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# INTRODUCTION TO THE INTRODUCTIONS: *WHEELS AND BUTTERFLIES* AS COMEDY

***Margaret Mills Harper***

On August 24, 1929, Yeats wrote to his old friend Olivia Shakespear about his excitement at the public reception of his play *Fighting the Waves*. It was, he told her, "my greatest success on the stage since Kathleen-ni-Houlihan, & its production was a great event here, the politicians & the governor general & the American Minister present" (*CL InteLex* 5277). The play was a prose rewriting of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, published ten years earlier. Not only had Yeats replaced poetry with prose and simplified the action, making it easier for an audience to follow, but the Abbey production was also enhanced by the striking modernist masks of the Dutch sculptor Hildo Krop, music by the bad boy futurist composer George Antheill, and the dance of Ninette de Valois, perhaps the most influential dancer/choreographer of her generation. The work, joining as it did words, music, movement, and visual art into what Yeats called "a new form," thrilled him. Still, he told Shakespear:

> I regretted as I often do when we are more than usually spirited at the Abbey, that [you] could not be here. One writes & works for one['s] friends, & those who read, or at any rate those who listen are people about whom one cares nothing—that seems the general rule at any rate (CL InteLex 5277).

This observation, that one "writes & works for one's friends" but that the main audience or readership is comprised of people "about whom one cares nothing," is the idea that grinds and flitters into and through *Wheels and Butterflies*, published by Macmillan in London in 1934 and New York the following year. This book does not get a lot of discussion. On the surface, it seems a somewhat makeshift affair, comprised of four late plays and four long, cantankerous, and often seemingly irrelevant introductions to them. All the plays were published elsewhere, and when they were composed Yeats was under obligation not to publish new books while the ultimately doomed Edition de Luxe was in preparation. He argued for publishing *Wheels and Butterflies* (perhaps chafing at the repeated delays for the de Luxe edition) by claiming that the new introductions weren't available elsewhere and were "rather long commentaries on the plays, not mere notes but general criticisms" (*CL InteLex* 5418, letter to Hansard Watt, December 12, 1930). The contents of *Wheels and Butterflies* could later be added to the de Luxe volume to be called *Plays and Controversies*, Yeats noted, in the midst of very practical negotiations with his publisher through his agent.

The commentaries *are* long. In total, out of the 163 pages of the volume, about a third (forty-nine pages) are taken up with the introductions. Antheil's music is printed at the back, and if those pages are included in the count, the plays themselves make up less than half of the collected material. This large percentage of seemingly peripheral matter is reminiscent of *A Vision*, which leads a reader through large quantities of seemingly ancillary components before arriving at the explicit exposition of the system in the main body of the book.

The title, *Wheels and Butterflies*, alludes to the same antinomy of the projected but unmaterialized title *Plays and Controversies*. The plays are the butterflies, offering art rather than politics, aimless joy (which Yeats often described using the image of a butterfly) rather than driving rhetoric. The introductions are the wheels, inexorable and perhaps making less real progress in their circular motion than a butterfly's erratic flight path. In another letter to Shakespear, Yeats described the general idea:

> I want to bring out a book of four plays called "My Wheels & Butterflies"—the wheels are the four introductions. Dublin is said to be full of little societies meeting in cellars & garrets so I shall put this rhyme on a fly-leaf
>
> To cellar & garret
> A wheel I send
> But every butterfly
> To a friend.
>
> The "Wheels" are addressed to Ireland mainly—a scheme of intellectual nationalism (*CL InteLex* 5414, December 2, 1930).

The first introduction in the collection, to the play *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, defines the terms:

> Somebody said the other night that Dublin was full of clubs—he himself knew four—that met in cellars and garrets and had for their object our general improvement. He was scornful, said that they had all begun by drawing up a programme and passing a resolution against the censorship and would never do anything else. When I began my public life Dublin was full of such clubs that passed resolutions and drew up programmes, and though the majority did nothing else some helped to find an audience for a school of writers (*W&B* 5, *VPl* 957).[1]

"Our" general improvement refers to Ireland, though Yeats makes sure to note that the former nationalist era and the current situation, well after the establishment of the Free State, are two versions of some general principle: "Political failure and political success have had the same result" (*W&B* 5, *VPl* 957).

In this special issue Charles I. Armstrong, Inés Bigot, Alexandra Poulain, and Akiko Manabe discuss the volume's four plays: *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, *Fighting the Waves*, *The Resurrection*, and *The Cat and the Moon*. Their essays are the butterflies, if you like, analyzing creative texts. My contribution serves as an introduction to their work and offers some discussion of Yeats's strange introductory essays. Thus, this introduction in relation to the essays that follow parallels Yeats's: it is the wheels, squeaking with strain rather than fluttering in scholarly joy. My hope is that these wheels, like Yeats's, may provide a quirky counterweight with a part to play in the larger drama.

A live question for *Wheels and Butterflies* concerns its readership. The consumer of the volume would presumably fall into one of the two categories defined in the epigraph: "To Garret or Cellar a wheel I send, / But every butterfly to a friend." Given that Garret and Cellar are synecdoches for earnest and narrow-minded improvers who succeed only in holding meetings and generating procedural nonsense, and butterflies are symbols of deep and joyful wisdom, readers would doubtless hope to get a butterfly and not a wheel.

Several problems are raised by Yeats's binary offer. One lies in the suggestion that the collection offers two gifts exclusive of each other, dullness to a set of appropriately tedious readers and delight to "a friend." Clearly, few buyers of the book would hope to be fall into the first category, and there is only one other gift on offer. Anyone not admitting to being thickheaded would need to be among Yeats's friends. Nor does this "friend" mean something like "Friends, Romans, countrymen" or "dear reader," an implication of likemindedness that has been part of formal rhetoric at least since Aristotle, and of literary fiction at least since Jane Austen. Readers may think of themselves as sympathetic or skeptical, lovers of poetry, or even the kinds of people who *might* be Yeats's friends if they only knew him, but those other identities are not the ones Yeats told Shakespear were those for whom he "writes & works." It would seem to follow that insofar as wisdom is available only outside those airless spaces, we might not have access to it.

Neither the author nor his publisher would have hoped that sales would be restricted to that select constituency, of course. Nonetheless, this is a binary system, wheels or butterflies. Thus, reading the introductions is a bit uncomfortable: as we turn the pages, we suspect ourselves to be narrow-minded fanatics, voices raised in some rented room in a basement or attic about whatever cause obsesses us—though the primary focus is indeed, as Yeats indicated to Shakespear, "Ireland mainly," a small coterie of Irish readers who form what Yeats calls in the introduction to *Fighting the Waves* "our small public" (*W&B* 64, *VPl* 68). Thus, Yeats refers to "Cellars and Garrets" at third-person distance. The introduction to *The Cat and the Moon*, for example, begins curiously by recommending that the previous play, *The Resurrection*, is inappropriate for them.

> These plays, which substitute speech and music for painted scenery, should suit Cellars and Garrets, though I do not recommend *The Resurrection* to the more pious Communist or Republican cellars; it may not be as orthodox as I think; I recommend *The Cat and the Moon*, for no audience could discover its dark, mythical secrets (*W&B* 121, *VPl* 805–6).

A few pages further, Yeats recalls writing the play. He discloses his goal of secrecy, that "though I might discover what had been and might be again an abstract idea, no abstract idea must be present" in the action of *The Cat and the Moon*. "The spectator should come away thinking the meaning as much his own manufacture as that of the blind man and the lame man had seemed mine" (*W&B* 124, *VPl* 807). The rest of the section then explains the very abstract ideas that would be invisible to this mythical spectator, perhaps a member of "the Gaelic League, or some like body" (*W&B* 123, *VPl* 807).

Here as in the other introductions, the identity of the reader is at issue. The spectator now, years after the play was originally written and produced (in 1926), may be no more able to penetrate the "dark, mythical secrets" of the drama than before, but she certainly has access to those occult spaces, through this introduction and related texts, including *A Vision*. Perhaps she will have read this introduction and thus recognize that the play's "flightiness"—the term that Akiko Manabe parses in her essay in this volume—contributes to an Irish "intellectual nationalism," to use Yeats's phrase in the letter to Shakespear (*CL InteLex* 5414). The author who addresses this reader in the four introductions is urgent but also curiously indirect, preferring metaphor to direct description and backing off from clear assertion to an eclectic array of inter-texts. The persona suggested by this voice is eccentric, even outlandish, but he seems also to make proposals that are, to use a word that Yeats hated, sincere. For example, the first introduction, to *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, puts forward the idea that Ireland should reject the idea of progress:

> I suggest to the Cellars and Garrets that though history is too short to change either the idea of progress or the eternal circuit into scientific fact, the eternal circuit may best suit our preoccupation with the soul's salvation, our individualism, our solitude. Besides we love antiquity, and that other idea—progress—the sole religious myth of modern man, is only two hundred years old (*W&B* 18, *VPl* 963).

The rejection of progress is a theme that had preoccupied Yeats for decades, so the thought is clearly genuine. At the same time, the suggestion that Ireland abandon progress for the idea of eternal return is unlikely, to say the least. Is this projector seriously propounding that the nation exchange Christian teleology for the cyclical Platonic Year, or modern assumptions of development for the

eternal oscillation of opposites? The practical absurdity is underscored by the concession that "scientific fact" is unfortunately not available as proof—as if "scientific fact" were useful or relevant—followed by the additional argument that it would suit our character since "we love antiquity."

Although the style of the introductions varies somewhat, even within a single essay, it seems reasonable to treat them as a whole. A single reader may be presumed for the volume *Wheels and Butterflies*, and a single persona or mask is enacted throughout the four essays. That the first essay is haunted by Jonathan Swift is not accidental, though Yeats's proposer is not as harshly Juvenalian as Swift's. The most influential predecessor for Yeats's mode may be Plato and the *eiron* of Socrates in the *Dialogues*, as Stephen Helmling has remarked of *A Vision*.[2] Given the way that the introductions ramble from personal anecdote to political theory to spiritualism to poetry, Menippean satire also comes to mind.[3] At any rate, this speech is double-voiced, unsystematic, and creative. In other words, these wheels may have something of the butterfly in them after all.

Generally speaking, the introductions are strongly rhetorical, even if their style is full of sinuous syntax, qualifying phrases like "perhaps" or "as it were," and seeming divagations. The logic is allusive and anecdotal rather than formal, but the fervor in the tone is unmistakable. The essays express themes that are dear to Yeats in this late period, such as the virtues of eighteenth-century Anglo-Ireland and the spiritual awareness of premodern Irish peasant life, the Platonic Great Year, and life after death. In other words, Yeats's projector may actually share our garret or cellar with us.

There are moments of pure satire, starting with the Preface:

> All these plays have been played at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. *The Words upon the Window-pane* has been revived several times, *The Cat and the Moon* once, but *Fighting the Waves*, which drew large audiences, not at all, because Mr. George Antheil's most strange, most dramatic music requires a large expensive orchestra. A memory of that orchestra has indeed roused a distinguished Irish lyric poet to begin a dance play which he assures me requires but a tin whistle and a large expensive concertina. *The Resurrection* was played for the first time at the Abbey a few days ago. Like *The Cat and the Moon* it was not intended for the public theatre. I permitted it there after great hesitation. Owing perhaps to a strike which has prevented the publication of the religious as well as of the political newspapers and reviews, all is well.
>
> W. B. Y.
>
> *4th August 1934* (*W&B* v)

Besides the farcical detail of the nameless "distinguished Irish lyric poet" who is writing a dance play for tin whistle and "large expensive concertina," the equal-opportunity dig at politics and religion in the last sentence is particularly

noteworthy. Later, in the introduction to *The Resurrection*, this theme returns. After recounting episodes in which attempts to rethink both orthodox Marxism and Roman Catholicism, respectively, were shut down by Lenin and Pope Pius X, Yeats comments, "So far I have the sympathy of the Garrets and Cellars, for they are, I am told, without exception Catholic, Communist, or both!" (*W&B* 94, *VPl* 933).

The next sentence brings up "a third myth or philosophy that has made an equal stir in the world," that third myth being the Platonic Year and the eternal waxing and waning of gyres: "there was everywhere a conflict like that of my play between two principles or 'elemental forms of the mind,' each 'living the other's life, dying the other's death'" (*W&B* 95, *VPl* 933–4). With this turn, the introduction to *The Resurrection* leads to a path familiar to all readers of late Yeats: the system of *A Vision*. Does the Platonic Year and the idea of the "re-birth of the soul" actually make "an equal stir in the world" to Marxist politics and Christian religion, and provide an effective counter to their claims? Certainly not recently, at any rate. Yeats proceeds to buttress his points with a number of famous names, citing "empirical evidence like that Lafcadio Hearn found among the Japanese" (*W&B* 96, *VPl* 934) and similar beliefs by Schopenhauer, Hegel, McTaggart, Cardinal Mercier, von Hügel, and of course Plato and Plotinus.

In the midst of this list of august thinkers is an odd interjection: a dash in mid-sentence and then the clause "—I think of that Professor's daughter in Palermo." The eighteenth-century Irish philosopher Francis Hutcheson described this kind of humor, which relies on incongruity: canonical thinkers are put into a list with a medical doctor from Palermo named Camelo Samonà, who wrote an account in 1911 about the reincarnation of his young daughter Allesandrina into one of a set of twins he and his wife Adela conceived soon after Allesandrina's death.[4]

This is a representative sample of Yeats's prose in his late years: the authorial voice is making excessive, even obsessive claims. As problematic as it may be, this tone is deliberate. It is the authorial stance Yeats chose for the pamphlet *On the Boiler*, which takes its name from a man named McCoy, a "mad ship's carpenter" who was given to climbing atop an old rusted boiler in Sligo to "read the Scriptures and denounce his neighbours" (*CW5* 220). The wheelwright in *Wheels and Butterflies* shares a number of characteristics with the persona of "the Great McCoy" or his close kin, the raging old man in *The Death of Cuchulain*, another figure of a "wild old wicked man" from this period. These troublesome works present similar questions of writerly persona and readership to the essays in *Wheels and Butterflies*.

In many of the late plays and poems, tragedy is connected to joy. Near the end of *On the Boiler*, Yeats writes:

> Some Frenchman has said that farce is the struggle against a ridiculous object, comedy against a movable object, tragedy against an immovable; and because the will, or energy, is greatest in tragedy, tragedy is the more noble; but I add that "will or energy is eternal delight," and when its limit is reached it may become a pure, aimless joy, though the man, the shade, still mourns his lost object (*CW5* 247).

I have argued here that the wheels of *Wheels and Butterflies* fall into a mode best described as comedy, or even farce, in opposition to the tragedy of the plays (three of them, at least: *The Cat and the Moon* is an interestingly different case, using comedy and even farce but representing joy). A number of works of prose from Yeats's late period, such as *On the Boiler* and both versions of *A Vision*, also embody this mode. Insofar as Yeats creates a readership for the prose as well as readers and audiences for the plays, it seems we who turn the pages of *Wheels and Butterflies* have a comic fate as well. We may not be his friends, but he and we are caught together in these wheels.

It is worth recalling that Yeats was at this time also engaged in years of work on revising *A Vision*, thinking he was almost finished and being thwarted by that thorny book yet again. He was not only engaged in the system while sitting at his desk: the gyres upon which it is based require that its ideas be lived as well as thought, experienced as well as imagined. The system depends upon polarities in continuous opposition to each other and continuous motion towards each other as well. They move like magnets working from both poles simultaneously, repelled and also attracted to each other, until they reach a point of saturation or vacuum at which they change places. Butterfly drags road metal; wheels pull back brightness from the Zodiac (to steal phrases from the poems "The Fascination of What's Difficult" and "A First Confession"). Again, in the introduction to *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, the first in *Wheels and Butterflies*, Yeats writes that "If the Garrets and the Cellars listen I may throw light upon the matter [of imagination and civic life], and I hope if all the time I seem thinking of something else I shall be forgiven" (*W&B* 6, *VPl* 957). The "something else" is the system, described in the introduction to *The Resurrection* thus: "For years I have been preoccupied with a certain myth that was itself a reply to a myth" (*W&B* 91, *VPl* 932).

So here is a book of contrasts, in the quaternities that fill *A Vision*: four imaginative works and four essays, four dedications to symbolic people, and four emblems (house, mask, sword, and ship). The dates of first performance are prominently displayed on the half title pages for each play, and together they form a sort of inner gyre surrounded by an outer one (1930 and 1929, then a wider spread of dates, 1934 and 1926). Each play mixes high and low speech, poetry and prose, serious and comic modes, and the phenomenal and supernatural worlds. Within the quaternities are the triads explored in the essays

that follow this introduction: Swift, Vanessa, and Stella; Cuchulain, Emer, and Eithne Inguba; the Greek, the Hebrew, and the Syrian; the Lame Beggar, the Blind Beggar, and the Saint.[5]

You will guess what I am suggesting: that Yeats created *Wheels and Butterflies* to be an example of the gyres of the visionary system, which feature always-spinning opposites in an endless dance of contrapuntal energy. By this point in his life, Yeats was living and working on a paradigm requiring the energies of both attraction and repulsion, joy and hate, creative and expository writing, intellectual abstraction and biography or personal memory, tragedy and comedy. What this means further is that to appreciate Yeats in the 1930s is to accept this larger picture. Readers should be willing to dive under the wheels as well as enjoy the butterflies of his harsh and beautiful late work. Yeats's definition of tragedy, comedy, and farce from *On the Boiler* can help us to understand the book *Wheels and Butterflies*: "I add that 'will or energy is eternal delight,' and when its limit is reached it may become a pure, aimless joy, though the man, the shade, still mourns his lost object" (*CW5* 247).

## Notes

1 *Wheels and Butterflies* (London: Macmillan, 1934; New York: Macmillan, 1935), henceforward abbreviated *W&B*. The plays and introductions are also included in *VPl*; page numbers will refer to *VPl* as well as the US edition of *W&B*.

2 On *A Vision* as comedy or satire, see Steven Helmling, *The Esoteric Comedies of Carlyle, Newman, and Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Eugene Korkowski, "Yeats's *Vision* as Philosophic *Satura*," *Eire-Ireland* 12, no. 3 (Fomhar/Autumn 1977): 62–70; Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's* Vision*: Romantic Modernism and Antithetical Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); and Elizabeth Muller, "The Mask of Derision in Yeats's Prologue to *A Vision* (1937), in *YA19*, eds. Margaret Mills Harper and Warwick Gould (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013): 121–46.

3 Northrop Frye famously used this term in his categorization of literary genres, although he did not associate it with Yeats. Frye considered *A Vision* a serious epic, if one for an ironic age. See *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also Frye, "Yeats and the Language of Symbolism," in *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1963), 218–37.

4 I do not know where Yeats encountered this narrative, but it would have appealed to him in part because of a detail involving a state between lives. According to Karen Wehrstein, writing for the *Psi Encyclopaedia*:

> Carmelo Samonà, a physician in Palermo, Italy, and his wife Adele lost their daughter Alessandrina to meningitis on March 10, 1910, when she was five. Three days later, Adele had the first of two dreams in which Alessandrina reassured her that she was not gone and would return.

The couple heard from Alessandrina as well as "Carmelo's sister Giannina, who had died many years before," with a promise of Alessandrina's return. In April, Adele discovered that she was pregnant, and with twins, as the spirits had foretold. The new daughter

exhibited the same "quietness, little interest in toys, phobias of barbers, a dislike of cheese, a fascination with playing with cloth and shoes, a tendency to refer to herself in the third person, and left-handedness" as her predecessor. The other daughter, named Maria Pace, had not been part of the family in a past life, but the two spirits were understood to have "agreed in the intermission" between lives to return together as twins. See Wehrstein, "People Who Knew Each Other in Past Lives," *Psi Encyclopedia* (London: The Society for Psychical Research, 2017), retrieved May 14, 2020, https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/people-who-knew-each-other-past-lives

5 It may be worth noting that the twenty-eight lunar phases that are one of the principle symbols of *A Vision* may be described as triads within quaternities. See, for example, Table 12.1 in Neil Mann, *A Reader's Guide to Yeats's* A Vision (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2019), 216–18.