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**“NUMBER WEIGHT & MEASURE:”
“NINETEEN HUNDRED AND NINETEEN”
AND THE LABOR OF IMAGINATION**

Rosie Lavan

It is of more than passing interest that, of the thirty-four chapters in the two volumes of R. F. Foster’s biography of W. B. Yeats, only one bears a direct quotation for its title. Chapter Five, in volume II, *The Arch-Poet*, is called “Weight and Measure in a Time of Dearth,” and it covers the period 1920–21 (*Life* 2 193). Foster is quoting a letter Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory on April 10, 1921, in which he quoted William Blake in his account of his work towards the sequence of poems which would become “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.” The work was not easy and the progress was uncertain, but Yeats’s commitment to the labor of the writing was serious, underscored by the maxim he summoned from Blake:

I am writing a series of poems all making up one poem on the state of things in Ireland & am now in the middle of the third. I do not know what degree of merit they have or whether I have now enough emotion for personal poetry. I begin to find a difficulty in finding themes. I had this about twelve years ago & it passed over. I may have to start another Noh play & get caught up into it, if these poems turn out badly. The first poem is rather in the mood of the Anne poem but the rest are wilder. Newspapers & letters alike await now till my work is finished: “bring out weight and measure in a time of dearth” Blake wrote. (*CL Intalex*, 3900)

Yeats was slightly misremembering the quotation, though the inaccuracy does not suggest anything beyond haste in correspondence. The line he has in mind comes from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a text he knew intimately, and there it reads: “Bring out number weight & measure in a year of dearth.”¹ In retrieving this quotation from memory Yeats is snatching the necessary sentiment for this brief letter, which is implicitly a diversion from the urgent primary labor of the troublesome poems, yet offers no release from the pre-occupation that poetry itself might be evading him. The letter is often quoted by critics examining the contexts and composition of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.” Nicholas Grene, Helen Vendler, and Michael Wood have all done so in prominent studies in the past twelve years, and it has proved an essential document in clarifying the actual dating of the poem, as opposed to the date with which Yeats titled it.² Foster cites the letter at greater length, notably not only including, but also pursuing, the Blake reference in his gloss on it:

“The weight and measure were undeniable; for all the doubts of this letter, the complex poem-series became one of his masterpieces” (*Life* 2 193). This too is undeniable, but it is the aim of this essay to consider the space between the two halves of Foster’s sentence, exerting more pressure on the “weight and measure,” and the version of Blake that stands behind this masterpiece.

When Yeats describes the incipient “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” to Gregory, he fluctuates between the specific and the general: he is telling her about that poem, but he is also reflecting rather despondently on writing poetry. “Personal poetry” is personally exacting and he doubts his present capacity for it; the “themes,” which in retrospect bear all the majestic desolation of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” are elusive. There is discernment over possible distractions: a Noh play might prove to be generatively engrossing, a way of working through the block with other work; but newspapers and letters, the demotic and the everyday, need to be left aside. It is not unusual to find Yeats attesting to such creative challenges. Indeed, Vendler begins *Our Secret Discipline* (2007) by reminding us that: “Over and over, in the intervals he had set aside for writing poems, he complained of the ‘strain’ of writing lyrics, of the ‘exhaustion’ they caused.”³ In this context, the Blake maxim introduces the virtues of self-discipline and prudence. Weight and measure are the instruments of the dedicated artist, economizing his creative resources as he faces a process he expects will be strenuous and protracted. Read in these terms, the composition of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” as Yeats describes it begins to sound like a marathon, as opposed to what Seamus Heaney called the “sprint mode” of writing, when poems appear gifted by sudden inspiration.⁴ And Yeats himself sounds very like Heaney’s valorized Yeats, the poet who “offers the practising writer an example of labour, perseverance.” In Heaney’s self-affirming portrait, Yeats “proves that deliberation can be so intensified that it becomes synonymous with inspiration. Above all, he reminds you that art is intended.”⁵ In the letter, Yeats is seeking that truth for himself, trusting in labor, perseverance, and dedication as he invokes a very unmystical Blake.

Heaney’s word “synonymous” makes deliberation and inspiration equivalent in meaning, and that equivalence glosses the tension between the workmanlike practical application and the unbidden poetic stimulation Yeats is grappling with in the letter. His quotation from Blake, and the condition and process it describes, offer a vantage point on the construction and the mystery of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.” Rather than examining Yeats’s sustained and sustaining philosophical engagement with Blake, here the questions of inspiration, imagination, and vision will be considered in more quotidian, but no less illuminating, terms. The constellation of references and influences within “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” from Phidias to Loie Fuller, and from Ellen Quinn to Lady Kyteler, cohere around an expression of poetic inadequacy

which Yeats placed at the center of this sequence, in the third poem. That expression defies, or more properly defines, the achievement of the poem, a monument in its own way to the work of the poet.

When Yeats deployed that phrase from Blake in his letter to Gregory, he neutralized its original paradoxical force. The contortions of Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" are apparently overlooked in a quotation which is immediately and strategically personal. It is also revealing, leading us back to Yeats's earlier consideration of this phrase in relation to Blake's own artistic challenges. In the "Proverbs of Hell," Yeats's maxim is one of a series of elliptical and often perverse statements, in tone and intention far removed from the sincerity of purpose he seems to express, and need, in his letter to Gregory. Presumably, in his state of mind in April 1921, he would have found some of the other proverbs far less comforting; Blake's satire and subversion notwithstanding, "Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity" might have struck him as especially discouraging, but it is in this tonally intemperate context that number, weight and measure need to be understood.⁶ However, this was not the first time that Yeats moved to decontextualize and redirect the implications of this phrase. In the introduction to his 1905 edition of Blake's poems, extracted from the three-volume Quaritch edition of the *Works of William Blake* (1893) on which he worked with Edwin Ellis, he discussed Blake the contrarian, at odds with an age to which he refused to adapt:

He would not modulate his passion, for he was ever combative against a time which loved moderation, compromise, and measured phrase, because it was a time of "unbelief and fear" and of imaginative dearth. Had he not said, "bring out number, weight, and measure in a time of dearth?" [sic] and with him there was no dearth; and also that "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom?" His fault was not that he did not moderate his passion, but that he did not feel the error he so often warns himself against, of being angry with individuals instead of "states" of mind.⁷

The rhetorical question at the heart of this extract takes too much for granted. It just about functions as an impatient gloss on what comes before and after, but it also sounds like a non-sequitur. Sheltered in parentheses it might seem a less conspicuous and more logical corroboration of Yeats's argument in Blake's own words. But as it stands, this question raises questions—around, for example, the coincidence and distinction of those terms "dearth" and "measure"—which persist when Yeats draws on the quotation for his own purposes later.

What is clear, though, in the long paragraph from which this extract is taken, is that in 1905 Yeats was as determined to make the proverb personal to Blake the artist as he would be to claim it for himself in 1921. Doing so means disregarding the provocative pose of the "Proverbs of Hell." He outlines Blake's

denunciation of “the art of his day” and its influences, and then proceeds with this characterization of Blake’s temperament and predicament:

He made, in a blind hopeless way, something of the same protest made afterwards by the pre-Raphaelites with more success. They saw nothing but an artistic issue, and were at peace; whereas he saw in every issue the whole contest of light and darkness, and found no peace. To him the universe seemed filled with an intense excitement at once infinitesimal and infinite, for in every grass blade, in every atom of dust, Los, the “eternal mind,” warred upon dragon Urizen, “the God of this world.”⁸

Again, Yeats’s meaning is evasive: the transition from the Pre-Raphaelites (“[t]hey saw nothing but an artistic issue”) to Blake (“he saw in every issue”) is more convoluted than his euphonic repetition and cadence, which muffle the difference between surface and depth, suggest. When the Pre-Raphaelites see, they simply see: it is a matter of appraisal, and even of unexamined transformation of the world into art. Blake’s seeing is complicated by vision, a total and ineluctable apprehension which is carried in that tiny word “in.” But this too, as Yeats learnt from Blake, is “an artistic issue.”

Taking “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” as one of two major examples, Vendler argues that the Yeatsian sequence exemplifies “how, by means of abstraction, large and recalcitrant events can be brought within the precincts of poetry.”⁹ It is possible to proceed from her very helpful assurance, while at the same time acknowledging the Blakean challenge which precedes the discovery of those “means of abstraction” with which the finished poem presents us. In this poem, Yeats can be seen to confront “the whole contest” in its most basic representational terms: how could that not be the case, when we remember the ambition, the urgency, and the impossible capacity of its earlier title, “Thoughts upon the Present State of the World,” and when we consider, in Vendler’s summary, the disturbing plurality of its concerns?

In these various poems, we are sometimes agents of free will, sometimes helpless creatures of Fate. We are makers of beautiful things; we are destroyers of beautiful things. We live on a human scale; we live on a cosmic scale. We are rememberers; we are forgetters. We are believers; we are mockers. We are creative minds; we are creatures of erotic abjection. We are debased animals; we are the creators of abstract notions of honor and truth. All of these assertions are held in tension within the sequence.¹⁰

Vendler also rightly calls attention to the plurality of grammatical voices Yeats deploys in the poem. Caught between the dominant first-person plural (in I, IV, and V) and the “impersonal voice” of II and VI, the first-person singular

emerges only in the third poem. Here, Yeats centralizes the “artistic issue:” in the first stanza expressing a patently unsatisfying satisfaction with the comparison of the “solitary soul to a swan,” provided the bird is caught in a “troubled mirror;” and in the second, regretting the man absorbed through “his own secret meditation.” The third and final stanza is a vision of the end:

The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven:
 That image can bring wildness, bring a rage
 To end all things, to end
 What my laborious life imagined, even
 The half-imagined, the half-written page;
 O but we dreamed to mend
 Whatever mischief seemed
 To afflict mankind, but now
 That winds of winter blow
 Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed. (*VP* 431, ll 79–88)

As in the extract from Yeats’s introduction to his Blake selection, the euphonic repetitions mask the syntactical complexities at work in this stanza. The stakes could not be higher: the willful image is accorded its own agency, and the wildness and rage it brings end “all things,” but this, somehow, is not everything. Yeats also implicates, within this projected destruction, “all that my laborious life imagined,” condensing the work into the life to the point of indivisibility, but reinforcing its lamentably incomplete achievement in “[t]he half-imagined, the half-written page.” The destructive accomplishment of the image triumphs over the frustrated efforts of the laborious life, so all that remains to be done in the rest of the stanza is to retreat into the tripping, denigrated sphere of the dreamers and the dream.

Both Vendler and Neil Corcoran hear Shakespeare in this final stanza. Vendler describes this “trimeter lilt [. . .] embodying a Shakespearean song recalling *King Lear*.”¹² Corcoran, writing back to Vendler in his consideration of Yeats in *Shakespeare and the Modern Poet*, brings a welcome empiricism to his discussion of the echoes, assenting to the fact that the lines “do recall *Lear* in their weather, their evocation of universal suffering, and their hinting at madness”—though we might question how universal that dreaming “we” really is.¹³ Both critics agree that through these allusions Yeats puts us in the company of the Shakespearean fool, sealing the reference with that compound “crack-pated” which, as Corcoran points out, is “a nonce-word, presumably, for ‘crack-brained,’” but he argues for the surer resonance of the song “Blow, blow, thou winter wind” in *As You Like It*.¹⁴ It is worth dwelling on this reach to Shakespearean comedy. Later, discussing “Lapis Lazuli” and “An Acre of Grass,”

Corcoran considers the word “frenzy” in the frantic penultimate stanza of the latter poem:

Grant me an old man’s frenzy.
 Myself must I remake
 Till I am Timon and Lear
 Or that William Blake
 Who beat upon the wall
 Till Truth obeyed his call (*VP* 575–76, *ll* 13–18)

Here Yeats’s Blake steps forward, caught in a particular light, and physically opposing obstruction until his own conviction brings abstracted Truth to heel. Parsing the interesting displacement of Hamlet by Timon to accompany Lear, Corcoran suggests briefly that Theseus’s speech at the opening of Act V of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* might be detected “in this poem by a poet reaching the end of his life.”¹⁵ In that speech, the Duke of Athens evokes “The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,” as he seeks to dismiss as “more strange than true” the tales which the four young lovers have brought back from the wood to the city.¹⁶ In relation to “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” though, and the Blakean challenge of its composition, there are further connections to pursue.

Theseus’s much-quoted speech, with its contention that “The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact,” is often, and understandably, detached from its original referents. Shakespeare is using Theseus’s speech to satirical ends, invoking contemporary skepticism towards, in Sukanta Chaudhuri’s words, “the quasi-Platonic views of Shakespeare’s time about love, poetic inspiration and the divine furor of poets and visionary philosophers.”¹⁷ Chaudhuri goes on to note the distortions of Romantic engagements with this speech, and offers a clarifying set of assertions:

It would be simplistic to see Theseus as taking a merely rationalist stand against the action of the imagination (a term which, in any case, did not mean in Shakespeare’s time what it does today [. . .]). For Theseus ‘imagination bodies forth / The forms of things unknown; and ‘the poet’s pen / Turns them to shapes’ (5.1.14–16). In other words, the poet validates the imaginary forms *as forms*: they are authentic mental constructs even if they correspond to nothing material.¹⁸

Chaudhuri glosses “imagination in the old sense” as “the faculty of recalling and reordering visual impressions or images planted in the mind, perhaps to create unreal creatures and objects,” as distinct from the intervening Coleridgean definition.¹⁹ “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” is not resistant to the earlier understanding of the faculty. Borrowing further illumination from Chaudhuri’s

analysis, the “forms” throughout that formally varied poem are validated by this Shakespearean measure, and yet the “authentic mental constructs” are more than etymologically enmeshed with an authorial crisis, as Yeats presents in the third poem the perceived—or projected—flight of agency and conviction.

What is enduringly brilliant about this speech and its satire is that Shakespeare ensures Theseus’s argument functions equally effectively as a testament to the achievements of the imagination and as a dismissal of them. Harold F. Brooks put this well in his 1979 commentary on the remarks: “Theseus intends them as censure; but his eloquence, summoned like Balaam to curse, blesses altogether.”²⁰ This is poetry making nothing happen, with all the famous ambiguity of that famous statement from Auden’s elegy for Yeats.²¹ Theseus uses the imagination as a great yet unimpressive leveler: what difference is there to discern between the shapes that emerge from the poet’s transforming efforts, and the tricks the imagination can play on the anxious mind in the dark? Hippolyta, in response, is clear in her conviction that these experiences are made credible because all four lovers attest to them, but whatever the facts of the night they have attained “great constancy” and will remain “strange and admirable” to her, surviving, to borrow from Auden again, as a “way of happening.”²² The supreme irony of Theseus’s speech lies in our consciousness of Shakespeare’s dramatic contrivance: just because we enter a pact with the playwright does not mean we cannot see past the limits of the play. In the words of another of the play’s editors, Peter Holland, “The man who mocks ‘antique fables’ is a character from one.”²³ Again, this leads back to Yeats and the third part of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen:” the rebellious swan, and the “laborious life,” the “half-imagined, the half-written page” are performative expressions of poetic incapacity in a poem of supreme accomplishment.

When the Cambridge critic E. M. W. Tillyard delivered a series of lectures about Shakespeare’s last plays at the Sorbonne in 1936, he too turned to this scene in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, using it to represent one of a writer’s strategies for managing what he called “planes of reality.” In a discussion which also embraced Virginia Woolf’s recently published novel *The Waves* (1931), Tillyard drew in the figure of Blake and imagined him as a poet of exemplary resistance to the possibility of unity Theseus’s speech embodies:

In the eighteenth century a poet liked to pretend that things were simpler than without prejudice he would have found them; with the result that Blake, in revolt against his age, passionately protests his own fourfold vision. Perhaps the normal poetic method is to strive to give some sort of unity to whatever planes of reality are apprehended. Something of this sort may be found in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. [. . .] There are many different realities and we may make excursions into them; but the light of common day is sweet and healthy, let us view things in it. Such, anyhow, is the tenor of Theseus’s famous comment.²⁴

Tillyard went on to discuss the alternative to the unifying impulse of this “normal poetic method.” In other plays, he said, Shakespeare handles these different planes of reality by “communicating the sense of their existence without arranging them in any pattern of subordination.”²⁵ Again he turns to *The Waves* as the modern exemplar of this method. In its own way, and with its own formal and intellectual strategies, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” offers another such exemplar. That is not to suggest that the sequence’s range is straightforwardly harmonized under its title, but rather to acknowledge that here—by Yeats’s own private admission, in the letter to Gregory—we see a poem emerging from an imagination under the strain of doubt. That strain survives as an artistic effect which seems to crack the polish of trust in achievement in the third poem, but it is also converted into the will to apprehend and comprehend in the sequence as a whole the strange, true subjects it absorbs—made admirable, and granted constancy, through being represented in poetry. In that sense, we can return to the title under which the poem was first published in *The Dial*, “Thoughts upon the Present State of the World,” and recognize that it is as accurate as it is portentous: thoughts traverse our own planes of reality, retaining their variety and discontinuity even as we might try to contain a situation in time (like the “Present State”) and a place (like “the World”) in inadequate singulars.²⁶

Some twenty years before he struggled with the images and events which would be transfigured into “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” Yeats visited Stratford-upon-Avon. The essay which recalls this trip is memorable for its sweeping denunciation of Victorian scholarship on Shakespeare, and notably the work of John Butler Yeats’s friend, Edward Dowden. Tellingly, Blake—and specifically the Blake of the “Proverbs of Hell”—is summoned against the odious efficiency drive of nineteenth-century readers:

It did not occur to the critics that you cannot know a man from his actions because you cannot watch him in every kind of circumstance, and that men are made useless to the State as often by abundance as by emptiness, and that a man’s business may at times be revelation, and not reformation. [. . .] Blake has said that “the roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword are portions of Eternity, too great for the eye of man,” but Blake belonged by right to the ages of Faith, and thought the State of less moment than the Divine Hierarchies. Because reason can only discover completely the use of those obvious actions which everybody admires, and because every character was to be judged by efficiency in action, Shakespearian criticism became a vulgar worshipper of success (*Ec&I* 103).²⁷

This is a more positive invocation of “the whole contest” he elsewhere understood as a challenge for Blake: the proverb about the roaring of lions stands for a higher vision, pitted against the narrow, the utilitarian, and the vulgar. It

might also, in this context, be understood as testament both to the impossibility of codifying the full achievement of the artist, particularly if the critic's eyes are clouded by their own interests and, conversely, to the always incomplete achievement of the artist. In other words, it reminds us of the poet's labor as Yeats perceived it. "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" permits an unusually full view of this labor; its very real challenges were admitted by Yeats in his letter to Lady Gregory, and then remembered and performed in the third section of finished poem. The "half-imagined," "half-written page" endures alongside and within the masterpiece, haunting the poet who lived that "laborious life."

NOTES

1. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (London: Penguin, 1977), 183, line 19.
2. See Nicholas Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 23–24; Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 64; Michael Wood, *Yeats and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 57.
3. Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 1.
4. Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2008, pbk. 2009), 261–62.
5. Seamus Heaney, "Yeats as an Example?" in Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber, 1980, pbk. 1984), 110.
6. Blake, *Complete Poems*, p. 183, line 9.
7. William Blake, *Collected Poems*, ed. W. B. Yeats (London: Routledge, 2002), xxxix.
8. Blake, *Collected Poems*, xxxix.
9. Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 61.
10. Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 71.
11. Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 63.
12. Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 72.
13. Neil Corcoran, *Shakespeare and the Modern Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 42.
14. Corcoran, *Shakespeare and the Modern Poet*, 42.
15. Corcoran, *Shakespeare and the Modern Poet*, 58.
16. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). UK eLD e-Books, 5.1.10–12.
17. Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Introduction, 204.0/832.
18. Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Introduction, 205.3/832.
19. Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.8n.
20. Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London: Methuen, 1979, repr. 1984), cxl.
21. W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," in Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1976, rev. edn. 1991), 248.
22. Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.26, 27; Auden, *Collected Poems*, 248.
23. Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Peter Holland (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 55.
24. E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Last Plays* (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), 63–64.
25. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Last Plays*, 65.

26. W. B. Yeats, "Thoughts upon the Present State of the World," *The Dial* LXXI (July–Dec. 1921), 265–69.
27. See also Blake, *Complete Poems*, 184, lines 5–7.