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**“SOME OVID OF THE FILMS”:
W. B. YEATS, MASS MEDIA,
AND THE FUTURE OF POETRY IN THE 1930S**

Charles I. Armstrong

Toward the end of Aldous Huxley’s novel *Brave New World*, a wide-ranging conversation takes place between the World Controller for Western Europe, Mustapha Mond, and three characters at odds with his regime. Bernard Marx and Helmholtz Watson have both fallen from places of privilege due to their dissatisfaction with the current world order, while John the Savage—having been fetched in as a curiosity from an enclosed reservation—can only observe it as a skeptical outsider. The Controller is at home, and indeed in control, engaging in a leisurely chat with his guests before ushering Marx and Watson to their banishment on a distant island. Mond tells them that their civilization has no use for old, beautiful things. While the autobiography of Henry Ford, who is treated as a divine creator of their civilization, appears to have the status of gospel, he explains there is no place for high art:

[New literature] couldn’t possibly be like *Othello*. [...] our world is not the same as Othello’s world. You can’t make flivvers without steel—and you can’t make tragedies without social instability. The world’s stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can’t get. [...] You’ve got to choose between happiness and what people used to call the high art. We have the feelies and the scent organ instead.¹

The “scent organ” is a sensory device that accompanies the high-tech “feelies,” a kind of futuristic film. Having once experienced a pornographic version of the latter, John the Savage is quick to dismiss them as senseless and horrible products “told by an idiot.”² The readers of Huxley’s novel are encouraged to identify with Savage’s unsuccessful rebellion against the world order. Like him, the book’s audience is intended to experience a “sinking sense of horror and disgust” in the face of a “nightmare of swarming and indistinguishable sameness.”³ Set several hundred years in the future, *Brave New World* is a scathing presentation of a totalitarian society where social and genetic control are in evidence everywhere. Individual thought and artistic expression are impossible, replaced by the mass enjoyment of drugs and various leisure activities including mindless new sports such as Centrifugal Bumble-puppy, Electromagnetic golf, and Riemann surface tennis.

Huxley's novel, published in 1932, was not his first work of satire. William Butler Yeats was taken by an earlier effort, *Those Barren Leaves* (1925), which lampooned the circle of Lady Ottoline Morrell. By April 10, 1936, Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespear that he was reading Huxley alongside Vita Sackville-West (without mentioning book titles). He disliked both authors yet admitted: "I admire Huxley immensely" (*CL InteLex* #6533). Two days later, he reported in a letter to W. J. Turner that although he was largely unfamiliar with contemporary novel writing, he had "read much Huxley" (*CL InteLex* #6534). By March 26, 1937, Yeats wrote to his wife that he was going to meet Huxley who, he approvingly added, "has taken up Astrology" (*CL InteleX* #6885). Whatever impact Huxley had on Yeats, and irrespective of whether Yeats actually ever read *Brave New World*, placing the Irishman in this company has the virtue of alerting us to the 1930s context of Yeats's later work. Yeats's views on the future, in particular, benefit from being considered with Huxley as a background figure. Typically read as a poet who framed his perspective on the future exclusively via Romantic versions of apocalyptic vision and ancient prophecy, Yeats can also fruitfully be interpreted in the context of a twentieth-century turn to dystopia that included not only *Brave New World*, but also novels such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921) and, after Yeats's death, George Orwell's *1984* (1949). As Peter J. Bowler has shown, not all the literature and journalism of this period was equally pessimistic about the future, but Yeats shares with Huxley and Orwell an alarmed counter-reaction to H. G. Wells and other commentators making optimistic predictions based on contemporary technological development.⁴

This article will look at Yeats's conception of poetry's place in the 1930s. I will try to sketch out how Yeats's understanding of the future of literature and lyric poetry is affected by the historical changes—both political and technological—that shaped his own time. Although there are key statements on poetry's formal underpinnings in his introduction to Scribner's planned version of his collected works, Yeats does not reflect much, or indeed systematically, on the issue of how poetry relates to other genres and artistic forms. One has to piece together different fragments, if one wants to present anything approaching a consistent position on this matter. I will mainly base my argument on three pieces of evidence, all coming from the paratextual margins of Yeats's oeuvre. First, I will take a look at how Yeats, in reported table talk, allegedly compared poetry to the novel, claiming that the former had been marginalized by its lack of relation with modern technology. Secondly, the argument will move to a discussion of how the future of literature is presented by Yeats in an unpublished fragment of *A Vision*, entitled "Michael Robartes Foretells." This will provide the most extensive analysis of this article, in which a central concern will be a reference made to Ovid and cinema. Although Yeats appears to present a

pessimistic diagnosis in “Michael Robartes Foretells,” my reading will tease out—via references to Gabriele D’Annunzio and other texts by Yeats—the spiritual and metamorphic possibilities of a future literature deeply affected by the development of other mass media. Thirdly—and lastly—I will turn to Yeats’s radio broadcasts, also from the 1930s, showing how Yeats’s own practice at this time underscores an affirmative vision of a popular art that develops in close connection with contemporary technological developments.

Virginia Woolf’s diary notes from a dinner at Lady Ottoline Morrell’s on November 8, 1930 provide a point of entry. Yeats attended this dinner together with fellow poet Walter de la Mare, and their conversation with Woolf developed into a contrast between the possibilities of poetry and the novel. According to Woolf:

Yeats said that “we”, de la Mare and himself, wrote “thumbnail” poems only because we are at the end of an era. He said that the spade has been embalmed by thirty centuries of association; not so the steam roller. Poets can only write when they have symbols. And steam rollers are not covered in symbolism—perhaps they may be after thirty generations. He and de la Mare can only write small fireside poems. Most of the emotion is outside their scope.⁵

Woolf ends this quotation with a rhetorical twist that turns Yeats’s abjection into a kind of heroism: “All left to the novelists I said—but how crude and jaunty my own theories were beside his: indeed I got a tremendous sense of the intricacy of the art; also of its meanings, its seriousness, its importance, which wholly engrosses this large active minded immensely vitalised man.”⁶ If one synthesizes Woolf’s personal portrait with the alleged quotation from Yeats, one gets a complex picture. Poetry is marginalized by modern technology, reduced in scope, and is losing ground to other genres. The precariousness of poetry’s position is exacerbated by the fact that Yeats is living at “the end of an era.” Yet at the same time, the seriousness and vitality of the poet and his poetry mean that the work somehow punches above its weight. The status of poetry is akin to that of Yeats’s friends of the 1890s, whom he saw as heroically out of synch with their own time, remnants of a different and more serious art.

An obscure prose fragment by Yeats called “Michael Robartes Foretells” fleshes out this picture. As the editors of the *Collected Works* version of Yeats’s 1937 text of *A Vision*, Margaret Mills Harper and Catherine Paul, suggest, it is a “heavily corrected nine-page typescript” that “is probably one of the discarded versions of the ending of *A Vision*” (CW14 462 n134). The text contains a framing dialogue between Hudden, Duddon, and Denise, fictional characters utilized both in other introductory material to *A Vision* and elsewhere in Yeats’s works. Here, however, I will focus on the subsequent, second part of the

text: the “prophecy” of Michael Robartes that provides the conclusion of the typescript. The latter is an attempt to replace the concluding vision of the 1925 “Dove or Swan” section of *A Vision*, where Yeats had tried to predict future historical change on the basis of the system propounded in his book. Yeats was, however, dissatisfied with the 1925 “Dove or Swan,” and would make major revisions before presenting an alternative version in the 1937 edition of *A Vision*.⁷

In the original version of “Dove or Swan,” Yeats contrasted the imminent, new era with a classical precursor:

The decadence of the Greco-Roman world with its violent soldiers and its mahogany dark young athletes was as great, but that suggested the bubbles of life turned into marbles, whereas what awaits us, being democratic and *primary*, may suggest bubbles in a frozen pond—mathematical Babylonian starlight. (*CW13* 176)

Arguably modern science, corresponding to the Babylonian science of the stars, is here being introduced as an important contrast between the respective outcomes of ancient and modern epochal turning points. As we shall see, the prophecy in “Michael Robartes Foretells” returns to explore this parallel between the classical and the contemporary, discovering both possibilities and complications in the process. It is a parallel also explored in *The Resurrection* (1931). But where the concluding song of that play (included too in “Two Songs from a Play” in *The Tower*) proclaims that “The Babylonian starlight brought / A fabulous, formless darkness in” (*VPI* 931; *CW1* 217), a different and less obscure change issues from “Michael Robartes Foretells.” The latter text is less apocalyptic than in Yeats’s typical approach to the future—more akin, in this respect, to Huxley’s dystopian vision than, say, the apocalyptic classicism of “Leda and the Swan” or “The Second Coming.”

The opening of Michael Robartes’s prophecy is actually so skeptical that it undercuts the possibility of making any predictions about the future: Robartes states that we “are misled the moment we try to imagine some future work of art or historical event.”⁸ This anticipates the eschewal of any concrete details in the prophecy ventured in the final, 1937 version of *A Vision*. Robartes nevertheless goes on, in the earlier draft, trying to predict what will happen on the historical scene in some of the concluding stages of the current civilization, based on Yeats’s system of the twenty-eight phases of the moon. As in much of Yeats’s later work, the focus is on the final phases of the current Christian era and an apprehensive anticipation of what kind of civilization will be ushered in after its demise. The Russian Revolution and modernism, described as “the art and thought of our time,” are referred to as the 23rd stage of the current era.⁹ What Yeats sees as totalitarian systems on both the right and the left are

described as “Dictatorships in various parts of the world”: these are placed in the 24th phase.¹⁰ The text tries to elaborate upon the social, political, and aesthetic developments of the 24th phase as well as what Robartes anticipates of a coming 25th phase.

As in *Brave New World*, the coming world order neither has much time for difference nor appreciates the creative potential of unhappiness. This, Robartes predicts, will be an age of “imitativeness in which there is always happiness.” The 24th phase communicates “the mass mind” and is “pre-occupied with the common good.” Dejection with the dictators and “the leadership of men who offer nothing reason cannot understand” results in a reactive immersion in triviality. People, Yeats asserts, “will return to women, horses, dogs. They will prefer to the political meeting, the football field or whatever thirty or sixty years hence may have taken its place.”¹¹ The final prediction is linked to Yeats’s claim, doubtlessly referring to the radical politics of his age, that “the old age of our civilisation begins with young men marching in step, with the shirts and songs that give our politics an air of sport.”¹² The triumph of sport is anticipated in early Yeats, for instance in the contrast made in “When Helen Lived” between beauty and “some trivial affair / Or noisy insolent sport” (*CW1* 110). The text’s treatment of crowds also harkens back to Yeats’s antipathetic reaction to the 1897 Jubilee Riots, and how he consequently sought to achieve an alternative to the “mob” in an Irish national theater.¹³ Yet Yeats’s position in “Michael Robartes Foretells” is specific to its historical moment. In Tyrus Miller’s words, the 1930s “were years in which the collective intruded into the question of art.”¹⁴ Like Huxley’s *Brave New World*, this text of Yeats’s brings out the dominance of mass society, reflected and sustained by large-scale industrial production and by popular cultural expressions such as music and sports. Given the Roman tenor of Robartes’s prophecy, the football field appears as a modern, and perhaps also humorously dystopian, setting for the “mahogany dark young athletes” (*CW13* 176) evoked in the view of Roman decadence in the 1925 version of *A Vision*.

In “Michael Robartes Foretells,” Yeats predicts that political change will be accompanied by developments in the arts. A Whitman-like Virgil will be representative of the 24th phase, and at the 25th phase another figure will take center stage: “Some Ovid of the films [will] surpass even his popularity by celebrating our common casual pleasures.”¹⁵ The phrase “Some Ovid of the films” should give us pause. While Virgil makes a number of appearances in Yeats’s oeuvre, albeit usually as a prophetic figure, Ovid is not someone Yeats refers to frequently.¹⁶ The Roman poet probably appears here for a variety of reasons. Most immediately, he surfaces as part of the classical context for Yeats’s attempt to make sense of the 24th and 25th phases. Another typescript, presumably written around the same time and reproduced by Harper and Paul, similarly

expresses Yeats's wish to "separate the Roman 23rd phase from the general turbulence of the civil wars (phase 22)" (CW14 295), mentioning particularly Augustus Caesar and Virgil as key figures in that 23rd phase. Ovid, born twenty-seven years after Virgil, would naturally fit as a literary reference-point for the next phase.

Many of Yeats's revisions to the first edition of *A Vision* can be traced to the historical and philosophical sources he read at that time. In the 1940s, Isaac Asimov would turn to *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon as a source for his science fiction view of the future. Yeats's source was a less-canonized version of Roman history. A concluding note in "Michael Robartes Foretells" specifies that Yeats "accept[s] Schneider's identification of Virgil, Ovid, Nero, Epictetus with certain logical developments of Roman thought and I name those developments Phases 24, 25, 26, 27."¹⁷ This refers to the work of a University of Leipzig professor, Hermann Schneider, and his two-volume *Die Kulturleistungen der Menschheit*, translated in 1931 as *The History of World Civilization*. In another draft of what would become "The End of the Cycle" in the final version of *A Vision*, Yeats writes that a prophecy of the future must base itself on "some other age like and yet unlike what the symbol seems to foretell. Perhaps certain pages of Schneider's analysis of Roman civilization give me what I need though my instructors spoke of Greek civilization alone in their examination of the pre-Christian age" (CW14 294).

In the second volume of *The History of World Civilization*, Schneider identifies a turning point in Roman philosophy that is manifested only in the work of its literary authors. Prior to the establishment of the republic, there was (in Schneider's words) the "triple dictatorship" of Caesar, Pompey the Great, and Marcus Licinius Crassus. During the reign of Caesar's successor, however, there was a "conflict of religious and philosophic views that was fought out in the Augustan age in poetry, not in philosophic works. Virgil, followed by Horace and Livy, stood for the ideal of social reform that Augustus strove to effect. Tibullus, Propertius, and especially Ovid were in opposition."¹⁸ Schneider identifies with Emperor Augustus a "framework of moral and religious duty," which exhorted Roman citizens to "submit piously to the will of the gods, attain moral self-mastery, and serve eternal Rome and the divine imperial house, and that not only on the battlefield and in the council chamber but through a pure family life and the procreation of children."¹⁹ In Schneider's disillusioned account, Virgil "wrote for a society in which there were no longer any knights, but only officers at best," in what was essentially a "capitalist economy." In this reading, Virgil's hero becomes a vehicle to celebrate the emperor: "Doubtless his Aeneas was a disguised Augustus."²⁰ This bureaucratic, propagandizing Virgil provides a model for Yeats's description of "some Virgil at Phase 24," who "may celebrate whatever popularisation our civilisation permits for the perfect

official, carrying out the plan of an Olympian Board of Works amid many perils, amid much self-conquest.”²¹

A contrast, in Schneider’s account, is provided by Ovid. He is a decadent figure who finally—with his banishment to Tomis, at the edge of the empire, in 8 AD—went too far. His rebellion, including a sexual element contesting Augustan domesticity, led to his own demise. More generally, though, the “new spirit” of an “extreme development of individuality” that he represented eventually succeeded.²² For Schneider, Ovid’s “amorous battles,” “graceful impudence and rococo femininity” showed “no desire to instruct or educate morally,” but rather aimed “simply to entertain idle society gentlemen and ladies.”²³ Schneider appears to be reading Roman poetry through the lens of late-nineteenth-century rebellion against bourgeois mores. One wonders whether Yeats would have seen in Schneider’s Ovid a classical version of Oscar Wilde, in whom Yeats himself (in *A Vision*) professed to find “something pretty, feminine, and insincere, [...] and much that is violent, arbitrary and insolent, derived from his desire to escape” (CW13 69; CW14 112).

In “Michael Robartes Foretells,” Yeats’s future Ovid is linked to “casual pleasures.” The latter phrase might seem straightforward enough, given how the Roman poet’s *Ars Amatoria* for instance gives lessons in how to pick up women when attending gladiator shows. At the same time, Yeats’s use of the adjective “casual” is richly allusive, and has a distinctly Yeatsian ring. In “The Statues,” the monuments “look but casual flesh” (CW1 345) but are really so much more. This sense of restriction is brought out more fully in “Her Triumph,” the fourth poem of the series “A Woman Young and Old.” In the latter poem, the speaker has been awakened from the sensual limitations of a view whereby she “had fancied love a casual / Improvisation, or a settled game / That followed if I let a kerchief fall” (CW1 276). The miraculous awakening in “Her Triumph” is a more erotic version of the change undergone by the revolutionary heroes of “Easter, 1916” who, having been transformed, have resigned their part in “the casual comedy” (CW1 183).

The Ovid of “Michael Robartes Foretells” can thus be seen as the representative of a negative version of more revelatory cataclysms. Rather than moving from casualness to ecstatic rigor, he appears to represent an opposite movement: a winding down of history into a form of careless mediocrity. The movement toward a comic paradigm anticipates the lament for tragedy in *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), epitomized by the hero’s ignominious demise at the hand of the Blind Man. Yet given such a context, one may still ask, why is this an Ovid “of the films”? In the absence of any discussion of the connection between Ovid and film in Yeats’s letters and published work, one possibility here is that he was drawing upon Gabriele D’Annunzio, who frequently linked Ovid with the new cinematic medium. D’Annunzio was critical of the mass appeal of

the form, yet at the same time he saw in it creative possibilities that were characteristic of Ovid's poetry—and more specifically his *Metamorphoses*:

I thought that from the cinema a delightful art could be born, one whose essential element was the “wondrous.” Ovid's *Metamorphoses*! There is a true subject for the cinema! Technically, there is no limit to the representation of marvels or dreams. [...] I never stop thinking of Daphne's delicate arm, changed into a leafy branch. The true and unique virtue of the Cinema is metamorphosis, and I'm telling you that Ovid is its poet.²⁴

We see that D'Annunzio sees potential in the new art form of cinema, precisely insofar as it has an inherent relation to the poetry of Ovid. Could Yeats have been hinting at something similar in his prophecy of a future “Ovid of the films”?

The only reference to Ovid in *A Vision*, the work in which “Michael Robartes Foretells” presumably would have ended up had it been published, is an off-hand one. In the introductory text dedicated to Ezra Pound, Yeats mentions “a Metamorphosis from Ovid” —alongside “the Descent into Hades from Homer” and various “medieval or modern historical characters”—as the basis for Pound's Cantos (*CW14* 4). There Yeats is at pains to distinguish Pound's poetry from his own. Yet the relationship between the two writers was full of ambivalence. In the original version of *A Vision*, in a passage that was to be omitted in 1937, Yeats identified the art of Pound and other modernists—characterized by “technical research” as it was (*CW13* 174)—as belonging to the 23rd phase. Since Yeats saw his own art as representing the preceding phase, Pound's modernism was interpreted as entailing an increase in the kind of impersonal objectivity characteristic of the ending of the current historical era.²⁵

Since Yeats feared being left behind by the modernists, one can see in “Michael Robartes Foretells” an implicit literary history whereby the future, representative artist described as an “Ovid of the films” is going to be responsible for a marginalization of the literary remnants embodied by his Virgilian predecessor. The text appears to posit a rather unequivocal narrative of decay, whereby contemporary art is going to be replaced by mass communication. This process would itself be one of metamorphosis, which might suggest a possible way to decipher the ambiguity of the term “Ovid of the films.” Is this Ovid a poet who writes about, or likes, films, or is it an Ovid who is representative of a new age, in that his chosen medium is the new art form of cinema? If this figure is to be interpreted as a director or filmic auteur, then the Ovidian tag accrues another potential association. He is an Ovid not only because he follows the civic epic of a Virgil with a more “casual” idiom, or because film is quintessentially (for the early twentieth-century audience) a medium characterized by change, but also because the dethronement of literature as a key

form represents a major shaking up of the hierarchy of arts. The essence of art, one might say, suffers a metamorphosis into a more communal shape where film replaces literature as the capstone of the available forms.

If Yeats is critical of this transformation, it is because he sees in the new mass communications a fall from earlier standards. We know from other contexts that Yeats was critical of what he saw as the stultifying effects of the new mass society. In a letter to Shakespear on March 14, 1920, while on tour in the United States, he reported having told a Mormon in Salt Lake City that “America & Germany had both made [the] same mistake, the mistake of standardizing life, the one in interest of monarchy, the other in interest of democracy but both for the ultimate gain of a sterile devil. That once both America & Germany had been infinitely abundant in variation from type & now all was type” (*CL Intellex* #3710). Later he would report that there was, “especially in America, [...] signs of prophetic afflatus” about a “new movement [...] consonant with the political and social movements of the time,” which embodied “a desire to fall back or sink in on some thing or being” (*CW5* 110). This kind of view was far from unique, echoing for instance the anti-American undercurrent of *Brave New World*, which has been interpreted as “developing a dystopian future for England in large part through a venomous satire of American capitalism and entertainment.”²⁶

But Yeats’s polemics are, like his inspirations, rarely as unequivocal as they first appear. There is much in Yeats’s cultivation of the lyric form, as well as the poetic voice in his drama, to suggest that his *oeuvre* constitutes a conservative version of the kind of media specificity that Clement Greenberg proclaimed to be characteristic of modernism. For Greenberg, modernism entailed that each art form sought a purified version of its own medium, as evidenced by how abstract visual art aimed to affirm solely the flat canvas without any illusion of three-dimensional figurality.²⁷ In Yeats’s conception of the lyric voice, there is (at least in certain versions) a similar attempt to jettison narrative and all dependence upon other media. Like the “oath-bound men” of the poem “The Black Tower,” he can be interpreted as a stubbornly heroic defender of old modes and verities in a time of change (*CW1* 339). At the same time, though, evidence of more supple relationships to new media is not hard to find. This includes Yeats’s relationship to cinema. Already in the 1920s, as part of his work in the Irish Senate, he participated in the Censorship of Films Appeal Board. We also know for instance that he made a point of watching Eisenstein’s film *The Battleship Potemkin* in 1929, together with his wife, with tickets given by his friend and illustrator Edmund Dulac, who was on the council of the Film Society in London (see *YGYL* 212 n2). In a letter to his wife, George Yeats, from February 8, 1932, he praised *An Indian Monk*, the autobiography of Shri Purohit Swami, for being “a masterpiece. A book the like of which does not exist, written with the greatest possible simplicity—mahatmas, cows, children,

miracles, a sort of cinema film to the glory of God" (*CL Intellex* #5590). Here literature approaches the form of cinema not through process of degeneration, but through a form of revitalization. In the listing of the "mahatmas, cows, children, miracles," the motif of metamorphosis recurs, as it is the ever-changing focus of the monk's prose that appeals to Yeats. In his later prose introduction to *An Indian Monk*, there is no reference to cinema, but a passage generalizing on the monk's perceptions strikes a related note:

The Indian [...] approaches God through a vision, speaks continually of the beauty and terror of the great mountains, interrupts his prayer to listen to the song of birds, remembers with delight the nightingale that disturbed his meditation by alighting upon his head and singing there, recalls after many years the whiteness of a sheet, the softness of a pillow, the golden embroidery upon a shore. These things are indeed part of the "splendour of that Being". (*CW5* 133)

As William H. O'Donnell's note makes clear, the final quotation, referring to God as a Divine Being, is from the Gayatri Mantra in the Rig Veda.

The surprising nexus established between divinity and film in these passages implies a divergence from Yeats's most typical stance on representation. Most often, we find Yeats contrasting, in a manner evocative of Coleridge and the Romantics, the creativity of the imagination to a kind of slavish mimeticism, often associating the latter with the passivity of a mirror.²⁸ In the writings coming out of Yeats's friendship with the Swami, however, a more positive appraisal of mimeticism, associated with Eastern mysticism, comes to the fore. This can take the form of "the selection of some place, object or image, as the theme of meditation" (*CW5* 158). More profoundly, Yeats's recalibration of his view of literary form entails opening up to the deeper experience of "Spirit, the Self that is in all selves" as a "pure mirror" (*CW5* 147). Access to the deeper, common self is the highest form of enlightenment. In his introduction to the English translation of the *Mandukya Upanishad*, Yeats describes the mind being a "reflection" of a "Self" that is common to all: "the images of the gods can pass from mind to mind, our closed eyes may look upon a world shared, as the physical world is shared" (*CW5* 161). This is familiar Yeatsian territory, the common storehouse of images identified by the poet as the *Anima Mundi*. The implicit link drawn in "Michael Robartes Foretells" between cinematic experience, Hindu mysticism, and that common store is less familiar. To imagine the experience of film images as analogous to divine inspiration is not what one expects from Yeats, who was more inclined to seek the shared movement of transcendent images in the séance room than in the darkened movie theater. Certainly, the links traced here are implicit, and cross from text to text in a subterranean and understated manner.

Could the classical divinities of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* have been at the back of Yeats’s mind in “Michael Robartes Foretells,” infusing the decadent figure of that fragment with a supernatural gravitas? In his *Guide to Kulchur*, Pound declared: “I assert that the Gods exist. [...] I assert that a great treasure of verity exists for mankind in Ovid and in the subject matter of Ovid’s long poem.”²⁹ One need not conjecture a similar faith in Yeats to detect an alternative to his usual criticism of mass society. There are other, more overt forms of affirming the possibilities of the spaces of mass media in Yeats. This is evident for instance in Yeats’s engagements with radio in the 1930s. Yeats contributed to several radio programs for the BBC and Radio Éireann between September 1931 and October 1937, in addition to writing a script for one program that was not broadcast.

These radio programs represent something of a return to the idea of a popular art, which Yeats’s experiments with Noh theater had temporarily set aside. In his first broadcast, he reminisces about his earliest work on an English version of *Oedipus the King* back in 1912: “I did not want to make a new translation for the reader but something that everybody in the house, scholar or potboy, would understand as easily as he understood a political speech or an article in a newspaper” (*CW10* 219). To Yeats, the radio work must somehow recreate the inclusiveness of the political rally or mass-produced newspaper. This will indeed require some kind of simplicity. One form of quasi-simplicity that Yeats favors is the ballad form, privileged in the 1930s broadcasts. As Louis MacNeice pointed out, Yeats’s late interest in the ballad is the crystallization of a life-long interest in the genre.³⁰ Another distinctive feature of Yeats’s work for the radio is that he is acutely conscious of its distinctiveness and tries to conceptualize it in terms related to how he understands the performance of his poetry and plays. Thus in his third broadcast, from April 10, 1932, he introduces the program by reflecting on the choice of poems. He refers to his old friend Shakespear—who remains unnamed in the actual broadcast—encouraging him to read love poems on air. He recalls a reading session in the United States, where he declined reciting such personal material in public. This, however, leads to a realization of the unique possibilities of the new medium:

Then I remembered that I would not be reading to a crowd; you would all be listening singly or in twos and threes; above all that I myself would be alone, speaking to something that looks like a visiting card on a pole; that after all it would be no worse than publishing love poems in a book. Nor do I want to disappoint that old friend of mine for I am sure that she has her portable wireless brought to her room, that she is at this moment listening to find out if I have taken her advice. (*CW10* 234)

There is indeed a form of simplicity at work here, as the radio broadcast does not reach its audience in one big mass—as, say, the mass spectacle of a sports event does in a stadium—but rather in a more intimate and secluded form. Here we approach a paradox not uncommon in modernism, which often features “scenes of communication where intimacy appears indistinguishable from the exchange of information,” and “simple conversation” is coexistent with “a daunting degree of technical proficiency.”³¹ At the transmitting end of this scene, Yeats seems relieved by the simplicity of the radio studio. Before his very first radio broadcast, George Yeats had written to Yeats that she had arranged with the BBC for him to “have a try-out on the microphone before [...] actually do[ing] the thing,” warning him: “you won’t be able to tiger up and down the room as you usually do when you speak!” (YGYL 245). Even if it appears Yeats quickly found himself comfortable in the studio, the rhetoric of his gesture in the broadcast is perhaps more complex than it seems. Even while he refers to a simplicity of address he opens up a parallel, exemplary logic. Everyone listening to his words is encouraged to imagine Shakespeare’s response, and also perhaps even to imitate what Yeats anticipates as her benevolent and finely tuned attitude. At the same time, the microphone’s appearance of being “like a visiting card on a pole” might be taken as alluding to the absence of a missed or deferred assignation, rather than the presence of a face-to-face encounter.

The idea of an intimate space is elaborated in later broadcasts, two of which have Yeats asking his audience to imagine that they are sitting in a pub. Thus a broadcast from April 1937 has Yeats addressing his listener as follows: “I want you to imagine yourself in a Poets’ Pub. There are such pubs in Dublin and I suppose elsewhere. You are sitting among poets, musicians, farmers and labourers” (CW10 267). The preceding broadcast from the Abbey stage asks his audience to “think yourselves old men, old farmers perhaps, accustomed to read newspapers and listen to songs, but not to read books” (CW10 262). What is interesting here is that the space of the pub does not seem far removed from the football field previously imagined in “Michael Robartes Foretells” (even though the intimacy of poetic address is preserved). In this context—which seems to embody a space where the ideals of a later stage of civilization (in Yeats’s view) have been anticipated—elitism is out of place. The pub, one might claim, manifests precisely what had been anticipated in “Michael Robartes Foretells”: “the completion of a public ideal, its assimilation to the common civilization, where all, whatever degree or rank or station remain, will live and think in much the same way.”³² Although Yeats often tends to present this “public ideal” as a pernicious levelling of standards, his own embrace of the mass medium of radio—alongside a career-long interest in popular art—complicates the picture somewhat.

Some caveats are in order here. In “Michael Robartes Foretells” and *A Vision*, Yeats sees the final phases of his era as ushering in the transcendence of political conflict, as part of the establishment of an implicitly more totalitarian society, yet even in his radio broadcasts he uses the ballad form for a belligerent political rhetoric linked with Parnell. In addition, one might question whether even his radio-friendly version of the poet is fully submerged in the public space: unlike his Virgil and Ovid of the later phases, the poet of Yeats’s radio broadcasts stands at least partially apart as the maker and singer of fine things. In any case, the radio work shows that Yeats is not unequivocal on poetry’s place at the end of an era.

Yeats’s response to the prominence of the novel and the growing popularity of film and other mass forms of culture displays a figure at times defensive, at times fascinated, at other times hopeful. The negative, dystopian Yeats is in some ways close to Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Both authors picture the coming of a society where equality and happiness, coupled with a new emphasis on mass society and sports, overshadow individual identity and expression. The poet as a carrier of tragic insight is in danger of becoming entirely marginalized in an age of uniformity, blithely immersed in mass culture. Yet in Yeats there is also the realization of new possibilities for poetry in an age of burgeoning mass media. Literature may appropriate the form of cinema, as in Yeats’s comment on the Swami’s autobiography, or alternatively it may take over the means of mass communication—evident in Yeats’s radio programs—to explore new forms of community with its audience. All of these are different facets of Yeats’s supple calibrations of the future of poetry in a time of change.

Notes

1. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Vintage, 2007), 193–94.
2. Huxley, *Brave New World*, 194.
3. Huxley, *Brave New World*, 183–84.
4. See Peter J. Bowler, “Introduction: Progress or Threat?,” in *The History of the Future: Prophets of Progress from H. G. Wells to Isaac Asimov* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1–15.
5. Virginia Woolf, *A Moment’s Liberty: The Shorter Diary* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1985), 289.
6. Woolf, *A Moment’s Liberty*, 289.
7. On Yeats’s revising of “Dove or Swan,” see Matthew DeForrest, “W. B. Yeats’s *A Vision*: ‘Dove or Swan,’” in *W. B. Yeats’s “A Vision”: Explications and Contexts*, eds. Neil Mann, Matthew Gibson, and Claire Nally (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Digital Press, 2012), 136–58.
8. William Butler Yeats, “Michael Robartes Foretells,” in Neil Mann, “The System of W. B. Yeats’s *A Vision*,” <http://www.yeatsvision.com/Endcycle.html>, accessed May 19, 2018. Edited transcripts of this text have been presented previously by Hazard Adams, Walter Kelly Hood, and George Mills Harper. Of particular assistance to my own interpretation has been the section devoted to “Michael Robartes Foretells” in Wayne K. Chapman, *W. B. Yeats’s*

Robartes-Aherne Writings: Featuring the Making of His "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends" (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 312–39. Against other scholars' contention that the text was written in 1936, Chapman argues for it being composed sometime between August 1932 and July 1933.

9. Yeats, "Michael Robartes Foretells."
10. Yeats, "Michael Robartes Foretells."
11. Yeats, "Michael Robartes Foretells."
12. Yeats, "Michael Robartes Foretells."
13. On this theme see Marjorie Howes, "When the Mob Becomes a People: Nationalism and Occult Theatre," in *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 66–101.
14. Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 212.
15. Yeats, "Michael Robartes Foretells."
16. Ovid does not appear at all in Brian Arkins's survey of Yeats's classical allusions and inspirations. For a discussion of Roman writers (including Virgil) in Yeats's writings, see Brian Arkins, *Builders of My Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), 141–51.
17. Yeats, "Michael Robartes Foretells."
18. Hermann Schneider, *The History of World Civilization*, vol. 2, trans. Margaret M. Green (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931), 617.
19. Schneider, *The History of World Civilization*, 618.
20. Schneider, *The History of World Civilization*, 650.
21. Yeats, "Michael Robartes Foretells."
22. Schneider, *The History of World Civilization*, 618.
23. Schneider, *The History of World Civilization*, 656.
24. Gabriele D'Annunzio quoted in Gianni Oliva, *Interviste a D'Annunzio (1895–1938)* (Lanciano: Carabba, 2002), 282, 284; translated in Martin M. Winkler, "Ovid and the Cinema: An Introduction," in *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*, 1st ed., eds. John F. Miller and Carole E. Newlands (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 470.
25. On Pound and *A Vision*, see Catherine A. Paul, "A Vision of Ezra Pound," *W. B. Yeats's "A Vision": Explications and Contexts*, 252–68.
26. Genevieve Abravanel, *Americanizing Britain: The Rise of Modernism in the Age of the Entertainment Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 43.
27. See Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4: *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brien (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).
28. On this contrast, and the use of the mirror image, see Matthew Gibson, *Yeats, Coleridge and the Romantic Sage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).
29. Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1938), 299.
30. See Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Faber, 1967 [1941]), 141–49. For a related interpretation of how musical chanting—facilitated by the ballad form—was pursued through much of Yeats's career, see Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For recent readings of Yeats's radio work, see for instance Emily C. Bloom, *The Wireless Past: Anglo-Irish Writers and the BBC, 1931–1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Emilie Morin, "W. B. Yeats and Broadcasting, 1924–1965," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 35, no. 1 (2015): 145–75; Adrian Paterson, "Music Will Keep out Temporary Ideas: W. B. Yeats's Radio Performances," in *Word and Music Studies 12: Performativity in Words and Music*, ed. Walter Bernhart and Michael Halliwell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 43–76. I have

previously addressed the same theme in “Pub, Parlour, Theatre: Radio in the Imagination of W. B. Yeats,” in *Broadcasting in the Modernist Era*, eds. Matthew Feldman, Erik Tonning, and Henry Mead (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 23–37.

31. Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 12.
32. Yeats, “Michael Robartes Foretells.”