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CORNERED: INTIMATE RELATIONS IN *THE WORDS UPON THE WINDOW-PANE*

Charles I. Armstrong

When *Wheels and Butterflies* was published by Macmillan in 1934, both the cover and the title page featured an image of three faces clustered together in a circular formation. This image was based on theatrical masks made by the Dutch artist Hildo van Krop for *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and subsequently used in a Dublin production of *Fighting the Waves* (a dance play based on *The Only Jealousy of Emer*). The masks belong to the characters of the Woman of the Sidhe, Emer, and Cuchulain, and their juxtaposition on the cover reflects the complex love triangle in *Fighting the Waves*.¹ Set in intimate proximity, the three partially overlapping faces appear anguished and awkwardly, even forcibly intertwined. Although originally written and staged in 1930, *The Words upon the Window-Pane* was—like *Fighting the Waves*—one of the four plays included in the *Wheels and Butterflies* volume. The cover image also speaks to *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, which circles around the historical circumstances of Jonathan Swift's amatory relationships to Vanessa and Stella at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Love is not simply a particular theme or motif in literature. It transcends the status of mere content in a literary text. Towards the end of his career, Harold Bloom reformulated his famous thesis concerning the anxiety of influence. Influence, he claimed in *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*, was a matter of “literary love.”² Whereas Bloom in his early writings had theorized the relationship between a strong writer and his exemplary forerunners as an Oedipal battle, at this late stage he was willing to admit that literary influence could be put in more positive terms. Whether or not Bloom's later writings can be said to fundamentally adjust his earlier theory, the idea of literary love is of some use in making sense of *The Words upon the Window-Pane*; but rather than looking exclusively at narrowly defined love relationships in this essay, I reflect on a wider range of relationships that can be defined as relations of intimacy. By this I mean relationships of love or proximity that undermine autonomy and that commit subjectivity—both spatially and interpersonally—beyond itself. This in turn relates to the idea of a relational, vulnerable self as formulated by Judith Butler.³ Among several relevant post-structuralist rearticulations of subjectivity, also worthy of mention is Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of exposed being, which is formulated in regards to both signification and love. “‘To be exposed,’” Nancy writes, “means to be ‘posed’ in exteriority, according to an exteriority, having to do with an outside *in the very intimacy* of an inside.”⁴ For Nancy, the fundamentally exposed nature of

subjectivity is intrinsically also a relation of representation—thus not merely a relation of “juxtaposition, but exposition.”⁵ Nancy renounces, however, the idea of creating a master narrative or general theory of love relations or community, and this essay will not attempt to subsume Yeats’s play under any overarching concept or theoretical regime.

This article hypothesizes that the tortured love relationships between Swift, Stella, and Vanessa are not without relevance to Yeats’s appropriation of Swift. In addition, I place these examples of erotic and literary intimacy alongside the play’s dramatization of a séance. Love, literature, and mediumship, I claim, enter into interesting connections—indeed, in relations of intimacy—in the play. Interpersonal relations and representational strategies are interlinked, rather than a set of loosely collected devices. Both the interpersonal relations and the representational processes in question frequently involve spatial relations of proximity, and one of this essay’s key arguments focuses on how *The Words upon the Window-Pane* self-consciously addresses notions of place and space. More abstractly, this kind of spatial proximity amounting to a form of overlapping also shows itself on the textual plane, as Yeats’s play enters into close but far from unequivocal relations with its introduction in *Wheels and Butterflies* and the posthumously published “Pages from a Diary in 1930,” as well as other texts by Yeats and parts of Swift’s *oeuvre*. In all of these instances, my interpretation demonstrates relations of a kind of cornered intimacy, even if I do not pretend to have cornered (i.e., hunted down and brought under control) any univocal, underlying meaning subsuming the singular vitality of the play and its relations.

Yeats wrote *The Words upon the Window-Pane* quickly, starting to plan the play in August 1930 and finishing it in early October that same year. This creative burst followed a long period of illness, with Yeats suffering from brucellosis (“Malta fever”) for several months, attended by his wife George and hired nurses, in Rapallo and nearby Portofina Vetta. In December 1929, the situation was sufficiently serious for Yeats to dictate a will. During his confinement, both Yeats and George led extremely enclosed and limited lives. In a letter to Lennox Robinson, George lamented that except for “balconies I haven’t been out I really forget for how long [...]. What’s happened to the world?”⁶ She also complained about the proximity and the personality of the nurses, whose presence was no doubt experienced as both a support for, and an encroachment upon, the married couple’s domestic togetherness.

During his recovery in the spring, Yeats wrote to L. A. G. Strong:

I am almost well again—indeed there is nothing wrong now except that I tire very soon. After five months of illness I have begun to work again though but

a little and not every day. I have had much illness these last two years, but there seems no reason why I should not now be as well as ever (April 15, 1930, CL *InteLex* 5344).

Yeats put up a bluff façade in his letters, but it is obvious that this period of confinement had been extremely difficult. To Lennox Robinson he wryly described himself as having emerged from “a kind of happy prison” (February 28, 1930, CL *InteLex* 5335), and in a letter to George Russell (AE) he underscored the physical toll of prolonged isolation:

I have been ill for five months, and blink at the world as if fresh from the cloister. My wife tells me that the little wrinkles [sic] are gone out of my face. All days or nights of discomfort or delirium have been blotted from my memory and I recall nothing but peace (April 13, 1930, CL *InteLex* 5342).

Already, at this point, Yeats was looking back at his ill self as something of a stranger, and he was not particularly anxious to dwell on an experience in which (to quote Virginia Woolf’s “On Being Ill”) “the world has changed its shape; the tools of business grown remote.”⁷ But still the memory of a different kind of existence, akin to that of a “prison” or a “cloister” where nothing can be done, impinged upon his consciousness, and the play he would go on to write after his recovery would pay implicit testimony to that memory.

When *The Words upon the Window-Pane* was first staged by the Abbey in November 1930, it became something of a surprise success. Unusually for Yeats, it did well at the box office. While this was notable enough, it must have come as surprise, perhaps especially to Yeats himself, that a play based on his interests in the esoteric had found such a wide and seemingly receptive audience. The play deploys mediumship and the séance in a more direct fashion than any other of Yeats’s dramatic writings. In doing so, it articulates a desire for intimacy that underpins mediumship. Séances often involve the wish of bereaved individuals to get in touch with their lost loved ones. In *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, Mrs. Mallet is in this position: she wants to speak to her deceased husband, as she declares she will remain “utterly lost” if she “cannot question him” (CW2 469).

Mediumship, as portrayed in Yeats’s play, involves an attempt to make the dead speak. This parallels Yeats’s own relationship to Swift. Like the other plays published in *Wheels and Butterflies*, *The Words upon the Window-Pane* was coupled with a prose introduction providing a contextualization of the text. The introduction presents Swift as a key figure who “created the political nationality of Ireland” in the *Drapier’s Letters* (CW2 710), while also suggesting that he was a witness to the breaking apart of pre-modern harmony. I will return to the prose introduction later, but for now I want to dwell on the following words: “Swift

haunts me, he is always just round the next corner” (CW2 708). Yeats immediately links this compulsion not only to personal connections (i.e., an ancestor who was in the ambit of Swift’s social circles) but also to his own experiences, wandering around St. Patrick’s Cathedral and other parts of Dublin, amidst an urban landscape that seemed to bear the traces of Swift and his contemporaries. In this setting, he wrote, the past spoke to him as something that was “near and yet hidden” (CW2 708). In *W. B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland*, Donald Torchiana claims that Yeats’s sense of being haunted indicates the strength of Yeats’s admiration for Swift—the fact that, in Torchiana’s words, “Swift had always attracted him.”⁸ This is perhaps overstating things, as Yeats early on in his career had little time for Swift and other eighteenth-century figures, in contrast with his strong admiration for the Romantics. As he writes earlier in the same text: “I turned from Goldsmith and from Burke because they had come to seem a part of the English system, from Swift because I acknowledged, being a romantic, no verse between Cowley and Smart’s *Song to David*, no prose between Sir Thomas Browne and the *Conversations of Landor*” (CW2 707). His feelings would change by 1930, yet his admission, “Swift haunts me,” should not be construed simply as an expression of newfound attraction or admiration. Rather, I suggest, in setting this quotation alongside the play, that Yeats’s relationship with Swift was akin to that of a medium with a spirit. I further propose that the reference to Swift’s being “just round the next corner” is significant and connects with other references to inaccessibility—to things that are near and yet unreachable—in the play.

The Words upon the Window-Pane portrays a contemporary séance in which the medium Mrs. Henderson unwittingly channels Swift and the two key women of his adult life, Esther Johnson (dubbed “Stella” by Swift himself) and Esther Vanhomrigh (also called “Vanessa”). Their medium, Mrs. Henderson, and her mediumistic control, Lulu, experience these figures as frustrators who get in the way of the real business of the séance for the rather motley crowd attending.⁹ The odd one out at the séance is the young Cambridge student John Corbet, who happens to be writing a Ph.D. on Swift and his relationship with Stella. When Dr. Trench hands Corbet a scrap of paper showing the lines of verse etched on the window-pane, which are traditionally ascribed to Stella, the young scholar has no difficulty recalling the poem and the circumstances of its composition. This prompts Dr. Trench to remark: “I have shown that writing to several persons, and you are the first who has recognized the lines” (CW2 468). Corbet also recognizes the poem when Swift, channeled by Mrs. Henderson, quotes it at greater length in his speech to Stella later on in the séance (see CW2 476). Based on his knowledge of Swift’s life story, he sees in the details of the unfolding drama an accurate reconstruction of past events but dismisses the séance itself as an elaborate fabrication on the part of Mrs. Henderson. This is a missed opportunity, as

the possibility for witness and recognition is introduced but goes unfulfilled. Indeed, Corbet is reminiscent of the Greek in Yeats's play *The Resurrection*, also included in *Wheels and Butterflies*. There, the Greek is yet another figure whose rationalism makes it impossible to place credence in the supernatural events that take place in his presence—although, as some scholars have pointed out, *The Words upon the Window-Pane* can be read as casting some doubt upon the actual veracity of its apparitions.¹⁰

If there is a breakdown in communication between the spirit of Swift and the participants in the séance, there are also complications in Swift's intimate relations. By way of Mrs. Henderson and Lulu, he is revealed to be in the middle of a tortured love triangle. In the first dramatized sequence, he confronts Vanessa, scolding her for having questioned Stella about an alleged secret marriage between her and Swift. For Swift, Vanessa should be above such things, yet rather than acting with the dignity of a Cato or Brutus, she has been behaving "like some common slut with her ear against the keyhole" (CW2 474). In other words, a crisis in Swift's personal affairs has been unleashed through a transgression of the spatial confines of domesticity.

At this point in the play, the audience has become familiarized with the enclosed space of the stage. While the way in which the stage is used might remind one of the "conventional stage realism" of Ibsen, Shaw, and other realists,¹¹ the dynamics of Yeats's play go beyond such a framework. The exposition of the play depicts in some detail the arrival of all the participants at the séance, with knockings on the door and scenes of welcoming, as they enter the building via an entrance hall. At the end they all depart, leaving only Mrs. Henderson, who, unknown even to herself, is still under the spell of Swift. The seemingly unremarkable locality has deeper resonances. *The Words upon the Window-Pane* is dedicated "In Memory of / Lady Gregory / In Whose House It Was Written" (CW2 465). Although she was still alive when the play was first staged, by the time it was published in *Wheels and Butterflies*, Lady Gregory was dead. In "Pages from a Diary in 1930," written at the same time as the play, Yeats foresees the ignominious future of his friend's Big House: "Coole as a Gregory house is near its end, it will be before long an office and residence for foresters, a little cheap furniture in the great room, a few religious oleographs its only pictures" (Ex 319). One might compare this anticipated non-place with the setting of the play. Dr. Trench observes that the building used for the séance was once inhabited by Stella and "was a country-house in those days, surrounded by trees and gardens" (CW2 467). The building still has "large stables at the back" (CW2 467), but it has been swallowed up by the urban sprawl of the city and is now a mere lodging house. Implicitly, there is a tacit parallel between the fall of Georgian Dublin and the impending demise of twentieth-century Ascendancy culture.

The premises are effectively a haunted house (as is made even clearer in drafts of the play, where J. Sheridan Le Fanu is mentioned), and desire is dramatized as being baulked by spatial confines. Swift is first introduced by Lulu as “[t]hat bad man, that bad old man in the corner” (CW2 473). His exposed position “in the corner” is a physical manifestation of his dislocation. Like Oedipus, who in *Oedipus at Colonus* has been “driven out to wander through my whole life as a beggar and an outcast” (CW2 412), Swift is a figure at the extreme margins of community. Both Oedipus and Swift have transgressed sexual mores and are paying a steep price. “Never to have lived is best,” the chorus of *Oedipus at Colonus* says (CW2 432), while Yeats’s Swift cries out: “Perish the day on which I was born!” (CW2 479). Whereas Oedipus is hovering outside the borders of the *polis*, though, the Dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral is banished from the realm of the living. When the participants in the séance join together in singing John Keble’s words in a hymn, asking that “some poor wandering child of Thine / [...] no more [must] lie down in sin” (CW2 475), they are praying for his absolution. But there is no transcendence for Swift analogous to that which “fixes our amazed attention” on Oedipus “when his death approaches” at the end of the *Oedipus at Colonus* (Ex 299), no end to his wanderings. He is cornered and simply cannot find a way out.

In the following dramatization of the relationship between Vanessa and Swift, the confines hemming both in are evident in her frustrated desire to attain complete intimacy. “I thought it would be enough to look at you,” she tells Swift, “to speak to you, to hear you speak. I followed you to Ireland five years ago and I can bear it no longer. It is not enough to look, to speak, to hear” (CW2 474). In the earliest existing draft of the play, in a notebook Yeats kept in Rapallo, Vanessa’s language is even more repetitive and desperate: “It is not enough to see you,” she says, “It is not enough to see enough, not enough to see & speak to you, not enough to see & speak, & touch your hands when we meet or part.”¹² She grasps his hand and places it on her breast, in a moment of tense erotic proximity, but Swift resists. He is shown to be torn between his strong passion and a concern about the possible offspring of their relationship. He is also judgmental, flaunting an intellectual superiority that has led A. S. Knowland to characterize him as “an intellectual corner-boy.”¹³ Significantly, this passage ends with Swift being unable to escape due to Dr. Trench having earlier locked the door: “Who locked the door?” he asks, “who locked me in with my enemy?” (CW2 475). The locked room becomes an image of his repeated, unredeemed trauma, which is only heightened by the way in which he is exposed to an ignorant group attending a séance. They too are cornered, forced to submit to a confusing presence that interrupts their session.

When Stella’s relationship to Swift unfolds in the subsequent part of the play, she is not portrayed as an erotically charged figure and thus presents

a contrast to Vanessa. Swift's two loves embody the penury and excess of passion, respectively, rather than any idealized view of consummated love. Earlier in the play we have come across a couplet from Stella's poem "To Dr. Swift on his Birthday, November 30, 1721"—these are the words upon the window-pane. Singled out in the title of Yeats's play, the word "window-pane" brings associations of isolation and the necessity of having to make do with representations: rather than having direct access to reality, one has to make do with a distanced view from afar. The emotive disturbance caused by this sense of constriction is also hinted at in the homonym of "pain." Unlike the inscription discovered by Lockwood at the beginning of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the actual words inscribed in Yeats's play do not herald the unveiling of a passionate, stormy relationship. Instead, the relationship between Stella and Swift is portrayed as being affectionate but distant.

Swift mainly engages with Stella through textual exegesis, as her own voice is not channeled. Stella's poem presents a version of the nineteenth-century notion of the beautiful soul, where inner virtue is reflected by outer beauty.¹⁴ Although Swift tries to put a positive gloss on their relationship, his denial of bodily intimacy reduces her to a wan, sexless shadow: Stella is an isolated, stunted figure. As such she is a connecting link with Lady Gregory's granddaughter, Anne Gregory, in Yeats's poem "For Anne Gregory." This poem was written alongside *The Words upon the Window-Pane* in Yeats's Rapallo notebook and has a related theme of imperfect human love. Where no suitor, but only God, can offer transcendent love, mortals are exposed to a state of lack. In the words of Swift's character in Yeats's play: "You have no children, you have no lover, you have no husband" (CW2 476).

In "Pages from a Diary in 1930," Yeats suggests that Swift "almost certainly hated sex" (Ex 334). This abnegation of physical relations is certainly important in the play: Swift cannot deny his physical urges yet nevertheless struggles to abstain from pursuing them. For Terence Brown, "the biographical force of the work is to be found in its conviction that the tragedy of Swift, expiring a driveller and a show, was a sexual tragedy. To deny the body, as Yeats had done for so many years in his young manhood, was to tempt a Swiftian fate, as he now understood."¹⁵ Although Brown here draws an interesting parallel with the young Yeats's struggle to remain chaste, it is hard to believe that personal memories dating thirty or forty years back in time might provide a key clue to decipher what is a complex, many-cornered play. The play's focus on a love triangle might instead lead one to Yeats's persistent questioning of marriage and domestic bliss in favor of more bohemian relations, insisting upon an excess that challenges conventional ideas of monogamy.¹⁶ Although most overtly a feature of his writings prior to his marriage to Georgie Hyde Lees in 1917, this dimension more implicitly enters Yeats's oeuvre via his later balancing of that

marriage with extramarital affairs and flirtations. The position of Swift in the play, caught between the youthful advances of Vanessa and the long-suffering loyalty of Stella, can be compared to that of Cuchulain in *Fighting the Waves*. The previously mentioned use of masks representing Cuchulain, Emer, and Eithne Inguba on the cover of *Wheels and Butterflies* might be motivated by the similar love relationships of these two central plays of that volume.¹⁷ In addition to the dynamics of their erotic relationships, Cuchulain and Swift are figures who languish in a kind of ghostly twilight zone between life and death. Both are also characters whose identity is usurped by stand-ins: Cuchulain's by Bricriu who has taken his "likeness" (CW2 459) and Swift's by the mediating presences of Mrs. Henderson and Lulu.

Swift's situation is of course shared, in this respect, with his two loves. The relay of voices in *The Words upon the Window-Pane* underscores Stella's isolation. Her voice is subject to multiple mediation: it comes to us via the medium of Mrs. Henderson, who channels it via Lulu, who again mediates Swift, who for his part passes on not Stella's own words but rather those of her poem. The words upon the window-pane are thus a figure of erasure in the play, poetry being a particularly a weak form of representation in this work. This is not the only meta-literary reference in Yeats's play. The way in which Swift, Stella, and Vanessa have reappeared in Mrs. Henderson's séances leads Mrs. Mallet, early on, to say that it is "just as if they were characters in some kind of play" (CW2 469). In his introduction to *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, Mrs. Henderson's role persuades Yeats to insist that "mediumship is dramatization" (CW2 719). This claim would in turn cause a rather worried correspondence between him and George, who interpreted it as being more suggestive of mere fabrication than a true manifestation of spirits.¹⁸ Certainly, the play raises rather open-ended questions about the force and veracity of Swift's presence. In his introduction to the play, Yeats reads him as representative of a civilization that is already being threatened by degeneration. In the words of Corbet in the first draft of the play, "Swift was not only the greatest literary figure of the age but as it were its symbol."¹⁹ The symbol is to accomplish an act of *sympallein* (to use the ancient Greek verb), the bringing together or touching of the individual figure and its more general, historical significance. With regard to *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, Corbet is very much the mediating figure that is entrusted with bringing together these two dimensions, linking the concrete action of the play with the historical exegesis provided in Yeats's prose introduction in *Wheels and Butterflies*. Yeats cannot but endorse Swift's rejection of Vanessa, since it confirms his higher mission as a representative figure of the eighteenth-century Protestant Ascendancy. This rejection makes Yeats's relationship to Swift possible: Vanessa's loss is Yeats's gain. The strong investment he places in that relationship is hinted at in the way Yeats refers to the play in his letters to

George. On September 14, 1930, he calls it simply “the Swift play” (*CL InteLex* 5382). By October 4 of the same year, he refers to it as “Swift or as I call it ‘Words Upon the Window Pane’” (*CL InteLex* 5391). In subsequent letters he would periodically mention “Window Pane,” but on October 22, 1931 he refers to it, in his commentary on the play (first published in a shorter form in the *Dublin Magazine*), as “my Swift” (*CL InteLex* 5526).

Yeats’s strong personal investment is also evident in how he negotiates the temporal divide that separates him from Swift. Matthew de Forrest has written eloquently about how *The Words upon the Window-Pane* involves a “specific kind of time travel” that relates to *A Vision* and the opposition between eternity and historical time.²⁰ In his dealings with Swift, however, Yeats also negotiates a traditional hermeneutical dichotomy, key to Victorian predecessors such as Tennyson and Hardy, between the past and present. In “Pages from a Diary in 1930,” Yeats reflects upon how “thoughts become more vivid when I find they were thought out in historical circumstances which affect those in which I live, or, which is perhaps the same thing, were thought first by men my ancestors may have known” (Ex 293). In the same entry, he goes on to note how a particularity of Swift’s style makes it possible for his voice to carry across the chasm of history: “I can hear Swift’s voice in his letters speaking the sentences at whatever pace makes their sound and idiom expressive. He speaks and we listen at leisure. [...] Swift wrote for men sitting at table or fireside—from that come his animation and his naturalness” (Ex 293–94). Swift excels in striking a vivid pose, one might say, if one also allows for the word’s etymological root of positioning or commanding a place.

Yeats’s belief in Swift’s ability to become present for contemporaries can be compared to how the character of Abraham Johnson, in *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, wishes to draw upon the spirit of the American evangelist Dwight L. Moody. Johnson wants “to ask him to stand invisible beside me when I speak or sing, and lay his hands upon my head and give me such a portion of his power that my work may be blessed” (CW2 469). Apart from the reference to touching, which anticipates the frustrated bodily contact between Vanessa and Swift later in the play, it is worth pausing at the use of the word “portion” here. In the Harvard manuscript version of the text, the word was written in a near-illegible hand, forcing the typist to leave an empty space. This in turn meant that Yeats had to re-insert the word in the typescript by hand. “Portion” is not a word much used in Yeats’s writings, but it shows up in the poem “Broken Dreams,” where Yeats writes of the great “portion” Heaven has in the peace Maud Gonne makes “By merely walking in a room” (CW1 153). In both these cases, then, “portion” conveys a form of embodied representation—even while its privative nature (a portion, instead of the whole) indicates that the representative vehicle is missing or incomplete. The hymn sung at the

beginning of the séance relates to this issue. The participants sing the following lines from the opening of John Keble's hymn 564: "Sun of my soul, Thou Saviour dear, / It is not night if Thou be near: / O may no earth-born cloud arise / To hide Thee from Thy servant's eyes" (CW2 479). God's presence is desired in the same way as that of other spiritual beings in the play.

In Yeats's relationship to Swift, privation is caused by temporal distance. Yeats desires a form of immediate contact with Swift, which will close the gap between past and present. He further explores how to facilitate such contact in an extraordinary passage in the introduction to the play:

In judging any moment of past time we should leave out what has since happened; we should not call the Swift of the *Drapier Letters* nearer truth because of their influence upon history than the Swift who attacked in *Gulliver* the inventors and logicians; we should see certain men and women as if at the edge of a cliff, time broken away from their feet (CW2 716).

There is a sense in which this passage is facilitating the atemporal presence with which Yeats often opposed historicism. At the same time, his act of isolating Swift "as if at the edge of a cliff" strategically leaves Yeats face to face with his eighteenth-century inspiration. The passage is reminiscent of a key episode in Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, where Henry Knight's hanging on a cliff leads to an epiphany where "Not a blade, not an insect, which spoke of the present, was between him and the past."²¹ It also anticipates a famous passage in Walter Benjamin's 1940 "Theses on the Philosophy of History," where the causal connections and unified narratives of positivist history are said to be countered by an alternative approach whereby Benjamin grasps "the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one."²²

The desire to create a "constellation" with Swift and his historical moment entails that Yeats wishes to leap-frog everything that historically can come between them. What the German hermeneutical tradition calls the *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the reception history of the preceding author's life and works, is to be simply bracketed out. Certainly, Swift's relations with Stella and Vanessa have been subject to much later attention. Summing up part of this tradition, Louise Barnett sardonically remarks: "Down through history male critics have gallantly lauded Stella and condemned the importuning Vanessa as a usurper."²³ Thanks to the scholarship of Mary Fitzgerald, we know that Yeats here is more specifically preceded by a significant body of theatrical work in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In an article reprinted, in revised form, as the preface to the Cornell manuscripts edition of *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, Fitzgerald has shown that Yeats's work with the play was facilitated by the pre-existence of earlier plays exploring Swift's personal life.²⁴

Fitzgerald mentions Sidney Paternoster's 1913 Abbey play *The Dean of St. Patrick's* but argues for a more significant source: *Swift and Stella: A Play in One Act*, by Charles Edward Lawrence (an acquaintance of both Lady Gregory and Yeats), published in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1926. In addition to the two texts broached by Fitzgerald, one can also add Florence Bell's 1903 *The Dean of St. Patrick's*. In Bell's play, as in Paternoster's and Lawrence's, much is made of Swift's complicated *ménage à trois*. At one point, one of her characters exclaims: "What! must a man needs have two women at his beck and call to make his life comfortable and put up with his humours, and never a wife with it all to make him hear reason?"²⁵ This might be compared to John Corbet's observation, made early in *The Words upon the Window-Pane*: "How strange that a celibate scholar, well on in life, should keep the love of two such women!" (CW2 468). As all three of the preceding plays circle around the love triangle between Swift, Stella, and Vanessa, this suggests that the choice of the central, intimate relations at the heart of Yeats's play was hardly an innovation in his time. Just as Yeats in his introduction to *The Words upon the Window-Pane* struggles to assert himself and distinguish his own views from those of Corbet and the other characters—"If I had not denied myself, if I had allowed some character to speak my thoughts," he asks at one point, "what would he have said?" (CW2 719)—the play embodies Yeats's struggle to articulate a distinct contribution in the midst of a veritable industry of Swift plays. All the more reason for Yeats to call his version "My Swift." His use of this possessive pronoun can however be interpreted as ambiguous. While it indicates that Yeats's appropriation of Swift is his own, singular property, it also implicitly concedes that there are other Swifts that are not Yeats's.

I think this ambivalence corresponds to an undercurrent in Yeats's inclusion of a translation of Swift's epitaph among the poems in *The Winding Stair*. While the epitaph might be read as clearly distinguishing between passersby who are addressed as "World-besotted travelers" and more savvy inheritors such as Yeats, the admonitory "Imitate him if you dare" nevertheless expresses unease (CW1 250). For although Swift is portrayed heroically in texts such as "The Tower" and the introduction to *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, the play itself indicates he is not a figure one could emulate or embrace without reserve. Michael McAteer has even gone as far as to claim that the play shows Swift "living out the collapse of his mind as a perpetual curse."²⁶ To imitate such a man is to flirt with disaster.

What firmly separates Yeats's play from those of Bell, Paternoster, and Lawrence is the way in which the love triangle at its heart is framed by a contemporary *séance*. If Yeats presents *his* Swift, it is specifically a Swift who struggles to be heard. This structure of blockage and indirection relates, in fact, to a key feature of Swift's career as a writer. As Leo Damrosch writes:

much of Swift's writing was issued under assumed names: Isaac Bickerstaff, M. B., Drapier, Lemuel Gulliver. As with his gift for mimicry, he relished the game of becoming someone very different from himself as he appropriated a voice—people from the lower classes, politicians he despised, household servants, patrician ladies.²⁷

Swift's career is full of examples of his speaking through other voices, and as such Yeats's decision to channel him, via Mrs. Henderson and Lulu, paradoxically represents a loyal form of mediation.

An in-depth account of Yeats's deployment of Swiftian sources will not be given here, but there are other aspects of Swift's writings that would seem to suggest that Yeats's séance is no arbitrary imposition upon his eighteenth-century predecessor's example. Although the *Wheels and Butterflies* introduction is mainly devoted to Swift's politics, the vein of pessimistic classicism that runs through his writings may also have played a role in determining how Yeats chose to represent his legacy for a twentieth-century audience. In "On the Death of Dr. Swift," Swift anticipated the lack of any posthumous life for his own work:

One year is past; a different scene;
 No further mention of the Dean;
 Who now, alas, no more is missed
 Than if he never did exist.
 Where's now the fav'rite of Apollo?
 Departed; and his works must follow:
 Must undergo the common fate.
 His kind of wit is out of date.²⁸

The threat of posthumous neglect appears often in Swift's writings. In the words of "Cadenus and Vanessa," he fears a situation where such "great examples" as his own "are in vain / Where ignorance begets disdain."²⁹ The way in which even Corbet cannot recognize Swift's presence in *The Words upon the Window-Pane* represents an ironic version of precisely this scenario.

Fighting against neglect, Swift sought to impose his presence upon the reader. While he mercilessly parodied mysticism alongside other forms of unconventional Christianity in *A Tale of the Tub*, Swift also explored how writing could in some ways be said to compensate or obviate the author's lack of immediate presence in his work. In "Cadenus and Vanessa," pedagogy is shown to be heightened when "[t]he book, the author, and the friend" can be said to be one and the same.³⁰ Ideally, the author communicates through his books in a way that is as immediate as face-to-face contact with a friend. That authorial presence might, in some cases, even survive death. In *The Battle of the*

Books, such survival is part of the lively personification of classic books. There, the way in which authors communicate posthumously in their works is said to be in the form of “a restless spirit” that “haunts over every book.”³¹ When Yeats states that “Swift haunts me,” he is effectively confirming his predecessor’s poetics of posthumous survival.

Even during his own lifetime, Swift was not averse to haunting others through his writings. In *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, Dr. Trench mentions that Swift “chaffed” Stella in “the *Journal to Stella* because of certain small sums of money she lost at cards probably in this room” (CW2 467). In some of the more playful passages in his letters from London to Stella and Rebecca Dingley between 1710 and 1713, which were later published as *Journal to Stella*, Swift imagines himself eavesdropping or even haunting Stella during her card games back in Dublin. On March 20, 1711, he teasingly admonishes her:

[...] so go to your dean’s, and roast his oranges, and lose your money, do so, you saucy sluts. Ppt, you lost three shillings and four pence t’other night at Stoitè’s, yes, you did, and pdfr stood in a corner, and saw you all the while, and then stole away. I dream very often I am in Ireland, and that I have left my cloaths and things behind me, and have not taken leave of any body; and that the ministry expect me to-morrow, and such nonsense.³²

In passages such as this, Swift uses information he has received from acquaintances of Stella (affectionately referred to as “Ppt”, i.e., “Poppet,” here) and Dingley to reconstruct their movements and activities in his absence. While he conjures their visits to figures such as John Stearne (then the dean of St. Patrick’s) and Dublin alderman John Stoyte, he also imagines himself (frequently identified as “pdfr”) as hovering in the vicinity. As an invisible figure standing “in a corner” in this passage, Swift is projecting himself as a ghostlike persona haunting the location where Stella engages in her games of cards. The passage thus prefigures, and may have influenced, Yeats’s own imagining of Swift as a “bad old man in the corner” of Stella’s former home in *The Words upon the Window-Pane* (CW2 473).

The image of the cornered Dean has been something of a leitmotif in this essay, in which I have explored the relationship between literature, mediumship, and love both within *The Words upon the Window-Pane* and in the play’s outer, paratextual ambit. My aim has not been to imply that there exists one master narrative of relationships but rather to show how this fascinating play strongly suggests and demonstrates the analogous ways that various forms of intimacy—from the sexual and social to the literary and spiritual—are experienced. The intense, claustrophobic spatiality of the play is informed by the memory of Yeats’s confinement during a long illness in the months preceding its composition, while the focus on Swift speaks to Yeats’s own experience of

literary influence, a wish to channel a “portion” of his great eighteenth-century Ascendancy precursor, and a form of emotionally charged desire. In Swift’s hauntingly intimate relation to Yeats, a double bind of sorts inheres, whereby closeness to Swift is both desired and resisted by the author of *The Words upon the Window-Pane*. Such an ambivalent relation is at the heart of Bloom’s notion of the anxiety of influence,³³ and is also, I would suggest, at play in Yeats’s late fascination with the Dean. While one might be tempted to see Yeats’s use of the framing séance as a betrayal or ironic displacement of Swift’s personal love predicament, being stuck between Stella and Vanessa, the concluding part of this essay has told another story. As a writer of indirection, obsessed with both the difficulties and possibilities of representation, Swift’s example also informs those parts of the play that might, at first glance, appear most distant from him. Although Yeats’s Swift is an unsettlingly vulnerable and exposed character, he is also a remarkably compelling figure, whose vitality draws upon the example of his real-life model.

NOTES

- 1 For reproductions of the images and an account of how Yeats and his publishers arrived at the final design, see Warwick Gould, “*Wheels and Butterflies*: Title, Structure, Cover Design,” in *YA19*, eds. Margaret Mills Harper and Warwick Gould, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013), 369–78.
- 2 Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 8. Italics in the original.
- 3 See particularly Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 19–49.
- 4 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xxxvii. Italics in the original. The spatial dynamics explored in my reading of *The Words upon the Window-Pane* are also related to the issue of framing in Yeats, explored in Charles I. Armstrong, *Reframing Yeats: Genre, Allusion and History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- 5 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 29.
- 6 George Yeats to Lennox Robinson, January 9, 1930, cited in Ann Saddlemyer, *Becoming George: The Life of Mrs. W. B. Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 424.
- 7 Virginia Woolf, *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life. Selected Essays: Volume Two*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 1993), 43.
- 8 Donald T. Torchiana, *W. B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1966), 123. Compare John Kelly’s claim that Yeats in early April of 1930 “becomes obsessed by Swift, Bolingbroke and Pope.” See Kelly, *A W. B. Yeats Chronology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 268.
- 9 On the concept of “frustrators,” see Yeats’s account of the automatic writing sessions with his wife in *CW14* 10–13.
- 10 See for instance Peter Ure, *Yeats the Playwright: A Commentary on Character and Design in the Major Plays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 102–23.
- 11 Richard Taylor, *A Reader’s Guide to the Plays of W. B. Yeats* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), 132.
- 12 W. B. Yeats, *The Words upon the Window Pane: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Mary Fitzgerald (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 25–27.
- 13 A. S. Knowland, *W. B. Yeats: Dramatist of Vision* (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1983), 183.

- 14 See Robert E. Norton, *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).
- 15 Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 331.
- 16 On this topic, see Charles I. Armstrong, "An 'Experiment in Living': Bohemianism and Homelessness in W. B. Yeats's *Autobiographies*," in eds. John Lynch and Katherina Dodou, *The Leaving of Ireland: Migration and Belonging in Irish Literature and Film* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), 273–91.
- 17 R. F. Foster links both *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (which is the basis of *Fighting the Waves*) and *The Writing upon the Window-Pane* to the complex erotic entanglements Yeats's relationship to Iseult Gonne led him into. See Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life. II. The Arch-Poet, 1915–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 410, 109.
- 18 See George's letter dated November 24, 1931, and Yeats's response on November 25 (with an added note and comment), in *YGYL*, 270–72.
- 19 Yeats, *The Words upon the Window Pane: Manuscript Materials*, 95. Partially overlapping with "Pages from a Diary in 1930," the introduction also interprets Swift's *Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions between the Nobles and the Commons in Athens and Rome* in a way that makes it affirm, and conform to, the historical scheme of *A Vision*. For Swift's and this text's appearance in the latter, see *CW14* 36 and Margaret Mills Harper and Catherine E. Paul's editorial comment, 335 n39.
- 20 Matthew de Forrest, "Atemporal Presence of the Discarnate States of *A Vision* in *Words upon the Window Pane* and *Purgatory*," in *The Yeats Journal of Korea* 54 (Winter 2017), 168.
- 21 Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, ed. with notes by Alan Manford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 199.
- 22 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 263.
- 23 Louise Barnett, *Jonathan Swift in the Company of Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21.
- 24 Mary Fitzgerald, "Introduction," in Yeats, *The Words upon the Window Pane: Manuscript Materials*, xv–xxviii.
- 25 Florence Bell, *The Dean of St. Patrick's: A Play in Four Acts* (London: Edward Arnold, 1903), 63.
- 26 Michael McAteer, *Yeats and European Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 164.
- 27 Leo Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 6–7.
- 28 Jonathan Swift, *Major Works*, ed. with intro. and notes, Angus Ross and David Woolley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 522.
- 29 Swift, *Major Works*, 344.
- 30 Swift, *Major Works*, 351.
- 31 Swift, *Major Works*, 4.
- 32 Jonathan Swift, *Journal to Stella: Letters to Esther Johnson and Rebecca Dingley, 1710–1713*, ed. Abigail Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 166–67.
- 33 See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 70 and 152.