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Martin Lockerd
Schreiner University

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YEATS'S STOLEN CHILDREN

Martin Lockerd

Initially published in *The Irish Monthly* (1886), reprinted in the collection *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* (1888), and later included in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889), “The Stolen Child” quickly established Yeats’s early reputation as a poet of the Irish folk, and it has remained one of his most recognizable and beloved lyrics. I confess, though, that as a young college student reading it for the first time, the poem elicited more embarrassment than admiration. It felt cloying and sentimental, hardly worth mentioning in the same breath as the cold, intellectually complex, Modernist poems of his mature period. It was only some years later, after my wife and I suffered the stillbirth of our first daughter, that I found I couldn’t read the poem without the threat of tears. I came to understand “The Stolen Child” not as a twee poem about mischievous fairies, but as a poem that deals seriously with trauma and loss—one that combines the artist’s desire to express the inexpressible loss of a child with the folk Irish instinct to frame that injury within the logic of fairyland.

This article begins by arguing for “The Stolen Child” as an artistic sublimation and reenactment of the early trauma of Yeats’s three-year-old brother’s passing, an event that the adult Yeats identified as “My realization of death” (CW3 55). The poem, I claim, frames its traumatic content within the context of folklore and extends that content into a surprisingly complex lyric form that has gone unremarked upon by even such groundbreaking formal critics as Helen Vendler. Understanding the poem’s successful abreaction of child loss in turn allows for a consideration of a later poem that fails at the same task. Five years after the publication of “The Stolen Child,” following the death of Maud Gonne’s son Georges, Yeats revisited the trauma of child loss in the unpublished poem “On a Child’s Death.” There he foregoes the explanatory fictions of folklore in favor of a rawer, and hence unpublishable, lyric of loss. This movement from early success to later failure suggests the problems inherent not only in attempting to process trauma on behalf of someone else, but also in attempting to do so without the aid of deep-seated meaning-making narratives, such as that of fairy abduction in rural Ireland. In this sense, “On a Child’s Death” expresses modernity’s failure to provide a meaningful alternative to the folk and religious traditions of trauma-framing that were unseated by scientism and cultural pluralism.

Trauma, like so many theoretical paradigms, is notoriously resistant to pithy definition. For the last thirty years critical consensus has generally held that “trauma is that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation.”¹ Building on the work of Sigmund Freud and employing the techniques of deconstruction, early trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth emphasized the impossibility of knowing and articulating trauma to such an extent that they risked evacuating the traumatic event and witness of real meaning. Within this earlier model, according to Richard Crownshaw, the traumatic event effectively cannot be known; therefore, “it engenders through its insistent return a compulsive and repetitive acting out rather than working through.”² By making all individual experience of trauma an expression of ontic woundedness or absence, Caruth’s Freudian model carries with it the universalizing implications that “all of modernity is traumatic,” and that all trauma is, at root, structural, transhistorical, and textual (i.e. expressed solely through language’s failure of expression).³ Drawing on the insights of historian Dominick LaCapra, Crownshaw points out that within such a theoretical framework “Historical trauma is reduced to a textual trace, and textual trauma supersedes history.”⁴ Lucy Bond and Stef Craps summarize the tension between earlier models of structural trauma and more recent, historicized models:

These different positions are indicative of a tension within trauma theory between those who are primarily concerned with doing justice to traumatic repetition as a sign of survival and those who seek to drive home the point that one needs to heal from trauma if one is to be able to fully reengage with life and work towards a better tomorrow.⁵

Structural trauma results from a Freudian notion of a foundational absence within all human beings and thus cannot be overcome. By contrast, historical trauma relates to a specific instance of loss and carries at least the possibility of being worked through in time. What these divergent models perhaps fail to account for are the myriad ways in which literature reveals how one person may both “work through” a traumatic event, by the process of witnessing that event in art, and yet still continue to feel traces of the psychological wound of that original loss as part and parcel of the universal human encounter with suffering and death.

Yeats’s poems about lost children illustrate the potential verity of both historical and structural models of trauma, thus revealing the limitations of both. On the one hand, he is seemingly able to “work through” the trauma of his brother’s death by embracing the cultural narrative of the changeling and by aestheticizing his pain within the formal qualities of “The Stolen Child.” On the other hand, he fails to articulate a satisfactory response to *Gonne’s* (and

by projection his) loss of a son and falls back on a universalized lament about the cruelty and essential senselessness of death. The success of the former and failure of the latter poem, in terms of working through trauma, rest squarely with the larger failure of Yeats's attempt to cope with modernity by moving beyond local, historicized systems of belief and enfolded all human history, religion, and culture into an overarching, trans-historical, cyclical system of occult Gnosticism. This failure in turn reminds us of a central shortcoming of modernity as a whole, namely, the loss of meaningful, shared cultural trauma-framing beliefs and practices. As I write these words in the wake of a global coronavirus pandemic, I am reminded that our era is simultaneously better equipped than ever before to temporarily confound death through medical technology and worse equipped than ever before to meaningfully engage with and make sense of death.

I. A STOLEN CHILD

Robert Corbet Yeats died of croup on March 3, 1873. The condition stems from inflammation in the respiratory system and expresses itself as a harsh, barking cough that would freeze the blood of any parent. Yeats lived a life of some hardship, but few events in that life might be better characterized as traumatic than the death of his infant brother. Roy Foster relates that Willie, nearly eight years old at the time, tried to cope by quickly converting the loss of his brother into art:

Lily and WB Yeats woke to hear their mother cry "My little son, my little son" and horses' hoofs galloping for the doctor. After the death, the children sat drawing pictures of the ships along the Sligo quay, with flags at half mast. Susan Yeats, who thought she heard the banshee cry before her child died, was probably precipitated by the loss into the depression from which she never really returned. (*Life* 1 21).

She had little chance of return. Three years later, her fifth and youngest child, Jane Grace, succumbed to pneumonia before her first birthday. Deirdre Toomey points out that Yeats's *Autobiographies* neglect to mention his mother's existence until the recounting of Robert's death, some twenty pages in: "Susan Yeats thus enters the narrative with death, again a most unusual presentation in autobiography."⁶ Following the deaths of her children, as well as the never-ending displacements and penury caused by J. B. Yeats's failures as husband, father, and painter, Susan Yeats entered a semi-paralytic state for the remainder of her life. She became in her son's mind, Toomey argues, "away"—the euphemism employed by the Irish peasantry for those people taken by the fairies and replaced with a broken substitute.⁷ We can see a presentiment of

Yeats's earliest fairy lyric in Robert's death, Susan's retreat from consciousness, and the folk explanations that frame each. We can also see young Willie's attempt to cope with Robert's death by making art that turned his private loss into a cause for public mourning. The boy's need for emotional expression, his need to revisit and work through the experience of his trauma, would later find an appropriate public voice in "The Stolen Child."

As we have seen, Caruth's structural trauma model implies that literature, and language in general, revisit trauma to seek closure that cannot be achieved, since the original, painful experience exceeds full understanding and participates in a universal absence at the heart of the human psyche. Yeats's poem speaks to the partial truth of Caruth's model; he clearly feels compelled to revisit and retell his loss. But, without recognizing the historicity of the original traumatic event and Yeats's eventual artistic response to that event, we risk missing the ways in which the poem not only reenacts but works through the trauma of Robert's death. The particular trauma-framing practices of nineteenth-century Ireland play a strong role in Yeats's process of recovery and recuperation.

"The Stolen Child" draws on Irish folk beliefs about fairies and changelings to create art that revisits trauma in search of closure. Because fairies, to his mind, were not the tiny, playful, sweet creatures of much Victorian literature, Yeats often eschewed even the word fairy. He once explained this policy in a letter to a poet who had attempted to "prettify" and domesticate the fairies: "I myself try to avoid the word 'fairy' because it has associations of prettiness. *Sidhe* or 'gentry' or 'the others' is better. The Irish peasant never thinks of the fairies as pretty. He thinks of them as terrible, or beautiful."⁸ As we will see, he regularly opted for the spelling "faery." Belief in the *Sidhe* began in pre-historic, pagan Ireland. Once incorporated into the metaphysical framework of Christianity, those pagan gods were generally reconceptualized as fallen angels. These bad but not damned angels, according to some, were caught between heaven and hell when the gates of each closed after Lucifer's rebellion.⁹ If not immortal, they are, at the very least, extremely long-lived. They spend their lives haunting the countless fairy mounds around Ireland. Part of the terror associated with the *Sidhe* among the Irish peasantry sprang from the belief that the fairies would spirit away healthy, beautiful mortals and replace them with changelings. These often malformed and sickly creatures were generally the spirits of ancient, decrepit fairies, who could no longer sport and cavort with their own kind. When a loved one took suddenly ill or died, the family would naturally assume that they were "away" and would thus suspect fairy abduction and substitution.

Sometimes this suspicion would lead to acts of violence meant to chase out the changeling and force the *Sidhe* to return what they had stolen. As late as the 1890s, a father and mother in County Donegal, just north of Sligo, killed their

child in an attempt to get the fairies to take back their changeling.¹⁰ Then there is the more notorious incident of Bridget Cleary in 1895. The twenty-six-year-old woman had become willful and mentally disturbed. In an attempt to exorcise the fairy possessing her, Bridget's husband and family members burned her to death.¹¹ Michael Cleary spent the next three nights waiting beside the local fairy hill for his bride to return. He would eventually be convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to fifteen years of hard labor. The Cleary case is horrifying but exceptional. Toomey notes that Yeats's essays concerning folk beliefs about changelings emphasized "the importance of not injuring the 'substitute'" and saw in this practice both a pact of non-aggression with the Sidhe and an inspiringly humane mode of treating the weak and broken.¹² General belief held that the fairies most desired beautiful newborns and infants. Blaming the Sidhe for infant mortality provided an answer for what might otherwise feel like senseless human suffering.

The devout might seek such answers within the Catholic catechism, but, for many an Irish peasant, even the metaphysically sophisticated Church failed to satisfactorily account for the grief of infant death with either the promise of paradise or the notion of a limbus infantium, that spiritual realm where unbaptized infants spend dumb eternity in neither the pain of Hell nor the ecstasy of Heaven. Belief in fairy abduction provided a more immediate, ancient, and local explanation for loss, while at the same time denying the believer any immediate solace, which is, as the wounded know, the last thing we desire at the moment of bereavement. In the face of his own loss, Yeats found that the various myths surrounding fairy abduction provided a source for artistic abreaction whereby he might, however subtly, express and partially expurgate the trauma of his brother's death. It seems only natural that Yeats chose Sligo as the setting for his poem about a child stolen away by the Sidhe. There he learned about the fairies from country people and the servants in the kitchen of his grandparents' grand home, Merville; and there, he experienced Robert's death. Yeats's need for emotional expression and his need to revisit the experience of his trauma would eventually find a public voice.

The conventional reading of "The Stolen Child" goes something like this. In the first stanza, the fairies describe their "leafy island" on Lough Gill and tempt the child with their song:

*Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand.
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.*¹³

They go on to describe their dances at Rosses Point, a sandy peninsula north of Sligo, and contrast their carefree “footing” to a human world “full of troubles” and “anxious in its sleep.”¹⁴ When not dancing, we are told, the fairies spend their time in the pools below the Glen-Car waterfall whispering to sleeping trout and giving them “unquiet dreams”—a somewhat ominous pastime. In the final stanza, the Sidhe celebrate their successful temptation of a now “solemn-eyed” child. Why “solemn-eyed”? He has, according to the traditional reading, given up the little comforts of a human home: the peaceful song of the kettle heating over the fire, the sight of mice playing around the oatmeal chest. Viewed in this light, the poem describes something more like a seduction than an abduction. The young boy is tempted into leaving behind his family in favor of the promise of a life without pain. “Stolen” by the Sidhe and presumably replaced with a changeling, the child chooses a faery world with familiar Sligo geography but very different playmates and pastimes. Readers all agree that the boy is losing something, giving up his peacefully human world for a threateningly supernatural one. What they miss is that this is a poem as concerned with the carefully concealed poet as it is with either the speakers (the fairies) or the subject (the boy).

This is a surprisingly complex poem. Among other things, it highlights the difference between lyric enunciation and narrative. As Jonathan Culler points out in his *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), this type of poetry cannot be treated like traditional mimetic storytelling even if it contains narrative elements: “In narrative fiction, the question of the relation between *story* and *discourse* or between what is enunciated and the enunciation is generally theorized as one of perspective—from what point of view are events reported (in fictions the priority of event to narration is assumed).” By contrast, in lyric “the present of discourse or articulation cannot be reduced to the narrating of past events; on the contrary, the narrated events seem to be subsumed by, trumped by, the present of lyric enunciation.”¹⁵ Reduced to a narrative, the “The Stolen Child” fails to impress and may even threaten to embarrass. Does Yeats literally believe in fairy abduction? Does he wish us to? The only satisfying answer seems to be the paradoxical yes-and-no that characterizes the lyric mode as more performative than didactic. If we try to take the poem seriously, it becomes either parochial, false, or both. If we refuse to take it seriously, it becomes, at best, a parable about the emptiness of utopian fantasy and the pleasures of simple, human life: the kettle on the hob, the mice running round the oatmeal chest. No purely hermeneutic search for meaning can explain its power. Only by exploring the form of the fairies’ song can we begin to hear its warning note and, further, the submerged voice of the poet, who laments the boy’s decision as he inhabits the perpetual now of loss and grief. At the poem’s conclusion, the boy has made his choice; however, the poem’s structure rails against that

choice and, by so doing, expresses the emotions of neither the fairies nor the child. Instead, it becomes a sublimated expression of the poet's wish that the child would resist—that he would give up on the temptations of another world to stay with his family in this world.

The poet's implicit opposition to the child's abduction extends beyond the content of the poem and into its form. What Culler calls "triangulated address"¹⁶—that ritual dimension of the lyric whereby the speaking voice of the poem addresses the reader by addressing someone or something else—becomes even more complicated than usual in "The Stolen Child."

Where dips the rocky highland
 Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
 There lies a leafy island
 Where flapping herons wake
 The drowsy water rats;
 There we've hid our faery vats,
 Full of berries
 And of reddest stolen cherries.¹⁷

We, as readers attuned to the lyric "I," assume a singular speaker, and we may well have one. Initially, there is no reason to doubt that our fairy speaker is a singular representative addressing the child of the title on behalf of a group. But the following refrain, always rendered in italics, clearly represents a different kind of speech act, more akin to a chant than a chat:

*Come away, O human child!
 To the waters and the wild
 With a faery, hand in hand.
 For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.*¹⁸

Within the first stanza, the poet juxtaposes two different modes of address. The first is descriptive. It focuses on conveying the nature of fairy life in a manner that the speaker calculates will best entice the child. The second is imperative. It commands the child to follow and warns of the world's many sorrows. These complementary speech acts work toward the same goal for three stanzas. By contrast, the poem's final stanza reconfigures the act:

Away with us he's going,
 The solemn-eyed:
 He'll hear no more the lowing
 Of the calves on the warm hillside
 Or the kettle on the hob
 Sing peace into his breast,

Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal chest.¹⁹

Their abduction complete, the fairies shift their address from the boy to each other, from a monologue to a circular dialogue; nevertheless, we remain the fixed mark of their triangulated address.

Hand in hand with the Sidhe, the child moves into a world without weeping, even as we are left behind to mourn both his loss and what he has lost. The Sidhe do not simply steal the child from us; they steal the child's future and recount his losses for our benefit. What's worse, they do so within a fixed present. The child *is* going. His passage from our world to theirs remains locked in the present progressive tense, but the fairies' self-reflexive dialogue in the final stanza places his losses firmly in an immutable future tense: "He'll hear no more the lowing." This shift from present to future tense is as strange as the speakers' shift in address. The vast majority of lyric poetry does neither. Present tense is the particular province of the lyric, and the stable I/Thou address is equally dominant in the genre. When tense shift does occur, as Culler notes,²⁰ it usually entails a movement from the past tense into a poetic present, as in Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," in which the speaker pulls an anecdote into the frame of a present reverie. Conversely but similarly, lyric time may slip from present action to future recollection of that action, though this is far less common. Yeats enacts such a temporal shift in a later poem of grand historical trauma, "Leda and the Swan," in which the non-progressive present of the rape ("He holds her helpless") gives way to the interrogatory past tense only at the end ("Did she put on his knowledge with his power...?").²¹ The most present moment in "The Stolen Child," perhaps the most present moment in his corpus, is the moment of the child's departure: "Away with us he's going, / The Solemn-eyed." All the child's future losses described thereafter are contained in the progressive present, which (and this is the important point) is the tense of trauma.

"If all time is eternally present," T. S. Eliot tells us in *Burnt Norton*, "All time is unredeemable."²² Traumatic experience has a date, a time, and a place rooted in the past tense, but its consequences live in the progressive present. Loss, especially the loss of a child, does not happen once; it recurs; it is always happening, just as the child in Yeats's poem is always going away. Thus far, Caruth's Freudian model of structural trauma holds true enough, but, in asserting the perpetual present of "The Stolen Child," I am not interested in suggesting that Yeats *only* iterates structural trauma by illustrating language's inability to encompass the universal human experience of psychic absence. His poem involves both an acting-out and a working-through of the original traumatic event. The formal expression of trauma in the tense of the "The

Stolen Child”—its inherent abreactive quality, its imaginative recreation of a traumatic past experience in the distinct present of the lyric—makes it possible for both to occur at once. Time and speaker, however, represent only two of the lyric dimensions of Yeats's poem about loss. The poet, who functions neither as speaker, nor subject, nor any of the three presumptive audiences (the boy, the fairies themselves, and the reader), makes his presence felt in the poem's formal play with rhyme and rhythm.

Helen Vendler's groundbreaking book *Our Secret Discipline* (2007) draws attention to the fact that Yeats saw his job as a poet as the work of putting ideas into verse form. His obsession with the difficulty of this task finds voice in “Adam's Curse,” in which the speaker claims that the work of the poet, who may take hours to write a single line, is more grueling than that of the manual laborer. Although those with experience working on farms or construction sites may demur, once we understand the intensity of Yeats's investment in lyric form as the only mode suitable to the expression of our profoundest ideas, we can also begin to understand better his definition of poetry as an internal struggle: “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.”²³ This famous aphorism opens Section V of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918), Yeats's mostly unsuccessful attempt to lay out the mystical foundations of his poetry in prose for the benefit of his bewildered readers and reviewers. The poet, he tells us, makes poetry not to convince others of a cause or teach a lesson but to pursue a visionary ecstasy that can only come from a disciplined and unflinching encounter with reality.

Yeats immediately connects this artistic escape from self-deception and into ecstasy with one of life's cruelest realities, the death of children:

An old artist wrote to me of his wanderings by the quays of New York, and how he found there a woman nursing a sick child, and drew her story from her. She spoke, too, of other children who had died: a long tragic story. “I wanted to paint her,” he wrote, “if I denied myself any of the pain I could not believe in my own ecstasy.”²⁴

In “The Stolen Child,” Yeats's pursuit of ecstasy and quarrel with the reality and lingering trauma of his brother's death manifests itself in the interplay of content and form. The vast majority of Yeats's poetry, especially his early work, plays with rhythm and rhyme in regular, if not always conventional and predictable, ways: “The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes,” “The Indian Upon God,” “Down by the Salley Gardens,” “Who Goes with Fergus?,” the rose poems, the ballads, etc. “The Stolen Child” is different in respect to formal regularity. In fact, it is a poem of formal chaos in regard to stanza length, rhyme scheme, and rhythm. Within this chaos, we find again the poet, who implicitly warns

both receivers of the poem's triangulated address (i.e. the child and the reader) against following the deceptive Sidhe.

Yeats's fairies are not crass enough to speak in free verse. They seemingly aspire to regularity of traditional lyric form without attaining their end. This chaos playing at order manifests itself most noticeably in the length of the stanzas. Stanzas one and four are each twelve lines, but they bookend middle stanzas of fifteen and fourteen lines respectively. The effect is neither immediately noticeable, nor retrospectively accountable. Yeats easily could have balanced the poem into three, twelve-line stanzas. He chose not to. Likewise, he chose not to establish a regular rhyme scheme in stanza one only to distort it in the proceeding verse paragraphs. The center of the poem is the conventional, predictable abab rhyme scheme (highland/lake/Island/wake) that opens each stanza. That center fails to hold. In stanza one, it gives way to a series of couplets (rats/vats; fairies/cherries), which lead naturally enough into the italicized couplets of the chanted refrain (*child/wild/hand/understand*). That's all well and good. Were this pattern maintained through the rest of the poem, this rhyme scheme would feel conventional enough, a quatrain followed by couplets. We could inventively treat the stanzas as something like truncated hybrid sonnets. But things go awry in the second stanza. The opening abab quatrain (glosses/light/Rosses/night) gives way to the expected cc couplet (dances/glances), followed inexplicably by an extra b rhyme (flight) in the seventh line. Instead of returning to the couplet pattern following this seeming interruption or misstep, the succeeding four lines follow the rhyming logic of a Petrarchan quatrain. The next two stanzas continue this chaotic rhyming by distorting the original pattern from stanza one in new and jarring ways.

Aside from producing this erratic rhyme scheme, Yeats also gives us a poem of unpredictable rhythm. If the iamb is the regulatory rhythm of English speech, the Irish spirits can't seem to pull it off. The very first line ("Where dips the rocky highland") is a truncated iambic tetrameter that ends with an unresolved iamb. The next line ("Of Slewth Wood in the lake") substitutes a trochee in the middle foot ("Wood in"), becoming a syncopated iambic trimeter. This metric reduction finds its epitome in the key line of the final stanza and of the poem as a whole ("The solemn-eyed"). The fairies may be the poem's speakers, but the poet makes their speech a parody of human verse and punctuates the consequence of their theft by highlighting the boy's solemnity with those two iambic feet "The solemn-eyed." But why present the fairies as undisciplined artists in this manner? Since, as we have already learned from Culler, the lyric cannot be thought of in terms of fictive narrative, it must express trauma differently. Yeats's first lyric of loss achieves its sense of woundedness by establishing and then repeatedly violating its own formal pattern. What we have here is form as an extension of trauma.

In a 2013 lecture given at University College Dublin's Humanities Institute on the subject of contemporary trauma studies, Kali Tal remarked that she often describes trauma to her students in terms of narrative.²⁵ Throughout life, we draw on what she refers to as a "cultural library of coherent narratives"²⁶ about the past, present, and future of our own lives. Unless already distorted by depression or existential pessimism, our future narratives tend to follow predictable patterns of improvement leading to marginal gains in happiness. Only the deranged person gets married expecting that said marriage will end within five years because of a sudden brain aneurism or, much more likely, a car accident. The very possibility of living functionally in an unknown future demands that we construct more or less comforting narratives about the results of our present endeavors. Such future narratives are especially vulnerable to what Tal conceptualizes as "plot violations." Justifiably, we treat such violations as unbelievable; hence our inevitable resort to denial as a means of coping with sudden grief. "This can't be happening" is the predictable refrain of the traumatized. "When the scripts aren't there," Tal remarks, "and there's nothing to say, that's what trauma is."²⁷

The very idea of changeling abduction springs from the unbelievability of infant death. It provides a narrative supplement that offers to redress the traumatic plot violation of infant mortality. However, far from simply providing a superstitious explanation for a natural occurrence, the changeling myth affords access to a deeper, if not readily ameliorating, truth that Yeats saw at the heart of the Celtic imagination; the ancient beliefs that vivify Irish art and lend it its passion and melancholy are based on the assumption that material "reality" presents only one aspect of a larger reality that stretches beyond death and beyond the limits of language. Yeats makes this point clear in "The Celtic Element in Literature" (1903):

Certainly a thirst for unbounded emotion and a wild melancholy are troublesome things in the world, and do not make its life more easy or orderly, but it may be the arts are founded on the life beyond the world, and that they must cry in the ears of our penury until the world has been consumed and become a vision. [. . .] Matthew Arnold has said that if he were asked "where English got its turn for melancholy and its turn for natural magic," he "would answer with little doubt that it got much of its melancholy from a Celtic source, with no doubt at all that from a Celtic source is got nearly all its natural magic."

I will put this differently and say that literature dwindles to a mere chronicle of circumstance, or passionless phantasies, and passionless meditations, unless it is constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times.²⁸

Yeats's "Stolen Child" amounts to far more than a "chronicle of circumstance" because it refuses to treat the death of a child as yet another cruel reality of an absurd universe, a position he comes dangerously close to in his later poems about child mortality. This child is lost but not gone. He is with the Sidhe in a world without weeping. Moreover, he is immortalized in the poem itself.

Yeats did not stop thinking and writing about children. His poetic prayers for his children and his famous late poem "Among School Children" ("How can we know the dancer from the dance?") are iconic. However, he never returned to the idea of the changeling. Having corrected the plot violation of Robert's death by wedding it to Sligo folklore and weaving it into his abreactive lyric, Yeats depersonalized an early trauma and made it into lasting art. In one of the critical manifestos of literary Modernism, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), T. S. Eliot speaks to this process of depersonalization and provocatively calls poetry an escape from emotion. Poetry, Eliot insists, "is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things."²⁹ Yeats made such an escape. He wrote a depersonalized poem informed by the emotions of personal trauma. The solemn child, who drew ships with flags at half-mast when his brother died, grew up. The poet who wrote a poem about a stolen child did too. By the next time Yeats faced the death of a child in verse, he had distanced his poetry somewhat from its earlier folkloric preoccupations in favor of idiosyncratic occult Gnosticism. His next lyric of loss abandoned the historicized trauma-framing narrative of changeling abduction in order to ask the unanswerable questions at the heart of structural trauma. The result was a profound, in both senses of that word, failure.

II. A DEAD CHILD

Just over a year after Yeats's consequential first meeting with Maud Gonne in January of 1889, she gave birth to another man's son and named him Georges. Yeats didn't learn of the boy's existence until after the one-year-old child's death, presumably of meningitis, in August of 1891. Infatuated as he was, the young poet happily accepted Gonne's explanation that Georges was adopted. Strangely enough, Yeats relates in his *Memoirs* that, following Georges's death, Gonne claimed to have adopted the boy "some three years ago" (*Mem* 47). According to Yeats, she related the mathematically untenable story of Georges' birth and the tragedy of his sudden death in a confused letter: "Mixed into her incoherent grief were accounts of the death bird that had pecked at the nursery window the day when it [Georges] was taken ill, and how at sight of the bird she had brought doctor after doctor" (*Mem* 47). It should come as no surprise that Yeats fixates on Gonne's bird omen in relating the story of her loss, nor that

he recalls the one-year-old Georges as a three-year-old. Yeats's own brother, Robert, died just weeks before his third birthday. Yeats, whose mother had been so severely scarred by the deaths of two young children, would have had good reason to worry about Gonne. He also had ample reason to identify with her loss and seek to ameliorate it through verse, as he had done for himself in the composition of "The Stolen Child."

When Gonne, dressed in mourning, returned to Ireland some two months after her letter, she found herself quite accidentally on the boat carrying the body of Charles Stuart Parnell. Contrary to the opinion of many who witnessed her arrival, she did not wear black for the uncrowned King of Ireland, but for her lost child. In Gonne's own mind, she bore the weight of a profounder loss for herself and her nation. Before his death, Gonne had professed a hope that "Georgette" or "Georginet," as she affectionately called the boy, would one day be the king of a free Irish nation.³⁰ His loss was a blow. "Following her [Gonne's] arrival in Dublin," Yeats relates, "she went over again the details of the death—speech was a relief to her. She was plainly very ill."³¹ Aside from having temporarily lost the ability to speak French, a language almost as familiar as English to Gonne, the bereaved mother became addicted to chloroform, without which she could not sleep.

Yeats and AE attempted to comfort her with theosophical theories of the afterlife. One of AE's speculations about potential methods for directing the process of reincarnation supposedly led Gonne, upon returning to her home in France, to attempt to recapture Georges's soul by having sex with the boy's father, Lucien Millevoye, in the mausoleum she had erected for her son's remains. Theoretically, the child produced by this act would become a new container for the dead boy's spirit. The result was Gonne's daughter, Iseult. Yeats's account of Gonne's visit and what we know of her resulting necromantic exploit demonstrate the depth of her trauma and the lengths to which she was willing to go in order to correct the plot violation of Georges's death. These events also underscore the difficulties faced by those who lack the cultural, religious, or folk beliefs that help to bring such unspeakable pain within the circle of expected and, therefore, manageable loss. Notably, neither AE nor Yeats spoke to Gonne about changelings or fairy abductions. By 1891, Yeats was more prone to occult than folk explanations of the inexplicable. Gonne's attempt to reincarnate Georges seems to prove that, far from helping to frame and make sense of traumatic loss, such gnostic wisdom treats grief as something to be erased by magic. It also suggests that Yeats's failure to give artistic voice to Georges's death stemmed at least in part from his alienation from the types of traditional trauma-framing narratives that allowed him to create "The Stolen Child."

Yeats's first attempt to make sense of Gonne's loss for her came immediately on the heels of her visit to Dublin in the form of a poem focused on one of Yeats's favorite subjects, unrequited love. Not long before Georges's death, in what seems in retrospect like a transparent attempt on Gonne's end to demarcate the limits of their relationship, she had related a vision to Yeats. In some past life, they were brother and sister "on the edge of the Arabian desert," and they were sold into slavery (*Mem* 46). Misreading this revelation as a declaration of a special bond, Yeats rushed to do exactly what Gonne must have been trying to prevent; he proposed. She, of course, rejected the proposal, insisting that they must remain special friends, spiritual siblings, but no more.

Reflecting on this event in the aftermath of the death of Gonne's son, and keen to provide some amelioration of her suffering, he composed the poem "Cycles Ago." The speaker of the poem notes Gonne's dejection—"The sad rose colours of autumn with weariness mixed in your face"—and links it to his own loss of her love: "My world was fallen and over, for your dark soft eyes on it shone; A thousand years it had waited and now it is gone, it is gone."³² By the poem's conclusion, Gonne's grief at the loss of her child has become, at least in the speaker's eyes, intertwined with the larger grief of their recurring history of mingled glances and unrealized love:

Ah cycles ago did I meet you and mingle my gaze with your gaze,
They mingled a moment and parted and weariness fell on our days,
And we went alone on our journeys and envied the grass covered dead
For Love had gone by us unheeding, a crown of stars on his head.³³

Yeats's cyclical understanding of history and human fate, as expressed here, is essentially tragic in nature and offers little hope or comfort. Unlike "The Stolen Child," which transmutes loss into first-rate poetry and treats it as an historically rooted trauma that can be worked through with the aid of communally shared trauma-framing narratives, "Cycles Ago" implicitly embraces a structural notion of trauma by making each individual loss part of an essential absence at the heart of human existence. It literally treats trauma as something that cannot be meaningfully addressed because it recurs in ceaseless cycles. If you are torn from your beloved sister and sold into slavery in one life, it is only one manifestation of the essential trauma of human existence that will recur centuries later when your beloved rejects your marriage proposal just before watching her son die. The best we can do at the nadir of each cycle is envy the dead and move forward with the certain knowledge that our wounds will continue to reopen in new and devastating ways.

Yeats continued to play with the tragic notion of cyclical trauma until the end of his career, most notably rehearsing it in his last play, *Purgatory* (1938).

That is not to say that Yeats maintained such a position consistently. In *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, Jahan Ramazani warns against assuming consistent symmetry between Yeats's avowed beliefs about death and his greatest poems on the subject: "The system's displacement of death onto subsequent lives should not blinker our reading of the poems, since the strongest lyrics seldom ratify its view of death."³⁴ "Cycles Ago" is not one of Yeats's stronger lyrics in large part because it adheres to Yeats's system by treating all of human existence as, to an extent, an expression of cyclical, structural trauma, with death merely opening the door to yet more of the same. I like to think that Yeats's decision not to publish the poem, after going so far as to prepare the proofs for inclusion in *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1892), signals that he found this pallid vision ultimately unsatisfactory.

In 1893, almost two years after writing and rejecting "Cycles Ago," Yeats attempted once again to process Gonne's loss in verse. For what Ronald Schuchard calls "obvious personal reasons," Yeats omitted "On a Child's Death" from *Poems* (1895) and never published it (YA3 191). Without speculation, we can say that "On a Child's Death" meant a good deal to Yeats. In May of 1899, he inscribed it in a copy of *Poems* (1899), which he gifted to Lady Gregory, the one person with whom he had shared all the vicissitudes of his relationship with Gonne. Schuchard brought the poem to light in 1985; little has been made of it since. Yeats dated the inscription of "On a Child's Death," September 5, 1893, which Schuchard takes as a clear indication that the poem was originally composed to commemorate the second anniversary of Georges's death. The immediate sense of the poem is readily apparent. Yeats indicts the "shadowy armies of the dead" for greedily taking the child when their ranks already swell with kings and poets. Had they not done so, he suggests, "She" (Gonne) might have experienced a love capable of preserving her from the worldly, political tumult that Yeats so often blamed for separating her from his love. Since the poem is not widely known or readily available, I will reproduce it in full here:

You shadowy armies of the dead
 Why did you take the starlike head
 The faltering feet, the little hand?
 For purple kings are in your band
 And there the hearts of poets beat;
 Why did you take the faltering feet?
 She had much need of some fair thing
 To make love spread his quiet wing
 Above the tumult of her days
 And shut out foolish blame & praise.
 She has her squirrel & her birds
 But these have no sweet human words

And cannot call her by her name:
 Their love is but a woodland flames [sic].
 You wealthy armies of the dead
 Why did you take the starlike head. [sic] (YA3 153)

“On a Child’s Death” appears to have been somewhat hastily transcribed, but retroactively distinguishing error from artifice can be difficult. The title itself presents a quandary. Yeats clearly wrote it out in lower case letters as “on a child’s death.” Was the diminutive title a reflection of the subject? Was it an indication that the poem should be treated as an embryonic draft, an unfinished bit of occasional verse? Yeats was, of course, never a particularly good speller or careful penman. For example, the third-to-last line seems to read, “Their love is but a woodland flames”; presumably, the “s” at the end of flames was a mistake. Even more glaring than this is the use of a period instead of a question mark in the poem’s final line, though not glaring enough to merit comment by the BBC News, which reprinted the poem with the enigmatic period intact in a 2015 article by Hugh Schofield, salaciously titled “Ireland’s heroine who had sex in her baby’s tomb.”

Questions were essential to Yeats’s poetic technique. He ended more of his poems with questions than any of his contemporaries—thirty-nine poems in all if we include “On a Child’s Death.” Lee Zimmerman explores this tendency in his article “Singing Amid Uncertainty: Yeats’s Closing Questions” (1983). Seeking a unifying thread, Zimmerman posits that, unlike the impersonal poetics of Pound and Eliot, Yeats’s work consistently sought after deeply personal utterance within the bounds of fixed verse; simultaneously, he warns against assigning a rigid function to the formal practice of questioning:

Obviously they [closing questions] work in some similar and important ways but since the distinctive effects each achieves in context are equally important, they work in some very different ways as well. “Leda and the Swan,” for example, ends with an honest, if hopeless, inquiry, “Among School Children” with a rhetorical question, and “The Second Coming” with something in between.³⁵

To be sure, these three poems demonstrate a virtuosity of rhythm and rhyme unapproached by “On a Child’s Death,” but they can aid in conceptualizing the nature of its closing question. “Why did you take the starlike head?” feels like a literal question, more directly plaintive than the complex interrogatives found in later poems.

Taking up the issue of rhetorical questions in Yeats’s “Among School Children,” Paul de Man famously argues that any meaning we ascribe to the final lines—rhetorical or literal—is necessarily indeterminate. Although

reading the question literally ("Please tell me, how *can* I know the dancer from the dance?") requires far more interpretive gymnastics than we would need if we simply accepted the question as rhetorical; we cannot, de Man maintains, "make a valid decision as to which of the readings can be given priority over the other" because "none can exist in the other's absence."³⁶ Though we need not accept whole cloth de Man's deconstructive premises and conclusions about "valid" hermeneutic decisions, he is right to highlight the suggestion of ambiguity in the closing question of "Among School Children." "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" Yeats strongly implies that we can't, while simultaneously inviting us to engage in the kind of elaborate counter-reading produced by de Man. Likewise, in "The Second Coming" Yeats refuses to ask a straightforward question. "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" seems genuine enough until we remember that Yeats begins it by asserting "and now I know," thereby undercutting the supposed uncertainty of the query. As in "Among School Children," this question blurs the boundary between the rhetorical and the literal enough to invite reevaluation. We cannot be entirely sure whether we are being asked or told. What results is the kind of ambiguity we associate with great poetry in general and Yeats's oeuvre in particular.

Conversely, "On a Child's Death" asks an unambiguously literal question: "Why did you take the starlike head?" Why did death claim Gonne's boy? Yeats implies no answer, and his addressee, death, remains characteristically mute. All Yeats can do on Gonne's behalf is thrust forward the predictable question that must follow the "this can't be happening" of traumatic plot violation: "Why did this happen?" I daresay the closing question of "On a Child's Death" ranks among the more weighty in Yeats's corpus, if only because it highlights a particularly modern dilemma. With no mutually shared and believed-in narrative about what comes after death, how can we make sense of it as anything other than a senseless and endlessly recurring species trauma? Of course, the ordinary people of the west of Ireland whom Yeats so admired could have answered this question by relying on the trauma-framing narratives of their culture, both pagan and Catholic. Because he has consciously abjured such answers by subscribing to a trans-historical and trans-cultural occultism, Yeats is left trapped within Caruth's structural trauma, condemned to repeatedly act out instead of working through loss.

The resultant sense of helplessness in the face of universalized trauma extends into the form of "On a Child's Death" in a manner that produces a lyric far different from "The Stolen Child." Following our extended examination of formal chaos and complexity in "The Stolen Child," a poem written several years prior, "On a Child's Death" cannot help appearing less technically mature, or at least less technically daring. Its heroic couplets and monotonous iambic

tetrameter even employ the “monosyllabic rhyming-strings” that Vendler equates with Yeats’s earliest, immature work.³⁷ I would argue that the poem’s simple, predictable form acts as an appropriate extension of the simple yet profound question at its heart. As if to signal its knowledge of its own simplicity, the poem foregoes a predictable metrical syncopation early on, reserving it for later use. In keeping with the poetic tradition of punning on feet as both human and metrical, we ought to expect the rhetorical question in line six—“Why did you take the faltering feet?”—to contain a faltering foot. It does not. The lines of smooth iambic tetrameter are not broken until line eleven: “She has her squirrel & her birds.” The line still follows a rising rhythm, but the last two iambs are compressed into an anapest. Pets, even *Gonne’s* somewhat eccentric ones, are no replacement for a stolen child. The comfort they offer is itself a faltering and incomplete thing because, as Yeats points out, they lack the human capacity for speech (for poetry) and, by extension, love. Functioning as a source of reciprocal love in his mother’s life, “Georgette” might have turned her mind from the world of public action to a world of domestic affection—one that would, presumably, have some day included Yeats. A less generous reader might insinuate that Yeats mourns the child as a lost means to an end. Such a cynical reading misses the affection of the poem’s earlier lines, in which the poet represents the child via a series of heart-wrenching synecdoche: “the starlike head / The faltering feet, the little hand.” In writing this poem Yeats mourned the loss of a child who might have called him father and speaks the question that any father might fling into the void of such loss: why? Why take what was small and weak and full of promise when death has already undone so many of the great? Yeats had implied such a question before but never asked it openly.

This was, we know, not the first time Yeats mourned the death of a young boy in verse. Writing about Georges, he must have felt again the loss of his brother, Robert. In commemorating Robert’s death, Yeats had crafted a poem that worked through personal pain and trauma by aestheticizing them within the trauma-framing narrative of local Irish folklore. In doing so, he gave new form to ancient modes of making sense of the inexpressible loss that accompanies the death of a child. Strangely enough, as Yeats’s poetic powers waxed, his ability to engage artistically with this particular type of loss waned. We need not accept Schuchard’s speculation that Yeats thought the poem too personal for publication. For a poet willing to publish his deepest feeling of self-torturing and sometimes degrading romantic obsession, his fears of physical and sexual impotence, his regrets and shortcomings, his fears about death, Yeats seems the last person who would shy away from publishing personal loss, that is, if he could transmute such loss into meaningful art. The major difference between “The Stolen Child” and “On a Child’s Death” is that Yeats’s stolen child becomes *Gonne’s* dead child. The earlier poem denies death the

last word by placing the child outside of death's domain. This is similar to what Christians do when they bury their dead; they deny death's victory even while recognizing that a death has occurred. "On a Child's Death" makes death the ultimate reality, the void at the heart of human existence. It lacks the traditional meaning-making narratives of Irish religious and folk tradition as well as the "ennobling and heroic vision of death" that Rhamazani identifies in several of Yeats's later elegies.³⁸ Little wonder that Yeats sensed something wrong, incomplete, unpublishable in "On a Child's Death."

NOTES

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- 2 Crownshaw, *Afterlife*, 8.
- 3 Crownshaw, *Afterlife*, 8.
- 4 Crownshaw, *Afterlife*, 9.
- 5 Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, *Trauma: New Critical Idioms* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 73–74.
- 6 Deirdre Toomey, "Away," in *Yeats and Women*, ed. Deirdre Toomey (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 138.
- 7 Toomey, "Away," 153.
- 8 Edward Hirsch, "Wisdom and Power: Yeats and the Commonwealth of Faery," 8, nos. 1–2 (1986), 23.
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- 11 Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 64.
- 12 Toomey, "Away," 153.
- 13 W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, (New York: MacMillan, 1951), 18.
- 14 Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 19.
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- 16 Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 186.
- 17 Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 18.
- 18 Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 18.
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- 31 Balliet, "George Gonne and the Soul of the King of Ireland," 47–48.
- 32 W. B. Yeats, "Cycles Ago," in *The Early Poetry, Volume II—"The Wanderings of Oisín" and Other Poems to 1895: Manuscript Materials*, ed. George Bornstein (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 487.
- 33 Yeats, "Cycles Ago," 487.
- 34 Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 3.
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- 38 Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, 205.