

January 2020

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### Recommended Citation

Walker, Tom (2020) "Things, Thoughts, and Walter Pater in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen","  
*International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol4/iss1/6>

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**THINGS, THOUGHTS, AND WALTER PATER IN  
“NINETEEN HUNDRED AND NINETEEN”**

*Tom Walker*

“Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” was not always called, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.” The first printed version of the poem, appearing in the pages of *The Dial* in September 1921, was titled “Thoughts upon the Present State of the World” and dated “May 1921” (VP 428); before that, an extant manuscript version was alternatively, if somewhat indecisively, headed “The Things **Return come** that come again.”<sup>1</sup> Such shifts have given rise to much commentary. For Rob Doggett, where the first printed title suggests some straightforward reflections on a series of passing events, the final title and dating (reinforced by the added postscript date “1919”) resonates with “a sense of objective truth and the weight of history and historiography.” Such a resonance, though, is darkly shadowed by irony: “the expected progression evoked by the date is undercut by a chaotic vision of the present, which is in turn further undercut by the poem’s refusal to sanction any concrete historical narrative as a means for comprehending (and, in turn, valorizing) that present.”<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Grene sees the poem’s shifting titles as best understood in terms of the regressive sequence of dates deployed in the preceding three opening poems of *The Tower* (1928). Moving from the 1927 dating of “Sailing to Byzantium” backwards through “The Tower,” dated 1926, and “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” dated 1923, each poem unravels what the previous poem seemed to fix, constituting a “backward, darkening, spiralling movement one could call a widening gyre.”<sup>3</sup> In this vein, the move from the first to the final printed title also ties the poem more closely to Yeats’s “theory of the gyres and to the imagination of millennial disaster,” as gestured towards too in the abandoned manuscript titles: “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ is written out thus in words rather than given in numerals and, as such, it evokes irrationally an idea of the millennium minus one [...] not apocalypse now, but apocalypse tomorrow.”<sup>4</sup> However, beyond the temporal and historical determinacies and indeterminacies that the poem, including its final choice of title, enacts and critiques, the displaced earlier titles also point towards the poem’s concern with things and thoughts.

Reading the poem under the moniker “The Things **Return come** that come again,” for instance, immediately foregrounds the “things” now gone in the first part’s opening line. Similarly, to approach the poem as titled “Thoughts upon the Present State of the World” is to underline the cluster of thought referred to in the opening section’s second stanza: “We thought it would outlive all future days. / O what fine thought we had because we thought / That

the worst rogues and rascals had died out" (VP 428, ll 14–16). Moreover, this is a poem in which things are subject to thought and thoughts are evoked as things. Not only are the opening stanza's things gone, but so too is the collective mindset to which they "seemed" miraculous. In the second section, Loie Fuller's dancers are initially presented as enwinding "a shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth"—so, as a thing. But the dancers then become subject to the processes of mental perception, again evoked through the word "seemed," in appearing to be moved around by "a dragon of air [...] fallen among" them. Thinking about thinking makes up much of the third section, as is suggested by the deployment of a range of further cognates for the processes of the mind: "compares," "satisfied," "meditation," "affirms," "imagined," "half-imagined," "dreamed," "seemed," "learn," "crack-pated." Yet such thinking is also partly conducted through equating the soul to a swan, a figure that in turn becomes somewhat concrete in terms of the physical presence of the bird's "wings" and "breast." In the fourth section, past talk of the abstract values of "honour" and "truth" has now been brought down to the display of the "weasel's twist" and "tooth"—parts of an animal that are decidedly un-self-conscious. Those mocked in the fifth section include those who had "burdens on the mind" and so labored to leave to posterity a "monument"—marking another transition of thoughts into things.

Of course, classifying parts of an animal or a troupe of dancers as "things" alongside an animate object such as a monument raises questions of definition, as does the point at which satisfaction or affirmation might lie within or outside of the domain of thought. Such problems of categorization, though, seem to be repeatedly foregrounded within a poem marked, as Michael Wood observes, by a wider disturbance or instability of "apparent oppositions or distinctions:" "the whole poem in one sense is about what happens when we can't tell the difference between a march and a lurch."<sup>5</sup> A phrase such as "the night can sweat with terror" from the first section's fourth stanza reconfigures a process at least partly of mind, being terrified, as a thing produced solely via a bodily process, "sweat with terror." This is itself then displaced in terms of agency and affect from the human mind or body altogether, onto a period of time, "the night." Such estrangements also serve to thoroughly distance this activity in kind from the next line's piecing of "our thoughts into philosophy"—of human thoughts thoughtfully thought into thought, as it were. To be an "ingenious lovely" thing, as in the opening line, is to be at the least the product of thought, of ingenuity. The first printing of the poem in *The Dial* has "ingenuous" for "ingenious" (VP 428). But whether a mistake or a later change of mind (and the evidence from the manuscripts and typescripts is not wholly conclusive), this is in either case a thing somehow created via thought—innocent, clever, or perhaps somehow both. Moreover, this thing

is also able to be perceived as lovely, and so to be thought of as well. To then seem miraculous both through being ingenuous/ingenious and lovely, and through being uncommonly impervious to time (“Protected from the circle of the moon / The pitches common things about”), further raises questions as to the thought at work within and through the object itself—not least, its possible incarnation or materialization of the divine. An unsettling permeability between things and thoughts is repeatedly in play.

Discussing how Yeats reverses rather than simply adopts “forms of abstraction,” Wood points towards Angela Leighton’s consideration of the poet’s curious literalization of figurative language.<sup>7</sup> In relation to the golden bird at the end of “Sailing to Byzantium,” Leighton describes how “Yeats’s neoplatonism”—in terms of the flexibility it allows between a soul and the form it might take—“gives him a wild freedom with language, an ability to turn simile into fact.”<sup>8</sup> There certainly seems to be a similarly Neoplatonic side to this movement between the figurative and the literal at work in the evocation of the swan in the third section of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.”<sup>9</sup> However, in then contrasting this Neoplatonism with Yeats’s supposed aestheticism-derived sense of art as a separate realm, Leighton somewhat elides the extent to which Yeats during the 1920s is also starting to implicate art and indeed aestheticism itself within his sense of a destabilizing traffic between thoughts and things. Pointing to Yeats’s enduring debt to the writer and critic Walter Pater, she casts this influence as a matter of style rather than substance.<sup>10</sup> Yet the supposedly corroborating passage she points to from *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922) is altogether more equivocal than such a distinction would suggest (*Au* 235). There Yeats reflects on the centrality of Pater’s influence as a philosophical “sage” on “The Tragic Generation” of writers he encountered in London in the 1880s and 1890s. Having recently re-read Pater’s *Marius the Epicurian* he is also unsure as to whether its style (“the only great prose in modern English”) or “the attitude of mind of which it was the noblest expression” brought about the downfall of his friends. Quite where Pater’s philosophy and prose style begin and end is, for Yeats, unclear. This combination has an apparently direct effect on these poets in the realm of ideas (“Pater had made us learned”) and outward form (they are “ceremonious and polite” in their dealings with each other). However, Yeats also goes on to wonder about the connection between such behavior and the antithetical paradoxes of the corporeal forms that their lives and art actually took, as they lived “lives of such disorder” and sought “to rediscover in verse the syntax of impulsive common life.” Any comfort that an aesthete’s categorical separation between life and art might offer seems far from view; the instability and permeability of things and thoughts will simply not allow for it.

Turning back to “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” its initial appearance in *The Dial* followed consecutively on from a serialization across the three previous issues of “Four Years, 1887–1891,” the first part of *The Trembling of the Veil*—when he first meets the generation who will go on to become tragic. Such a publication context casts the poem as suggesting a writer now turning to offer their impressions of the present, having just offered a retrospect on the *fin de siècle*. Thus the “we” looked back on in the first stanza might be seen to include within what Wood aptly describes as its “movable moral and political community” of “anyone who was wrong about the world,” just this “Tragic Generation.”<sup>11</sup> They too had their “pretty toys” and “fine thought.” And before them again comes Pater—but a Pater decidedly of substance and not just style. As Elizabeth Muller has recently argued, Pater’s work was a persistent and important influence on Yeats into the middle and latter stages of his career, particularly in terms of the substance of Pater’s ideas about the art of Ancient Greece.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, Pater’s writings on Greek sculpture seem to be one of the possible sources for the things and the ideas about those things present in the poem’s first stanza. Richard Finneran suggests that: “The bees, also ascribed to Phidias in early printings of the poem, may derive from a reference in Walter Pater’s *Greek Studies* (1895) to ‘the golden honeycomb of Daedalus’” (CW1 495)—a possibility then also relayed in A. Norman Jeffares’s annotations.<sup>13</sup> That particular phrase comes from Pater’s essay “The Beginnings of Greek Sculpture,” but one might less tentatively add that several other ideas and phrases from across Pater’s *Greek Studies* also seem to be in play in this opening stanza.<sup>14</sup>

The “ancient image made of olive wood,” for instance, might derive, as Jeffares has it, from Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*, or the accounts of Herodotus or Pausanias he also cites.<sup>15</sup> But Pater’s “A Study of Dionysus” likewise evokes “the old miraculous olive-tree still growing” in the Erechtheus, before its destruction during the Persian sack of Athens.<sup>16</sup> A notion of “ingenious lovely things” seeming miraculous also forms a key part of the account of “the sensuous, decorative materiality of Greek sculpture prior to Phidias” through which Pater challenges “the neoclassical notion of sculpture as abstract thought in white marble,” as Lene Østermark-Johansen outlines.<sup>17</sup> “The Heroic Age of Greek Sculpture,” the first part of “The Beginnings of Greek Sculpture,” turns to the writings of Homer to capture a lost (ingenious even) period when the “miraculous power” of works of art was closely tied to their handcrafted ingenuity:

If the golden images move like living creatures, and the armour of Achilles, so wonderfully made, lifts him like wings, this again is because the imagination of Homer is really under the stimulus of delightful artistic objects actually seen. Only those to whom such artistic objects manifest themselves through

real and powerful impressions of their wonderful qualities, can invest them with properties magical or miraculous.<sup>18</sup>

From a different angle—the persistence of primitivism (ingenuous again) in classical Greek religious sensibilities—the miraculous nature of the work of Phidias himself is also considered at length in “A Study of Dionysius:”

If men felt, as Arrian tells us, that it was a calamity to die without having seen the Zeus of Olympia; that was because they experienced the impress there of that which the eye and the whole being of man love to find above him; and the genius of Pheidias had availed to shed, upon the gold and ivory of the physical form, the blandness, the breadth, the smile of the open sky; the mild heat of it still coming and going, in the face of the father of all the children of sunshine and shower; as if one of the great white clouds had composed itself into it, and looked down upon them thus, out of the midsummer noonday; so that those things might be felt as warm, and fresh, and blue, by the young and old, the weak and the strong, who came to sun themselves in the god's presence, as procession and hymn rolled on, in the fragment and tranquil courts of the great Olympian temple; while all the time those people consciously apprehended in the carved image of Zeus none but the personal, and really human characteristics.<sup>19</sup>

This final paradoxical emphasis on the divine somehow embodied and perceived in both the made nature of the literal object, “the carved image,” and the graspable mundanity of what it represents, “personal” and “human characteristics,” also seems inversely in play in Yeats's notion of a “sheer miracle”—a miracle that might at once be absolute and purely immaterial, in evoking the eternal, and made contingently and materially manifest in a crafted object that is sensually attractive.

Such ideas are mobilized in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” to evoke not a moment when art was distinct from, but rather when it was central to, life. Explicitly this moment is of course located in ancient Greece. Its probable mediation via Pater, though, also allusively suggests that the dream or idea of such an empowered and integrated relationship of art to life might also be seen to operate in relation to the more recent past and the collective “we” then turned in the poem's second stanza. Moreover, this we, in its very vagueness, can somewhat more expansively be linked to Pater's notion of a transhistorical spirit. In the preface of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Pater famously conceives of his subject as an “outbreak of the human spirit” characterized by a “care for physical beauty” and a “worship of the body”—of some kind operation of mind interacting with not just any thing, but with a human thing, the body, that itself seemingly combines matter and thought.<sup>20</sup> Just such

an outbreak, even if in an attenuated or incoherent form, has clearly been in play during Yeats's youth. But the "we" perhaps also gestures towards any such Renaissance, of any kind of investment in a humanistic unification between mind and matter, as well as the human and the divine. The reversals enacted upon such an outbreak within the poem certainly seem decidedly corporeal. In the first section human bodies, desensitized in becoming "a drunken soldiery," start to separate a human from a part of its very body, in leaving a murdered mother "to crawl in her own blood." In the second section, the determinism of the Platonic Year renders the body at least partly insentient, in dancing without agency. The operations of mind in the third section are condemned as a product of bodily malfunction, of being "crack-pated." The "wise" in the fifth section have had their very eyes short-circuited, while the mockers will not "lift a hand" for the good. The final section then culminates in a complete, twisted separation of thoughts and things within the site of the body. Robert Artisson, an evil spirit and so an illusory body, is "without thought." Yet the false corporeality of his image provokes irrational desire in a real human body, "the love-lorn Lady Kyteler." In turn this leads her to offer him the token of bodily sacrifices, in the form of the parts of disembodied birds. The dream that looking with care on physical beauty and worshipping the body will lead to an outbreak of the human spirit is undermined. From Paterian "ingenious lovely things," we arrive at a faintly echoing "bronzed peacock feather" that is decidedly not a thoughtfully sculpted or observed thing, but rather a remnant of a bird that in its beauty is still to be placed alongside the bloody "red combs of her cocks." They are both the product of forces, whether irrationally human or inhumanly deterministic, that will in time challenge the ontological and epistemological stability of all thoughts and things.

## NOTES

1. W. B. Yeats, *The Tower* (1928): Manuscript Materials, ed. Richard J. Finneran with Jared Curtis and Ann Saddlemyer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 198–99.
2. Rob Doggett, *Deep-Rooted Things: Empire and Nation in the Poetry and Drama of William Butler Yeats* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2006), 74–75.
3. Nicholas Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26.
4. Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes*, 27–28.
5. Michael Wood, *Yeats and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.
6. Yeats, *The Tower* (1928): *Manuscript Materials*, 199–255.
7. Wood, *Yeats and Violence*, 29–30.
8. Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 149–50.
9. See Tom Walker, "'the lonely flight of mind': W. B. Yeats, Louis MacNeice and the Metaphysical Poetry of Dodds's Scholarship," in eds. Christopher Stray, Christopher Pelling, and

- Stephen Harrison, *Rediscovering E. R. Dodds: Scholarship, Education, Poetry, and the Paranormal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 217–19.
10. Leighton, *On Form*, 150.
  11. Wood, *Yeats and Violence*, 43.
  12. Elizabeth Muller, “Defining Beauty: The Paterian Yeats,” *International Yeats Studies* 2, no. 1 (Nov. 2017): 24–44.
  13. A. Norman Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 230.
  14. Walter Pater, *Greek Studies: A Series of Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1910), 193.
  15. Jeffares, *A New Commentary*, 229–30.
  16. Pater, *Greek Studies*, 41.
  17. Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 238.
  18. Pater, *Greek Studies*, 204–05.
  19. Pater, *Greek Studies*, 30–31.
  20. Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (1873; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.