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# “THEIR MONUMENT AND MINE”: MATERIAL ARTIFACTS, THOOR BALLYLEE, AND YEATS’S LATER POETRY

*David Holdeman*

By gazing at [a Tattva card] fixedly until an after-image was left on the retina, by imagining this as a doorway and passing through it, a train of subsequent imagery could be produced.

—Graham Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*<sup>1</sup>

## I

Those who write about Yeats’s spiritual or aesthetic beliefs inevitably pay close attention to the evolution of his poetry’s willingness to engage the material world. Standard narratives of his development—from T. S. Eliot onward—describe the elaboration of his early aversion to materiality and mimesis by a later antithetical impulse to move “downward” upon solidity (*CW4* 195) and, in Eliot’s words, “speak as a particular man.”<sup>2</sup> Such narratives emphasize that, after 1900, material phenomena in the poetry—Maud Gonne’s face and body, for example, or the poet’s own physical being and voice—assume more definite shape as Yeats hones the “harder” edge praised by Ezra Pound and becomes a modern (if not modernist) writer.<sup>3</sup> This essay considers an aspect of these occurrences not often isolated for inspection, namely, Yeats’s treatment of material artifacts: physical objects manufactured by human beings. Such artifacts constitute the category of materiality Yeats is most reluctant to represent in his early work and the last category he moves downward upon as he grows older. When finally coming to terms with things crafted by human hands, however, he produces such extraordinary results as “Sailing to Byzantium,” “Lapis Lazuli,” and the several major poems set in proximity to the most important artifact appearing in his work: Thoor Ballylee. Both the early absence and later, occasionally central, presence of material artifacts in Yeats’s poetry are among its defining features. Recognizing them as such opens new sight lines on the conflict between his lifelong inclination to ponder how the material culture of a house, family, or nation shapes its spiritual life and his equally long-standing fear that mimetic representations of material artifacts construct opaque surfaces rather than symbolic portals for ideal forms emanating from the Great Memory.

In what follows, I explore this claim by surveying the early work through *Responsibilities* (1914) and then focusing in greater detail on poems—especially the central sections of “Meditations in Time of Civil War”—that imagine Yeats’s tower as a furnished family residence, a place to found a “house” in both the literal and metonymic senses of the word. In his early poetry, Yeats mostly restricts material artifacts to the background as part of a general tendency to avoid picturing the accidental, ephemeral exteriors of the physical world. But after marrying Georgie Hyde Lees in 1917, acquisition of the items necessary for a larger household inspires him to foreground the polarity between his fascination with the power of material artifacts and his wariness about representing them. His most characteristic encounters with such artifacts involve visionary attempts to dissolve their surfaces, so that what first appear as static physical objects begin to function like the symbolically decorated Tattva cards manufactured by members of the occult Order of the Golden Dawn: as doorways for seeing and passing through toward eternal patterns. Particularly in “Meditations,” however, Yeats’s commitment to the transparency of material artifacts complicates his efforts to establish the tower as a solid foundation for his own familial house. In refusing to rest his eyes on the surfaces of Thoor Ballylee, he relinquishes the ability to imagine it as a particular built environment to be shared with other unique, bodied individuals. Previous critics have rightly viewed the sequence as dramatizing its speaker’s struggle to free himself from ideological delusion and find a measure of liberating insight. I will emphasize the extent to which the achievement of such “half-read wisdom” requires the sacrifice of intimate contact with his material surroundings and his family, a sacrifice suggesting strong commonalities between the “ageing man” of “Meditations” and the “growing boy” of the early work (*CW1* 206).

## II

As multiple biographies have demonstrated, Yeats’s peripatetic childhood made him keenly sensitive to the beautiful or ugly influences of shifting physical surroundings ranging from the natural splendors of Sligo to the Pre-Raphaelite ornamentation of Bedford Park to the encroaching shabbiness endured at various Dublin and London residences as his family’s fortunes dwindled.<sup>4</sup> His prose confirms that, even as a very young man, he paid constant attention to the features of his material environment and habitually analyzed them in the light of his occult beliefs and of aesthetic and political ideals derived from John Ruskin and William Morris. His draft autobiography opens by describing a physically violent quarrel with his father provoked by his devotion to Ruskin. At that time – the late 1880s – “everything had become to [me] a form of ethics, and as I walked the streets I used to believe that I could define exactly the bad passion

or moral vacancy that had created, after centuries, every detail of architectural ugliness" (*Mem* 19). Like Ruskin, he believed that "commerce and manufacture had made the world ugly," but his aversion for ugly objects was not limited to mass-marketed or mass-produced commodities (*Mem* 124). His crucial 1901 essay "Magic" stresses his belief in magical correspondences between all physical embodiments and their spiritual essences, admitting with some regret that this conviction forces him "to see or to imagine, in men and women, in houses, in handicrafts, in nearly all sights and sounds, a certain evil, a certain ugliness" (*CW* 425). Michael, the protagonist of his unfinished autobiographical novel, *The Speckled Bird* (c. 1902), is preoccupied with design, both what it reveals about lurking evil and how its reform may summon beneficial spirits to aid human beings in altering society for the better. He learns from Maclagan (a character based on MacGregor Mathers, an early leader of the Golden Dawn) that "religious emotion must turn from the cloister to the field." Otherwise, "it leaves the field to the devil, who covers it with filthy towns and factories" (*SB* 17). Michael concludes that his purpose must be "to remake everything in a more ancient pattern . . . [beginning with] one's speech and one's dress and one's house" (*SB* 42).<sup>5</sup> He trusts that the example set by beautiful design—and the supernatural forces it magically evokes—will eventually lead to the destruction of filthy cities and the creation of a better material and spiritual culture.

This theory of magic's relationship to history resembles the scheme that emerges in Yeats's earlier story, "Rosa Alchemica" (first published in 1896), with one crucial difference: there, divine powers are summoned by imagining the beautiful "semblance of a living being" and not through the design and manufacture of material artifacts (*SRV* 142).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, achieving contact with a higher spiritual reality requires the unnamed narrator of "Rosa Alchemica" to abandon the symbolically potent tapestries, paintings, bronzes, and books of his newly decorated Dublin rooms and travel west with his shabbily-clad friend, Michael Robartes, to an alchemical temple where all that seems finely ornamented turns out to be "roughly painted" and "half-finished" once the spell of ceremonial magic has broken (*SRV* 148). It is telling that Yeats's attempt to craft a narrative hinging upon the insufficiency of even beautiful artifacts produced what many regard as his most successful work of prose fiction, whereas the contrary effort to imagine a protagonist making good use of such artifacts in aid of his magical quest ended in failure.<sup>7</sup> One of the oddities of *The Speckled Bird* is that the range of Michael's design interests remains curiously narrow, given his ambitions and his creator's own exposure to the multifaceted output of Morris, who involved himself in the making of houses, stained glass, furniture, housewares, tiles, wallpaper, printed and woven textiles, and hand-printed books.<sup>8</sup> Michael, by contrast, demonstrates no specific interest in any handicrafts other than "enamels and tapestries" (*SB* 61). His avowed purpose

may be to leave the cloister and “remake everything” in the larger world, but he devotes his energy to the creation of new rituals for cloistered ceremonial magic like that practiced in the Golden Dawn (and also, hypothetically, in the Celtic Mystical Order Yeats aspired to establish in collaboration with Gonne).<sup>9</sup> In one early draft, Michael works feverishly to see that symbolic diagrams based on legends of the Grail are “changed into emblematic curtains and tablets,” going so far as to consult “a woman who had some little reputation for design” and who has made “a few designs for chintzes and wall-paper that were really beautiful” (*SB* 163). But he never imagines specifically how his magical beliefs might influence the reinvention of whole rooms, houses, or cities, and even before his limited plans can be realized he quarrels with Maclagan (called Dunn in the early draft), who prefers “cold and abstract symbols” to “poetic and romantic images of knights and ladies and woods and creatures of the woods” (*SB* 163). Just as Yeats interested himself in rural life but struggled in his early drama to write credible peasant dialogue, he struggled in his early fiction to grapple convincingly with his interest in reforming modernity’s material culture.

As for his early poetry — there, he largely evaded the issue, directing attention to material artifacts even less often than to physical objects generally, and almost never describing them in concrete detail. Of the seventy-six poems ultimately collected in “Crossways,” “The Rose,” and *The Wind Among the Reeds*—poems comprising Yeats’s considered distillation of his lyric output from the 1880s and 1890s—twenty make no reference to any object that might be imagined as manufactured by a human being (see “The White Birds” or “The Hosting of the Sidhe” for examples). About forty make at most one or two such references, often as part of otherworldly metaphors in which the idea of a human maker is all but elided (e.g., the “pale thrones” occupied by the stars in “The Sad Shepherd” [*CW1* 9] or the “axle” that “keeps the stars in their round” in “He hears the Cry of the Sedge” [*CW1* 67]). Artifacts (or metaphorical references to them) occur somewhat more frequently in the remaining lyrics, where they are mostly conventional, unobtrusive, and fall into two categories: rustic objects appropriate to folk ballads (kettles, chests, candles, etc.) or heroic implements associated with ancient Ireland (crowns, torcs, battle-cars, and the like). Nearly all of the visual images suggested by both types of references would be at home in the background of a Pre-Raphaelite painting. Only three poems—“The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes,” “The Cap and Bells,” and “He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven”—derive their principal subject matter from references to material artifacts, and in each case the reference is metaphorical. The heavenly cloths in the last of these lyrics and the “old tympan” with “kind wires . . . torn and still” in “The Madness of King Goll” are among the only artifacts in the early poetry described with more than a single adjective or

detail (*CWI* 17–18). Even “The Lover tells of the Rose in his Heart”—a poem purporting to explain why “The wrong of unshapely things is a wrong too great to be told”—emphasizes unshapely natural phenomena and mentions only a single human-made item: a “lumbering cart” comprehended not as a sharply defined, palpable object but rather through the awkwardness of its movement and its offensive “creak,” a function less of its intrinsic physical character than of the poet’s perceptions (*CWI* 56).

None of this is terribly difficult to explain. As an active member of the Golden Dawn and avid practitioner of ceremonial magic, the young occultist who wrote these poems was committed to ascending the cabalistic Tree of Life out of the world of matter toward higher realms of spirit, and he saw poetry, poetic symbols in particular, as a means of summoning visions and spirits to aid him in this quest.<sup>10</sup> Because symbols gained their authority through association with forms and patterns inscribed deeply in the Great Mind and Memory, they were far more likely to derive from permanent cosmic or natural cycles—the repeating movements of stars, sun, moon, wind, wave, and migratory birds—than from the static, impermanent, culturally-specific fabrications of human makers. The poet’s Ruskin and Morris-inspired antipathy to mass production and commerce, activities closely linked by him and other Irish nationalists to British imperialism, made him particularly hostile to the characteristic outputs of his own time and place. For him, only the most traditional, nonparticularized artifacts—rood, crown, sword, embroidered cloth—could hope to serve as symbols or to avoid the pitfalls of literary realism, which misguidedly dispersed attention among the patternless detritus of transient modern exteriors. Still, it remained essential not to suggest an ultimately unbridgeable divide between divine creation and human making: occasional deployment of material artifacts as vehicles in metaphors describing eternal phenomena—the pale thrones of the stars or the heavens’ embroidered cloths—allowed the early poetry to suggest the potential for harmony between human creativity and the larger cosmos.

After the turn of the century, some categories of physical phenomena began to be outlined in the poetry with greater detail and particularity as Yeats famously altered his subject matter, diction, syntax, and rhythms to facilitate a shift in his vision toward real people and places. Eliot singles out “The Folly of being Comforted” and “Adam’s Curse”—two poems from *In the Seven Woods* (1903)—as turning points.<sup>11</sup> An early draft of the first not only depicts “threads of grey” in the beloved’s hair but also “crows feet” (later revised more decorously to “little shadows”) “round about her eyes” (*VP* 199).<sup>12</sup> The second climaxes in a meticulous account of a heavenly body framed by a conversation among three actual people “at one summer’s end”:

And in the trembling blue-green of the sky  
 A moon, worn as if it had been a shell  
 Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell  
 About the stars and broke in days and years. (*CWI* 81)

But the poet's new determination to portray natural settings—as well as human bodies and voices—with greater particularity was not accompanied by equally significant changes in his representation of material artifacts. “Adam’s Curse,” which takes human labor as its theme, valorizes evanescent words and gestures, dismissing the only artifacts it mentions—the “beautiful old books” once used by courteous lovers—as empty of lasting potency. Earlier, Yeats’s aptitude for summoning magic by imagining “the semblance of a living being” (in “Rosa Alchemica”) had been greater than his mastery of the premise that modernity’s spiritual life might be enhanced through reformation of its material culture (in *The Speckled Bird*). Now, similarly, he found it easier to delineate the crow’s feet around his beloved’s eyes—contrasting the flaws of her aging body to the undiminished “nobleness” of her soul—than to describe anything she might wear, or sit on, or hold in her hands (*CWI* 78). For the next fifteen years material artifacts in the poetry continue to be scarce; nonparticularized; restricted to the background; and mostly drawn from the familiar prop room of crowns, cups, swords, stringed instruments, looking glasses, golden cradles, helmets of silver, and so forth.

Still, there are a few early portents of change. “In the Seven Woods,” for example, is notable as the first of Yeats’s lyrics to evoke the material culture of a modern city by referencing actual artifacts: the “paper flowers [hung] from post to post” as part of Dublin’s celebration of King Edward VII’s coronation (*CWI* 77). Though more tangible than the allegorical “painted toy” encountered in “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” (*CWI* 7), these artificial flowers temporarily strung between artificial lights likewise embody superficial decoration masking grey, unsatisfying truths (Dublin’s status as a modern city, its streets demarcated by lampposts; and its subordination to “new commonness / Upon the throne”). The point, however, is not to itemize an urban landscape, but to establish a quickly sketched contrast to the environs of Coole. Establishing a precedent followed in subsequent Coole-related lyrics, Yeats tells us next to nothing about the human-made features of the estate, stressing instead its flora, fauna, and openness to the eternal light of the stars. The house itself remains unmentioned. The only acknowledgments of human intervention in the landscape are a garden (inferred from the presence of “garden bees”) and the fact that the woods have been numbered and named.

By the time we reach *Responsibilities* (1914) we find that, although the sheer quantity of allusions to material artifacts has not noticeably increased, their

quality has more conspicuously altered. Traditional or heroic objects typical of the earlier work continue to accrue in modest numbers. But alongside such references we now more frequently confront artifacts similar to the posts and paper flowers of "In the Seven Woods"—objects more indecorous or sullied than previously seen in Yeats's poetry: a ragged hat, a greasy till, a hangman's rope, a post defiled by dogs.<sup>13</sup> We also encounter a tendency that will strengthen in the later work, a tendency to devote sustained attention to significant material artifacts without naming them or allowing them to take definite shape. The most important artifacts in *Responsibilities*—the Lane paintings—are never physically described or overtly identified as paintings within the text of a poem. Instead, they are referred to in "To a Wealthy Man who promised a second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures" as "things it were a pride to give" (CW1 107). "To a Shade" employs a similar strategy:

A man

Of your own passionate serving kind who had brought  
 In his full hands what, had they only known,  
 Had given their children's children loftier thought,  
 Sweeter emotion, working in their veins  
 Like gentle blood, has been driven from the place[.](CW1 110)

Such caginess allows the poem to sidestep the paintings' status as valuable objects with particular provenances and physical characteristics and instead to focus on their use in providing access to lofty ideals. From *Responsibilities* onward, a dichotomy in Yeats's deployment of his descriptive powers becomes increasingly evident. When envisioning images emanating downward from the Great Memory, he strives to make them vivid and definite to the mind's eye (as in "The Magi" or "The Second Coming"). Conversely, when his starting points for contemplation are significant material artifacts, he declines to particularize them—or indeed dramatizes their depicularization—so that they come to function as symbolic portals rather than surfaces arresting our gaze. Only artifacts that can be (or have been) so used are worth contemplating, and for such use to occur, contemplation must not get stuck on outward description. The suggestion in "To a Shade" is that the Lane paintings might have served to mediate between the "gaunt" exteriors of Dublin's contemporary material reality and the spiritual realm for which the shade of Parnell serves as a possible emissary. Loss of the paintings has, for the time, forestalled productive congress between these two worlds.

William Gorski contends that, although "adamantly opposed [to] the practice of physical alchemy"—the literal attempt to brew an elixir or



magically transform metals—the “metaphysical plot-line” of spiritual alchemy was always central to Yeats’s occult beliefs.<sup>14</sup> By 1909, however, evidence from the poet’s journal suggests that “the alchemical thrust is reversing. The idea of spiritual force descending into the body and into matter—a movement into the ‘below’—[is gaining] primacy over the Symbolist ascension into the world of essences” prioritized in earlier texts such as “Rosa Alchemica.”<sup>15</sup> This reversal helps to explain the greater particularity of language and subject matter praised by Eliot in the post-1900 poetry. It is also congruent with Rob Doggett’s claim that, by the 1910s, the poet was learning to think in more practical, hard-headed terms about his relationship to the capitalist marketplace.<sup>16</sup> Building on Doggett’s claim, I argue elsewhere that, by the time of *Responsibilities*, Yeats’s poetry was evincing greater pragmatism in what it expressed or implied about the making and selling of goods.<sup>17</sup> He was no longer quite so prone to assume that “commerce and manufacture had made the world ugly.” This altered stance may have derived not only from shifts in his occult thinking but also from his experiences as a collaborator in the making of such tangible, saleable products as plays staged at the Abbey Theatre or fine-press books printed by his sister, E. C. Yeats, at the Dun Emer (later Cuala) Press, founded in 1902. In any case, the verbal and material texts of both the 1914 Cuala and 1916 Macmillan editions of *Responsibilities* suggest that the value of commodities—the poet’s own books in particular—derive not only from their inherent physical properties and the methods of their manufacture and sale but also from their distribution and use. The untitled preliminary lyric known as “Pardon, Old Fathers,” for example, praises merchant ancestors whose commercial and shipping activities linked Ireland to the wider world, bypassing Britain (*CWI* 101). Despite this poem’s ostensible request for pardon, moreover, it proudly exhibits the poet’s own book as proof of his fidelity to his forefathers’ example (reversing the sad dismissal of books-as-objects in “Adam’s Curse”). This gesture is especially striking in the Macmillan edition, the first of Yeats’s poetic volumes to be distributed by a major global publisher (Wade 122–23). With an emblematic design by T. Sturge Moore featuring a hawk, well, and withered tree on its cover—and a listing of its publisher’s offices in London, Bombay, Calcutta, Melbourne, New York, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Atlanta, San Francisco, and Toronto on an early flyleaf—the material text of Macmillan’s volume celebrates a comfortable merger of symbolism with mass production and marketing.<sup>18</sup> Such softenings of Yeats’s early inclination to see ugliness and evil in “houses . . . handicrafts . . . [and] nearly all sights and sounds” opened the way for greater engagement with material artifacts in subsequent poetic collections.

## III

The making and selling of commodities were not the only things Yeats had begun to think about more pragmatically by this stage: marriage and family life were others. The story of his multiple rejected proposals to Maud and Iseult Gonne and eventual marriage in October 1917 to “serviceable” Georgie Hyde Lees has been told many times and need not be repeated here.<sup>19</sup> What remains in need of consideration are the effects that setting up house with George had on the presence of material artifacts in the poetry and the roles they played in poetic accounts of his domestic life. Up to now, his personal possessions had been few. His London rooms housed some cherished treasures received as gifts—artwork, his Kelmscott Chaucer, and a leather armchair, for example—but his long years of bachelorhood had been characterized mostly by lack of money and constant travel from London to temporary quarters in Dublin or at Coole.<sup>20</sup> Marriage to a woman with an income allowed, and required, the acquisition of new residences and furnishings, not only at Thoor Ballylee, purchased seven months before the marriage and already under renovation, but also at such addresses as 4 Broad Street, Oxford (October 1919); 82 Merrion Square, Dublin (March 1922); 42 Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin (July 1928); and Riversdale, Rathfarnham, Dublin (July 1932). As Ann Saddlemeyer documents in her biography of George, the Yeatses were nearly as meticulous in selecting and furnishing these urban homes as they were in restoring their remote Galway idyll. The house in Oxford, for example, featured “floors, stairs, and dark oak panels brightened by George with many cushions and curtains—orange in the sitting room, cherry red in the landing and hall windows, plum-coloured in the dining room against whitewashed walls, deep blue Morris hangings in the guest bedroom.”<sup>21</sup> The bedroom furniture was “modern oak,” but a “Burmese gong summoned them to meals, where they dined off unpatterned, dark red china set on a long refectory table covered only by a narrow strip of brilliant Chinese embroidery.”<sup>22</sup> Catalogues for two major sales of Yeats family items in 2017 provide further evidence of the care with which the couple gradually accumulated fine furniture and housewares (as well as books, manuscripts, and artwork).<sup>23</sup>

Surrounding himself with so many newly acquired possessions, without confronting the domain of material artifacts more directly in his poetry, would have been the height of inconsistency for a writer who, despite his reservations about depicting artifacts realistically, was strongly inclined from late adolescence onward to believe that the material and spiritual lives of individuals and social units exert reciprocal shaping influence. This belief had by no means diminished in 1917. Indeed, it would soon produce his famous praise in *A Vision* (1925) for the unity of “religious, aesthetic and practical life”

in early Byzantium, where those who “made building, picture, pattern, metal work of rail and lamp” created “but a single image” proclaiming “their invisible master” (*CW13* 159).<sup>24</sup> It was one thing to avoid scrutiny of the artifacts exerting influence on his own life when his poetry summoned ethereal moods associated with rural or ancient Ireland and his personal belongings were few. It was quite another after not only beginning to write as a “particular man” but also (with George) acquiring multiple residences stocked with cushions, curtains, furniture, and china. In response, Yeats drew on the emergent attitudes and techniques observed in *Responsibilities*, where commodities such as books and paintings are evoked without calling attention to their distinctive physical attributes and valued pragmatically according to their use in accessing hidden spiritual presences. He also used Thoor Ballylee to establish a poetic and real-world space where he could avoid “steam rollers” (and other objects of the sort he told Virginia Woolf were too modern to be symbols) and instead encounter only traditional artifacts like those unobtrusively present in his earlier work.<sup>25</sup> In this sheltered space, the opposition between his fascination with and fear of material artifacts ceased to be a contradiction tucked away in the background of his poetry and emerged instead as a central preoccupation. He told Maud Gonne that, like Michael in *The Speckled Bird*, he “dream[ed] of making a house that may encourage people to avoid ugly manufactured things” (*G-YL* 393). Unlike Michael, however, he actually made the house and—in his tower poems—invited readers to visit.

Such invitations first appear in *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), where the second poem, “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” enjoys the distinction of being the first of Yeats’s collected lyrics to be set at Thoor Ballylee. But although the Gregory elegy implies that the “lovely intricacies of a house” (*CW1* 134) cultivate the welfare of the family inside it, this dynamic’s application to the tower itself does not receive extended consideration until near the end of the 1919 volume, where “A Prayer on going into my House” memorializes the act of taking full possession of the poet’s newly restored summer home:

God grant a blessing on this tower and cottage  
 And on my heirs, if all remain unspoiled,  
 No table or chair or stool not simple enough  
 For shepherd lads in Galilee; and grant  
 That I myself for portions of the year  
 May handle nothing and set eyes on nothing  
 But what the great and passionate have used  
 Throughout so many varying centuries  
 We take it for the norm; yet should I dream  
 Sinbad the sailor’s brought a painted chest,  
 Or image, from beyond the Loadstone Mountain,

That dream is a norm; and should some limb of the devil  
 Destroy the view by cutting down an ash  
 That shades the road, or setting up a cottage  
 Planned in a government office, shorten his life,  
 Manacle his soul upon the Red Sea bottom. (*CW1* 162–63)

Tower and cottage and heirs will be divinely blessed provided that all three “remain unspoiled.” And while the precise nature of this blessing remains unspecified—to be unspoiled is its precondition rather than its consequence—the type of spoiling Yeats has in mind is clear enough. Wear and tear due to weather and aging appear not to worry him. Instead, he fears that Thoor Ballylee may be marred by heirs who acquire household furnishings unbecoming its pastoral simplicity, and that his heirs in turn may be spiritually injured by handling and beholding objects reflecting and reinforcing poor aesthetic choices. Children may spoil houses and houses children.

The poem goes to great lengths to circumvent concrete description of Thoor Ballylee or its contents. Its opening line employs present tense and the demonstrative adjective “this” to suggest that tower and cottage need only be pointed at. Later, the standards set for both the tower’s humblest and most sumptuous furnishings are demarcated in purely negative terms: no tables or chairs or stools “not simple enough” for peasants whose innocence made them receptive to revelation; and “nothing” else but what passionate aristocrats have used for centuries.<sup>26</sup> Everything must correspond to “the norm,” but the norm is not positively defined or exemplified specifically. To offer a positive definition or specific examples would be to privilege one individual’s imagination and the material culture of a particular time and place, and thus to lose contact with collectively conceived, slowly evolving archetypes that transcend “many varying centuries,” emanating from the Great Memory and underpinning the communal “We” of line 9. By alluding to Sinbad’s sixth voyage, during which the sailor nearly perishes after his ship hits a loadstone mountain but nevertheless returns to Baghdad with chests of priceless treasure, the poem emphasizes that even our imagined conceptions of material artifacts must reinforce the collective, time-honored, constantly-renewing norm lest they distance us from God.

These ends are not easily achieved. Although the poet necessarily enjoys greater control of himself than of his possible future heirs, even he can only come to Thoor Ballylee “for portions of the year.” Life will often require exposure to degrading material environments like that depicted in the 1937 introduction for the never-published “Dublin Edition” of his works, where Yeats portrays himself standing on Dublin’s O’Connell Bridge, surrounded by “that discordant architecture, all those electric signs, where modern heterogeneity has taken

physical form,” and feeling in response “a vague hatred” surging “up out of [his] own dark” (*CL5* 215). In “A Prayer on going into my House,” such hatred expresses itself in the form of a curse directed not at heirs who may one day bring inappropriate artifacts into the tower but rather at outsiders who may diminish its sheltered separation from the road leading back to modern heterogeneity or, worse, build another house nearby with physical features and occupants exemplifying the empty values of middle-class bureaucracy. The poem derives a jocular tone from the blustering spontaneity of its blank verse and enjambed, swift-moving syntax; from the colloquial offhandedness of expressions like “some limb of the devil”; and from the hyperbolic bravado of its wish that the offending bureaucrat may rot with Pharaoh’s army on the Red Sea floor. But it also dramatizes palpable anxiety. The poet wishes to influence his heirs and their material environment, but his commitment to shared, collaboratively-evolving norms means that (like Moses) he mainly tells them what not to do. Like Michael in *The Speckled Bird*, he yearns for a spiritually-purposed material culture but refuses to offer detailed suggestions for realizing one.

The collected poetry’s fullest engagement with the material culture of Yeats’s own domestic life occurs in *The Tower* (1928), especially in sections II–IV of the acclaimed seven-part sequence drafted in 1922, “Meditations in Time of Civil War.” Compelling critical accounts of the sequence as a whole typically posit an implied narrative in which the poet painfully reappraises long-standing beliefs and impulses in response to the violence of the Irish Civil War. For Daniel Harris, Yeats struggles “to dismiss the personal myth of vicarious participation in a rich abundance created by [the Anglo-Irish]” in order to “[accept] the responsibility of becoming his own hero.”<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Cullingford, by contrast, emphasizes the poet’s “reconsideration . . . of his early endorsement of violent nationalism.”<sup>28</sup> Marjorie Howes sees “Meditations” as “[enacting] a recognition of internal corruption and fragmentation [in the Anglo-Irish ‘nation’], structured as a crisis of reproductive sexuality,” while Rob Doggett depicts Yeats as working to transcend “historiographic desire,” the impulse to use history to stabilize the present.<sup>29</sup> I will focus more literally on the striking paradox of the sequence’s simultaneous preoccupation with, on the one hand, the founding and furnishing of a new household, and on the other, the dread and embrace of solipsism. It might be supposed that sharing a carefully curated, symbolic physical space with one’s wife and children—deliberately removed from the maddening imperfections of the wider world—would foster intense familial intimacy. Perhaps in real life it did: letters written at Thoor Ballylee while Yeats was writing “Meditations” in the summer of 1922 combine reports of local civil war disturbances with idyllic descriptions of sitting “all day in our garden, George gardening—I writing and Michael under a tree asleep” (*L* 688). But whatever deep closeness the real-life Yeats forged with George

during the early years of their marriage, the poetic persona who describes his new domestic environment in "Meditations" never sets eyes on or addresses her. He claims in section IV, "My Descendants," to have chosen Thoor Ballylee "For an old neighbour's friendship" and to have "decked and altered it for a girl's love," but neither friend nor girl appear in the poems. His word choices—his recurrent use of "my" in section titles; his claim to have acted "for" rather than "with" friend and girl; his conspicuous avoidance of "our" when declaring the tower "their monument and mine"—insist on distance from these others (CW1 204). His young children remain similarly distanced, imagined only as future beings, "a woman and a man" whom he will "leave . . . behind" (CW1 203). If, as Nicholas Grene suggests, "It is only in Thoor Ballylee that Yeats is to be found fully at home in his poems," he is not to be found at home there with other members of his family in the "Meditations" sequence.<sup>30</sup> The only contemporaries who intrude on his musings are the "affable Irregular" and "brown Lieutenant" of section V, "The Road at My Door" (CW1 204), and the "dead young soldier in his blood" "trundled down the road" in section VI, "The Stare's Nest by My Window" (CW1 205).

An impulse to close himself off self-protectively in response to traumatic violence may contribute to the poet's refusal to portray himself interacting with the tower's other inhabitants in "Meditations." More generally, there is his longstanding and much analyzed tendency—going back at least as far as "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time"—to vacillate between dread of solipsism and fear of yielding autonomy. For readers of *The Tower* inclined to see the character Hanrahan as a proxy for his creator, this tendency is brought memorably into focus in the title poem's second section, which hints that the failure of the poet's courtship of Maud Gonne was caused not by her rejection of him but rather through his having

turned aside

From a great labyrinth out of pride,  
 Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought  
 Or anything called conscience once[.] (CW1 197)<sup>31</sup>

In "Meditations," Yeats continues to turn aside, not just from Maud (the "woman lost") or even George (the "woman won"), but also from the tower and its furnishings (CW1 197). Unlike the early version of himself fictionalized in *The Speckled Bird*, the poet of "Meditations" has done more than fantasize about "remak[ing] everything . . . [beginning with] one's speech and one's dress and one's house" (SB 42). He has renovated a real tower, carefully selected its fixtures, and peopled it with a family. But although he is now more willing to contemplate both real people and real artifacts in his poetry, such encounters

remain evanescent, in part because of his continuing commitment to a form of vision that looks through the surfaces of material artifacts to the timeless patterns they obscure. Grene, in discussing “To be carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee,” describes as “remarkable” the fact that “even at the dedicatory moment of the tower’s initiation as the couple’s home, [Yeats] imagines it returned to ruin with nothing remaining but . . . fragmentary commemorative inscription.” A hint of this “pre-memorializing Yeatsian mode,” as Grene calls it, is evident also in “A Prayer on going into my House,” and it strongly informs “Meditations,” accompanied by its logical corollary: an unwillingness to depict present-time shared experience within a particularized built environment.<sup>32</sup> To describe such an environment mimetically, with realistic attention to detail, is to permit and require others to share one’s experience of it. For Yeats, this is as bad as weighing one’s children down with inherited material possessions, not only because depictions of ephemeral manufactured surfaces obscure eternal depths but also because mimesis transforms readers into passive recipients of someone else’s vision. As in “A Prayer,” the Yeats of “Meditations” avoids burdening his family—and his readers—with prescriptively specific description of the material or spiritual realities he wishes them to share or inherit, offering instead “emblems of adversity” to be interpreted independently (*CWI* 202). But his respect for his and their autonomy—and desire for all concerned to remain dedicated to “Soul’s beauty”—requires him to remain aloof (*CWI* 203). At key points in the sequence, worry that he may again be denying himself day-to-day intimacy with others because of “some silly over-subtle thought” troubles his solitary reveries (*CWI* 197).

“Meditations in Time of Civil War” begins not at Thoor Ballylee but with deliberation on the origin and function of “Ancestral Houses,” hundreds of which were burned in Ireland during the War of Independence and Civil War (or fell derelict, like Coole, during the decades before and after those events). “Ancestral Houses” accords perfectly with Yeats’s lifelong refusal to value material artifacts as unique, physical objects. It considers rich estates as a class, eschewing details definitely associated with any particular house. Its first four stanzas focus on outdoor lawns, planted hills, fountains, terraces, and graveled garden paths: liminal zones where human manufacture merges with the natural. The fifth stanza turns indoors, but the emphasis remains on movement, on “pacing to and fro on polished floors / Amid great chambers and long galleries” (*CWI* 201). This is an environment to be moved through (and, ideally, moved by), not a static monument to be weighed and measured. One cannot help but notice, however, both the loneliness and purposelessness of the poem’s implied movement. The poet’s imagination encounters no other contemporary being as it scans the planted horizon, takes a slipped walk through the garden, comes through the escutcheoned doors, and paces

through the galleries. About the character of “the great-grandson” he can only speculate (*CWI* 200). Where is the family whom such artifacts should be cultivating or be cultivated by? The house’s emptiness evokes the larger Anglo-Irish reproductive crisis Howes sees Yeats as confronting. But although the sequence’s next two poems draw a stark contrast between the enervating decadence of rich estates where “glory” is “inherited” and the harshly invigorating local environment of the poet’s own newly founded house, Thoor Ballylee remains in these poems just as void of other people as the empty shell wandered here (*CWI* 200).

The title of section II, “My House,” promises an itemized tour. But the interior actually disclosed is that of the poet’s mind in the solitary act of transforming himself and his material surroundings into “emblems of adversity” (*CWI* 202). Doggett views this section as placing self-conscious emphasis upon “the drive to graft an unstable present upon a more stable past, and the regressive practical effects of attempting to do so.”<sup>33</sup> To me, the emphasis falls more fundamentally on an effort to wake up from the nightmare of history by dissolving both present and past into eternity. In the lengthy sentence fragment with which the poem opens, the absence of a main verb linking subject to object allows the poet to avoid specifying both his spatial and temporal relationship to the things he pictures:

An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,  
 A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,  
 An acre of stony ground,  
 Where the symbolic rose can break in flower,  
 Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable,  
 The sound of the rain or sound  
 Of every wind that blows;  
 The stilted water-hen  
 Crossing stream again  
 Scared by the splashing of a dozen cows;

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,  
 A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,  
 A candle and written page. (*CWI* 201)

Although the title asserts possession, the repetition of “ancient” in line 1 loosens this claim by insisting that both bridge and tower predate the poet’s ownership, and for a moment they recede into the distant past. The recurrent use of indefinite articles at both the beginning and end of the passage enforces a similar loosening and distancing by marking bridge, tower, farmhouse, etc. as instances of traditional archetypes rather than one of a kind, tangible things. Especially



in the first six lines, it is difficult to infer the poet's spatial vantage point. Is he standing outside looking at the tower? Inside, peering out? Somewhere far away picturing it all in his mind's eye? The first two lines move toward the tower's interior, but lines 3–5 reverse this trajectory. The fact that all five are end-stopped adds to the impression of a mind slowly absorbing a series of discrete, loosely connected perceptions.

Lines 6–10 take tentative steps toward fixing the poet (and reader) in the vicinity of the tower and the present moment. The apprehension of soft sounds and small, precisely identified creatures suggests proximity and immediacy. The poet's attention has momentarily turned from the human-made features of his house to its natural environment. But lack of definition does not fully yield to focused sharpness and singularity: "every" wind is blowing; the hen is acting out a repeated behavior; and the reference to "a dozen cows" seems more estimate than count. With the stanza break, the poem crosses more decisively into a particular place and time: Thoor Ballylee's first-floor room, one flight up the winding stair, at night, in the aftermath of poetic creation. Even here, however, indefinite articles suggest the instantiation of archetypes and an archetypal moment. And if, as the candle indicates, darkness has fallen, the poet's preceding account of his surroundings must be a blend of current sense perception and imaginative re-creation. We have been watching him in the act of performing poetic alchemy, quietly embedding artifacts and natural objects from a particular material reality into timeless patterns. This drama requires us to know that the tower and its environs actually exist; otherwise, we can't appreciate the strength of his determination to bring his idealizing vision to bear on the tangible world. But, having planted real roses in the stony ground, Yeats reasserts their symbolic power, not only by telling us overtly that they are symbols, but also by enacting an imaginative process whereby physically existing artifacts and objects fade and resolve into metaphysical norms.

In the remainder of the second stanza, the poet evokes Milton and (less directly) Shelley and Samuel Palmer, joining himself to a cosmopolitan line of visionary Platonists and thus further embedding his tower within spatially and temporally distanced contexts.<sup>34</sup> He then forcefully returns to immediate particulars as the third and final stanza opens:

Two men have founded here. A man-at-arms  
 Gathered a score of horse and spent his days  
 In this tumultuous spot,  
 Where through long wars and sudden night alarms  
 His dwindling score and he seemed castaways  
 Forgetting and forgot;  
 And I, that after me  
 My bodily heirs may find,

To exalt a lonely mind,  
 Befitting emblems of adversity. (CW1 202)

There is nothing glimmering or indefinite about this stanza's terse opening sentence. We are here, at the tower, now, with the poet, and he wishes to speak about distinct historical personages. But the melding of particulars into archetypes quickly resumes. Although records from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provide names for some early occupants, the identity of Thoor Ballylee's founder remains unknown.<sup>35</sup> He is simply "A man-at-arms" (note the indefinite article): someone who must have once existed but now can only be imagined as an exemplar of the Norman overlords who dotted Ireland with their fortresses. By juxtaposing himself with this semimythical founder, the poet overlays his own experience of civil tumult and "sudden night alarms" onto recurring patterns, patterns the "written page" resulting from his candle-lit toil will strive to save from the fate of "castaways / Forgetting and forgot."

The final lines reflect Yeats's longtime belief that channeling "the daemonic rage" (CW1 201) requires confrontation with "an image, or bundle of related images, symbolical or evocative of the state of mind which is, of all states of mind not impossible, the most difficult to that man, race, or nation; because only the greatest obstacle that can be contemplated without despair rouses the will to full intensity" (CW3 167). For the poet, that bundle of related images clearly includes Thoor Ballylee and its stony, ragged environs, and the drama of the poem centers on the rousing of his will to transcend those environs and himself. He hopes for a similar experience for his heirs, described as "bodily" to distinguish his real-life children from the metaphorical inheritors to whom he earlier bequeaths "faith and pride" in part III of "The Tower" (CW1 199). As in "A Prayer on going into my House," his wishes for these heirs are notably noncoercive. The phrase, "after me," can mean "in imitation of me." But it can also suggest simple chronology, a possibility activated here by the stipulation that the heirs will need actively to "find" emblems befitting their own lonely minds. As Howes stresses, the sequence is moving away from "natural, biological inheritance to a version of genealogy that separates it from nature and continuity and aligns it with isolation and adversity instead."<sup>36</sup> It is also troubling the premise that an inherited material culture can be a beneficial spiritual influence: in contrast to Anglo-Irish Big House families spoiled by passive acquisition of inert physical objects, Yeats's heirs will have to found their own houses, built on independent responses to ancestral, archetypal traditions.

The sequence's third segment, "My Table," moves deeper inside Thoor Ballylee, opening with characteristically idealized accounts of two objects Yeats actually possessed: an old-fashioned trestle table and, lying upon that table, a

centuries-old ceremonial sword given him in 1920 by a Japanese admirer, Junzo Sato:

Two heavy trestles, and a board  
 Where Sato's gift, a changeless sword,  
 By pen and paper lies,  
 That it may moralise  
 My days out of their aimlessness.  
 A bit of an embroidered dress  
 Covers its wooden sheath.  
 Chaucer had not drawn breath  
 When it was forged. In Sato's house,  
 Curved like new moon, moon-luminous,  
 It lay five hundred years. (*CW1* 202)

The poem's opening line offers the most detailed description of a household artifact to appear in all of Yeats's poetry. The table's components are itemized and the two trestles granted an adjective. Compared to the spades, butter churns, and bog oak rafters of a writer like Seamus Heaney, however, who vivifies artifacts with plentiful adjectives and descriptive metaphor and simile, Yeats's table remains decidedly generic. We know only that it is a heavy trestle table and presumably in conformity with the earlier directive (in "A Prayer on going into my House") that the tower contain "No table or chair or stool not simple enough / For shepherd lads in Galilee" (*CW1* 162). Despite the emphasis applied by the title, the table is not mentioned again. It serves solely as a device for bringing readers forward to the interior scene of the poet's writing.

Yeats devotes keener attention to the sword, but concentrates on its intangible qualities and function rather than on concrete description. Its intangible qualities include its status as a gift, unsullied by commercial exchange; its apparent changelessness; its age; and its long association with a particular house, family, and culture. Its function is not merely to inspire perseverance with the act of writing: it counters not idleness but "aimlessness," bringing a sense of moral purpose to the poet's work. Lying on a table that exemplifies pastoral simplicity, the sword epitomizes the second of the two kinds of artifacts the poet's earlier "Prayer" permits for the tower: "what the great and passionate have used / Throughout so many varying centuries" (*CW1* 162). The conjunction of peasant table and aristocratic sword thus associates his house's focal point—and the site of poetic creation—with converging political and aesthetic antinomies. Yeats allows a modicum of physical detail to embellish his description of the sword's outer coverings, but the object itself is present only in line 10, where the actual curve of its blade quickly disappears into a simile articulated with elaborate assonance and alliteration and associating it with heavenly lights and

patterns. As so often with artifacts linked to the tower, use of present tense creates the impression that sword and sheath are immediately apparent to poet and reader and thus in little need of visual description. The chant-like aura created by the poem's form—alternating tetrameter and trimeter couplets, roughened only slightly by occasional metrical irregularities, slant rhymes, and enjambments—heightens the feeling that table, and especially sword, are evoked less as distinct material artifacts than as talismans for accessing powerful archetypes. The implication, as in “A Prayer on going into my House,” is that if a family creates and sustains a material environment embodying such archetypes, that environment will in turn sustain the family. It is not just the sword that has lasted five hundred years, it is also Sato's house. The moral lesson for the founder of a new household, and for the warring founders of the new Irish state, would seem to be clear.

The opening passage quoted above falls into four short sentences, the first of which lacks a main verb and all of which convey a sense of passivity and stasis, of immobile objects lying in place for vast stretches of time. The pace is slow, brooding. Things quicken after line 11: the syntactic units grow longer; the verbs become predominantly active and transitive; the meter beats more irregularly; and the poet's thinking picks up speed as his mind turns from the attractions of changelessness to the necessity for change:

Yet if no change appears  
 No moon; only an aching heart  
 Conceives a changeless work of art.  
 Our learned men have urged  
 That when and where 'twas forged  
 A marvellous accomplishment,  
 In painting or in pottery, went  
 From father unto son  
 And through the centuries ran  
 And seemed unchanging like the sword.  
 Soul's beauty being most adored,  
 Men and their business took  
 The soul's unchanging look;  
 For the most rich inheritor,  
 Knowing that none could pass Heaven's door  
 That loved inferior art,  
 Had such an aching heart  
 That he, although a country's talk  
 For silken clothes and stately walk,  
 Had waking wits; it seemed  
 Juno's peacock screamed. (CW1 202–03)

The moon and the spiritual powers it symbolizes manifest an eternal ebb and flow. To align, human beings must direct the ebb and flow of their aching hearts toward the creation or apprehension of artistic responses to that changeless pattern. Citing unidentified authorities, the speaker suggests that the civilization that forged the sword remained so steadfast in pursuit of this goal that its material culture—encompassing not only metalworking but also painting and pottery—sustained “A marvellous accomplishment” undiminished over centuries. Because “accomplishment” can refer equally to an end result and the skill needed to arrive at it, this formulation integrates the product and process of miraculous artistic creation. While unchanging artifacts such as the sword were lying passively in houses such as Sato’s, embedding emblems of adversity at their centers, artistic skills were passed from father to son, infusing “Men and their business” with moral purpose of the sort the poet claims to seek. Meanwhile, the “waking wits” of the silken-clothed aristocrats who guided this world allowed them to inherit and preserve both the material artifacts manufactured by its artisans and the aesthetic and spiritual values those objects symbolized.

Joseph Lennon suggests that in Yeats’s later poetry, physical objects such as Sato’s sword often “[carry] the poet to other times and places.”<sup>37</sup> To some extent this is surely true. But the fact that the marvelous civilization evoked here was Japanese can only be inferred from the mention of Sato’s name. The poet is no more inclined to particularize the “when and where” of the idealized realm he conjures up than to identify his learned authorities or delineate the unique attributes of the sword. The emphasis again shifts from the particular to the general: from the distinctive characteristics of Japanese metalwork, pottery, and painting to the universal outlines of Unity of Culture. Recalling both “A Prayer on going into my House” and *The Speckled Bird*, Yeats theorizes the value of a spiritually-inflected material culture while refusing to specify what such a culture might look like in the present or to imagine himself sharing a particular built environment with other members of his family or nation. Some scholars have characterized his vision of the sword and its origins as misperception, an “evasive daydream” (in Harris’s words) that fails to confront the weapon’s “violent nature.”<sup>38</sup> My reading is closer to that of Howes, who argues that the speaker “retracts” the comparison of sword to moon after realizing they are “not comparable objects . . . [because the] moon embodies the continuity-in-change of nature, while the sword embodies the changelessness of a man-made artifact.”<sup>39</sup> What Howes regards as a retraction, however, I see as a forward-moving enactment of Yeats’s habitual tendency to look through static material artifacts toward fluid but eternal patterns, and to judge such artifacts as worthy of attention only when they permit such vision. This is not to say that the poet feels no doubts about his habits of mind and vision. Far from it. One is

struck by his increasing reliance on words activating the possibility that what “appears” or “seem[s]” or “look[s]” to be real may not be so. The single definite fact about the authorities cited is that they are “Our learned men,” westerners who interpret from afar. The cry of Juno’s peacock—associated in both versions of *A Vision* with the inevitable breakdown of civilization<sup>40</sup>—suggests that attempting “to remake everything in a more ancient pattern . . . [beginning with] one’s speech and one’s dress and one’s house” will remain an unrealized dream in the divided, warring world of modern Ireland, even for a poet with the wherewithal to fortify himself and his family in an ancient tower.

The poet struggles to come to terms with this realization in the sequence’s remaining poems. Inverting “A Prayer on going into my House,” which asks for blessing should the tower and its future occupants remain “unspoiled,” “My Descendants” first catalogs ways in which his heirs may “lose the flower” and then articulates a curse. It is hard to disagree with Cullingford’s judgment that in “[speculating] upon the possibility that his children may not be as wonderful as he is” the poet displays “dismaying arrogance.”<sup>41</sup> Yet the curse he lays on his house is literal, not metonymic: it targets not the family but the artifact. Along with consternation at the prospect of degenerate descendants, it registers foresight of an inevitable future when it will be needful—even beneficial—for Thoor Ballylee to “Become a roofless ruin” so that, unburdened by static monuments from the past, the men and women of the future may act in harmony with the cycles of the “Primum Mobile” and build upon the wreckage. Having prophesied and grudgingly accepted such a future, he at last attempts to content himself with the tangible present: to “count [himself] most prosperous” and regard local “love and friendship” as “enough” (*CW1* 203). As previously noted, however, the women from whom he seeks closeness do not materialize; and for anyone familiar (as Yeats surely would be) with Blake’s dictum that “less than All cannot satisfy,” the instability of this moment of willed contentment will be evident.<sup>42</sup>

“The Road at My Door” brings the arrival of warring combatants who prompt evasive speech and defensive withdrawal. Then, in “The Stare’s Nest by My Window,” the shock of contact with real-world violence jars the wall of the poet’s private self. The social unit he addresses in response, however, is not his family but a “brutal” Civil War Ireland that has “fed the heart on fantasies” and that he wishes to transcend. The imprisoning “substance” of nationalist fantasies impinging on the here and now is linked with hatred; the sweetness of love with the spiritual rebuilding that may follow the loosening of materiality (*CW1* 205). The seventh and final poem, like part II of “The Tower,” finds Yeats inhabiting Thoor Ballylee not as a family home but as a rooftop platform for private vision. Here, he opens his eyes on a cosmos cycling endlessly between vividly detailed images of hatred, love, and emptiness. When he reenters Thoor

Ballylee for the final time, its descending stair does not lead him toward kith and kin:

I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair  
 Wonder how many times I could have proved my worth  
 In something that all others understand or share;  
 But O! ambitious heart, had such a proof drawn forth  
 A company of friends, a conscience set at ease,  
 It had but made us pine the more. The abstract joy,  
 The half-read wisdom of daemonic images,  
 Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy. (*CW1* 206)

Love and friendship and an ancient house stocked with simple furniture and symbolic objects are not, it turns out, “enough” (*CW1* 203). The aging poet has redesigned his material environment in ways the boyish author of *The Speckled Bird* could only dream about; but like that younger man, he ultimately privileges “The half-read wisdom of daemonic images.” The changeless works of art conceived by his own aching heart will not be or celebrate solid objects: tables, swords, works of pottery, or any other product that a family of artisans might manufacture together in a workshop or that might occupy the physical center of a rich inheritor’s house. Instead, they will be verbal “emblems of adversity,” composed and read in solitude, and endowed with potentially liberating respect for the autonomy of those who subsequently, separately, encounter them (*CW1* 202). The poet’s wisdom will be “half-read” not merely as a result of his imperfect human understanding but also because he chooses to value transparent, open-ended images over definite, fully-read descriptions of ideas or physical surfaces.

#### IV

In his essay, “Thing Theory,” Bill Brown distinguishes between “objects” and “things” by writing that we “look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful.” By contrast, we “begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks.”<sup>43</sup> In Brown’s sense of these words, the vast majority of material artifacts in Yeats’s later poetry—the golden bird of the Byzantium poems, the sculpted gemstone of “Lapis Lazuli”—are objects rather than things. A handful of late poems, by contrast, depict broken material artifacts that once served as pathways to the immaterial before falling into ruin. “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” for example, begins by recognizing that although “ingenious lovely things” may seem “sheer miracle” while functioning as prompts for visionary experience, they remain, like all physical objects, subject to destruction. Once

the human imagination ceases to operate on and through them, they revert to “common things” (CW1 206–07). The poem’s opening stanza particularizes the substances from which the artifacts of ancient Athens were manufactured—bronze, stone, olive wood, ivory, gold—not to marvel at their physical richness but to begin their demystification. By the end of its first section, this demystification is complete. Those regarding the statue of Athena not as an unparticularized miraculous lovely object but rather as a thing “made of olive wood” may also see it as a “stump” that can be burned. Those perceiving Phidias’s ivories as “famous”—valued because others value them rather than for their higher use—may opt to break or “traffic” them (CW1 208). Yeats’s Thoor Ballylee poems—especially those in “Meditations in Time of Civil War”—portray the difficulties of inhabiting and sharing an “object” (in Brown’s sense) that shows signs of becoming a broken “thing,” marred by present-day violence manifesting cosmic patterns portending “Coming Emptiness” (CW1 205).<sup>44</sup> The sequence thus dramatizes self-critical reevaluation not only of the poet’s attachments to violent nationalism or Anglo-Irish genealogy, as previous scholars have emphasized, but also of his youthful aspirations to remake modernity’s material culture, starting with the example of his own house and family. The ingrained habits of perception, thought, and expression underlying Yeats’s lifelong refusal to represent the unique surfaces of particular material artifacts compel the speaker of these poems to look through, rather than at, the tower and its material and human furnishings. Contra Grene, he is never “fully at home” at Thoor Ballylee. His unwillingness to particularize the details of an intimately shared material culture, rooted in his more profound commitment to the “half-read wisdom of daemonic images,” precludes vivid depiction of what he once wistfully called “The hourly kindness, the day’s common speech, / The habitual content of each with each” (CW1 92). It is this deeper commitment to daemonic wisdom, and not arrogant speculation that his children may prove inferior, that chiefly accounts for his distanced stance toward his family. The anguish of his sacrifice, his determination to preserve his and their spiritual autonomy, even at the cost of painful isolation, permeates the sequence.

Although Yeats’s interests in paintings, books, stage props, coins, and textiles have been taken up in turn and ably analyzed by Elizabeth Loizeaux, George Bornstein, Paige Reynolds, Christopher Morash, Rob Doggett, Adrian Patterson, and others, discussions of his involvement with particular kinds of material artifacts remain comparatively few.<sup>45</sup> Assessments of his evolving responses to material artifacts as a general category are rarer still, while broader discussions of modern writing and material culture, such as Victoria Rosner’s *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (2005), often bypass Yeats altogether to focus on writers like Woolf who offer detailed analysis of domestic interiors and manufactured objects.<sup>46</sup> As I have sought to demonstrate, however, the



paucity of material artifacts in Yeats's poetry, and his distinctive manner of seeing through and beyond the surfaces of the few that feature prominently in his later work, help to define the character of his poetic development and of many of his most memorable poems.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Graham Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1984), 46.
- 2 T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 251.
- 3 Ezra Pound, "The Later Yeats," *Poetry* 4, no. 2 (May 1914): 66.
- 4 See, for example, *Life 1*, chapters 1–3.
- 5 Yeats writes similarly in "Four Years: 1887–1891" that he wished for "an infallible Church of poetic tradition" that could be discovered "not in pictures and in poems only, but in tiles round the chimney-piece and in the hangings that kept out the draught" (CW3 115).
- 6 *The Secret Rose: Stories by W. B. Yeats: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Phillip L. Marcus, Warwick Gould, and Michael J. Sidnell (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). Abbreviated SRV.
- 7 Beautiful artifacts in "Rosa Alchemica" are insufficient but not powerless. This is especially true of the grimoire examined by the narrator at the temple. The resemblance between this grimoire's binding and the decorated covers of the 1897 edition of *The Secret Rose* suggests that, unlike the temple's other material features, its grimoire has survived its destruction and taken new form in Yeats's book. See SRV 141 and, for discussion, Steven Putzel, *Reconstructing Yeats: 'The Secret Rose' and 'The Wind Among the Reeds'* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1986).
- 8 For an overview of Morris's output, see Charlotte and Peter Fiell, *William Morris, 1834–1896* (Köln: Taschen, 1999).
- 9 For discussion of the planned Celtic Mystical Order, see *Life 1*, chapter 7.
- 10 See "The Symbolism of Poetry" (CW4 113–21). For scholarly introductions to Yeats's esoteric thinking, see Hough or William T. Gorski, *Yeats and Alchemy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).
- 11 Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 251.
- 12 For the draft, see *In the Seven Woods and The Green Helmet and Other Poems: Manuscript Materials by W. B. Yeats*, ed. David Holdeman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 44–45.
- 13 See the untitled preliminary lyric (CW1 101) as well as "September 1913" (CW1 108) and the untitled final poem (CW1 128).
- 14 Gorski, *Yeats and Alchemy*, 15, 17.
- 15 Gorski, *Yeats and Alchemy*, 140.
- 16 Rob Doggett, "Aristocratic Patronage and the Commercial Logic of Yeats's Responsibilities," *Journal of Modern Literature* 34, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 1–18.
- 17 David Holdeman, "Late Yeats, Print and Symbolic Book Design: The Case of Responsibilities," in *The Edinburgh Companion to W. B. Yeats and the Arts*, eds. Tom Walker, Adrian Paterson and Charles Armstrong (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).
- 18 The same could be said of such later Moore-designed, Macmillan books as *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and *The Tower* (1928).

- 19 For the lead-up to the marriage, see *Life 2*, chapters 2 and 3. For Yeats's description of George as "serviceable," in a letter to Lady Gregory dated September 22, 1917, see *CL InteLex* 3328.
- 20 For descriptions of the contents of Yeats's rooms at Woburn Buildings, see *Life 1*, 160–61, 187, and 393.
- 21 Ann Saddlemyer, *Becoming George: The Life of Mrs. W. B. Yeats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 230.
- 22 Saddlemyer, *Becoming George*, 231.
- 23 See Warwick Gould's introduction to YA 21. See also <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/2017/yeats-family-collection-117136.html>.
- 24 Tom McAlindon argues convincingly that the continuing strong influence of William Morris shaped Yeats's conception of Byzantium. See his "A Case of Extreme Occlusion: Yeats, Morris, and Byzantium," *Modern Language Review* 115, no. 3 (July 2020): 518–35.
- 25 Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Volume III, 1925–1930, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, assisted by Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 330.
- 26 This division corresponds neatly to the two categories of material artifacts found in the background of Yeats's early poetry: simple furnishings appropriate to ballads and implements associated with heroic deeds.
- 27 Daniel A. Harris, *Yeats: Coole Park & Ballylee* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 163.
- 28 Elizabeth Cullingford, "How Jacques Molay Got Up the Tower: Yeats and the Irish Civil War," *ELH*, 50, no. 4 (Winter 1983), 774.
- 29 Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 120; Rob Doggett, *Deep-Rooted Things: Empire and Nation in the Poetry and Drama of William Butler Yeats* (Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 86.
- 30 Nicholas Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 46.
- 31 For an influential account of the dynamic noted here, see Deirdre Toomey, "Labyrinths: Yeats and Maud Gonne," *YA* 9, 95–131.
- 32 Grene, *Poetic Codes*, 43.
- 33 Doggett, *Deep-Rooted Things*, 86.
- 34 See *CW1* 163.
- 35 See Mary Hanley and Liam Miller, *Thoor Ballylee: Home of William Butler Yeats* (Portlaoise: The Dolmen Press, 1984), 9–10.
- 36 Howes, *Yeats's Nations*, 126–27.
- 37 Joseph Lennon, "Traces of Ancient Things: W. B. Yeats and Sato's Sword," in *Yeats and Asia: Overviews and Case Studies*, ed. Sean Golden (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020), 87.
- 38 Harris, *Yeats: Coole Park & Ballylee*, 173. Cullingford sees a similar "imaginative deficiency in the speaker's response to the sword, which after all was made for killing" ("How Jacques Molay Got Up the Tower;" 779).
- 39 Howes, *Yeats's Nations*, 125.
- 40 See *CW13*, 150.
- 41 Cullingford, "How Jacques Molay Got Up the Tower;" 779.
- 42 William Blake, *The Complete Poetry & Prose*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 2.
- 43 Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, 26, no. 1 (Autumn 2001), 4.
- 44 As Yeats explains in a note, the ancient bridge adjacent to the tower was destroyed by anti-Treaty combatants shortly before he completed work on the poem. See *VP*, 827.
- 45 See Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Yeats and the Visual Arts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986); George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Paige Reynolds, "A Theatre of the

- Head: Material Culture, Severed Heads, and the Late Drama of W.B. Yeats," *Modern Drama* 58, no. 4 (Winter 2015), 437–60; Christopher Morash, *Yeats on Theatre*, chapter 5 "Spaces and Objects," (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Rob Doggett, "Emblems or Symbols, Not Pictures: W. B. Yeats and Free State Coinage Design," *Eire-Ireland* 46 nos. 1&2 (Spring/Summer 2011), 87–105; Adrian Paterson, "Stitching and Unstitching: Yeats material and immaterial," *Review of Irish Studies in Europe* 2, no. 1 (2018), 149–81.
- 46 Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).