objects extends to his view of language itself, reading his early poems in terms of “magical” techniques and patterning. See Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 90–110.
24. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 30.
25. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 33.
26. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 300.
27. See, in particular, the passage from “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” beginning “The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses,” in Erdman, *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 70.
28. Marjorie Howes notes that this sense of difference is common in Yeats’s early poems. In “The Sad Shepherd,” for example, the shepherd’s attempts to comfort himself through pathetic fallacy in the manner of the Romantic poets are rebutted: “nature remains alien and indifferent to him; the shell to whom he tells his story ‘Changed all he sang to inarticulate moan / Among her wildering whirls, forgetting him’” (*VP* 69). Howes, “Introduction,” in Howes and Kelly, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, 1–18: 2.
29. Nicholas Grene, *Yeats’s Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 60–61.
30. Mattar, “Yeats, Fairies, and the New Animism,” 153.
31. Edward Hirsch, “Coming out into the Light: W. B. Yeats’s *The Celtic Twilight* (1893, 1902),” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 18, no. 1 (1981), 1–22: 11–12.
32. John Frayne suggests that, though this review was published in 1899, it was written long before that date. *UPI*, 153.
33. James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), 10.
34. “In Ireland this world and the world we go to after death are not far apart. [...] Indeed there are times when the worlds are so near together that it seems as if our earthly chattels were no more than the shadows of things beyond” *Myth*, 98.
35. Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, “Folklore,” in David Holdeman and Ben Levitas, eds., *W. B. Yeats in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 247–55: 247.
36. Since *The Shadowy Waters* underwent numerous revisions over at least a decade, this article follows the lead of Sidnell, Mayhew, and Clark in referring to the work as a “play” throughout the whole course of its evolution, for clarity. See W. B. Yeats, *Druid Craft: The Writing of The Shadowy Waters* (hereafter referenced in-text as *DC*), ed. and with a commentary by Michael J. Sidnell, George P. Mayhew, and David R. Clark (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1972), 3.
37. Arianna Antonielli, “William Butler Yeats’s ‘The Symbolic System’ of William Blake,” in *Estudios Irlandeses* 3 (2008), 10–28: 13.

38. A. J. Bate, "Yeats and the Symbolist Aesthetic," *MLN* 98, no. 5, *Comparative Literature* (1983), 1214–33: 1225.
39. See, for example, James W. Flannery, *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre: The Early Abbey Theatre in Theory and Practice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 34–35; Katherine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), 16.
40. William H. O'Donnell, "Yeats as Adept and Artist: The Speckled Bird, The Secret Rose, and The Wind Among the Reeds," in *YO*, 55–79, especially 68–69.
41. For more on occultist relationships to nature at the fin de siècle, see Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 14.
42. For more on Yeats's birds, particularly his use of them as political markers and as ways of reimagining the nation, see Lucy McDiarmid, "The Avian Rising: Yeats, Muldoon, and Others," *International Yeats Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016), 74–85.
43. For more on the relationship between *The Shadowy Waters* and the rituals of the Order of the Golden Dawn, see *DC*, 29–30.
44. Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes*, 91.
45. For more on the Celtic view of nature, see John Wilson Foster, "Encountering Traditions," in Foster, ed., *Nature in Ireland*, 23–70, especially 31–32.
46. Onno Oerlemans sees this re-assignment of "value" as central to all forms of environmentalism. See *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 9.