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YEATS AND THE MODERN SCHOOL¹

Wit Pietrzak

Despite his assertive opinions about what constituted true poetry, W. B. Yeats's judgments of other people's verse, especially the poetry of his older and younger contemporaries, were frequently adversarial. By contrast, he remained quite open to avant-garde work in the theater and to some degree in prose. In 1934, he showed little prejudice against Rupert Doone's experimental "Group Theatre," calling it "highly skilled" (YGYL 373) and deciding to cooperate with Doone to have his Noh plays staged. He sympathized with Joyce's early prose and saw potential in the work (mainly essayistic and broadly philosophical) of Wyndham Lewis. However, he generally dismissed new poetry: Pound and Eliot as well as the later generation's prodigies, Auden, MacNeice, Spender and Day Lewis. This prejudice against the younger poets may to some extent be ascribed to the fact that Yeats's reading of the poetry contemporaneous with his own was sparse when compared to his exposure to drama, which, as one of the directors of the Abbey, he read regularly; when it came to fiction, he boasted a vast knowledge of what may be considered pulp literature, which became his pastime during periods of convalescence after bouts of illnesses that befell him at disturbingly regular intervals from late 1927. In addition to westerns and detective fiction and the work of Joyce and Lewis, he developed a fondness for the novelists D. H. Lawrence and James Stephens.

Although Yeats kept up to date with the developments of those poets who were either his friends, such as AE and Oliver St. John Gogarty, or their associates, he did not become conversant with the principal movements of twentieth-century English-language poetry until, when in October 1934, he was asked to edit *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. Before that, his last in-depth reading of contemporary poetry came in the early years of the new century. In 1899, he edited and wrote a preface for *A Book of Irish Verse Selected from Modern Writers* that opened with Thomas Davis and included the new generation of Irish poets including Nora Hopper, Kathryn Tynan Hinkson, Herbert Trench, AE, Douglas Hyde, and Lionel Johnson. Being a member of the Rhymers' Club, Johnson constituted a link between the Irish and English traditions. Indeed, those few years spent in the company of Johnson and Symons marked the only time in Yeats's poetic career that he stayed in the main current of poetic development; in the years to follow he would poetically outgrow the Rhymers but would never come to be so intimately connected to the live contemporary tradition. Although Yeats spent 1911 until late 1916 in close

collaboration with Pound, he did not share his circle of friends. For example, working on his selections for *The Oxford Book* in 1935, he decided to reject Richard Aldington and found H.D., whom he had once appreciated, “empty, mere style.” Similarly, F. S. Flint’s work was pronounced “gilded stucco” (*CL InteLex* 6415). Shortly after Yeats’s death, T. S. Eliot proclaimed him not only a “master” but also “a contemporary,”² however, the fact that Eliot needed to state that appraisal indicates that Yeats’s position within the main current of contemporary poetry was uncertain. That is all to say, when Yeats was asked to prepare an anthology of modern poetry, he needed to compensate for decades of readerly negligence.³

What *The Oxford Book* came to represent in the end has been subjected to extensive critical scrutiny, but in the main, scholars agree with MacNeice: “It seems that Yeats Oxford Book is loony.”⁴ Yeats’s introduction to *The Oxford Book* caused no less rancor than the selection itself; his attack on Eliot, Pound and “the Auden school” coupled with dismissal of the war poets and an outlandishly optimistic approval of Dorothy Wellesley and W. J. Turner may not have seemed as inane to contemporary readers as they do now, but the lines along which Yeats led his onslaught have shown him to be out of tune with the developments in poetry of the previous two decades. For Yeats, however, 1935 was the year when he effectively realized where his own theory of poetry stood *vis à vis* the contemporary scene. The crucial differences between his idea of poetry and that of the moderns have been discussed by Frank Kermode and C. K. Stead, Terence Diggory, Ronald Bush, Steven Matthews and Edna Longley.⁵ However, the aspect of Yeats’s involvement with modern poets that has received less critical attention is his own theory of post-World War I poetry. In what follows, I explore Yeats’s construction of the notion of modern verse in his late writings, with particular attention to Eliot, Pound, and the writers that Yeats grouped together under the name of “the Auden school.” I aim to demonstrate that his principal criticism of contemporary verse derives from the ideas developed in his newly-discovered philosophy of history set forth in *A Vision* (both A and B texts); it is here argued that the crucial line of dissention comes down to the opposition between what Yeats called Unity of Being and Unity of Fact. Being one of three primary ideals along with Unity with Nature (characteristic of Phases 26–28) and Unity with God (characteristic of Phases 2–4), Unity of Fact is in no sense a cornerstone of *A Vision*’s philosophy. Yet, it captures both the essential features of the moderns’ work and is an appropriately marginal term for what Yeats regarded as a transient moment in the history of poetry.

When he began reading for *The Oxford Book*, Yeats had already been busy correcting *A Vision*, which not only gave him “metaphors for poetry” (AVB 8) but also offered a template for assessing the lyrical moment that the world had arrived at since the beginning, in the 11th century, of the present

one-thousand-year cycle. The ideas that came from the automatic sessions with his wife were first gathered in the 1926 edition of *A Vision* but never really relinquished their grip on Yeats's imagination. It is unsurprising, then, that by October 1935 he was able to tell Robert Nichols that he "[had] arranged the poems [in the anthology] as a kind of drama of the soul" (*CL IntelLex* 6381). The notion goes back to section IV of "What the Caliph Partly Learned" in *A Vision A*, where Yeats compares the antithetical man to a character in *Commedia dell'Arte* so as to emphasise the creative aspect of the Will's struggle against its Body of Fate (see *CW13* 18–19). Earlier still, in the script for 17 January 1918, the control Thomas added that this comparison could extend to the Noh which is also "partially a dramatization of the soul – it is all great art" (*YVP1* 270). Therefore *The Oxford Book*, as Yeats told Margot Collis, was to be "the standard Anthology" (*CL IntelLex* 6316) in the sense that it would demonstrate the central conflict between the primary and antithetical dispensations of the historical cycle as manifested in the development of modern English and Anglo-Irish poetry in general and of individual poets in particular.

In the script and *A Vision A*, Yeats sketched the broad concept of the struggle between the new generation of the "moderns" and "the more sensuous work of the 'romantics'" (*LDW* 74), a line-up that included Yeats himself, Irish poets, especially Gogarty, as well as his new-found friends Dorothy Wellesley and W. J. Turner. In a session of 2 June 1918, following an intensive mapping of individual Phases on world history, Yeats received confirmation that Western civilization had reached Phase 22 of the historical cycle (*YVP1* 471). In *A Vision A*, he explains further that Phase 22 is characterized by impersonality: "the aim must be to use the *Body of Fate* to deliver the *Creative Mind* from the *Mask*, and not to use the *Creative Mind* to deliver the *Mask* from the *Body of Fate*. The being does this by so using the intellect upon the facts of the world that the last vestige of personality disappears" (*CW13* 75). This is an inversion of the logic that governed Phases 12 to 18, in which the *Mask* was to be liberated from the constrained path dictated by the *Body of Fate* so that the Will might win some autonomy in the act of assuming a *Mask*. From Phase 19 the *Body of Fate* begins to dominate and so the *Mask* becomes the undesired aspect of personal freedom, for now "all must be impersonal" (*CW13* 77). Moreover, "since Phase 19 [power] has been wielded by a fragment only" rather than by "the whole nature" (*CW13* 76). The emphasis on fragment rather than wholeness marks the movement away from Unity of Being to which the being comes closest in Phase 17. After 17, however, the near-complete unity of thought and action is becoming ever more distant. This is further accompanied by the loss of the mind's emotional character, which is replaced by "a predominately intellectual character" (*CW13* 76). As a result, "A man of Phase 22 will commonly not only systematise, to the exhaustion of his will, but discover this exhaustion of will in

all that he studies" (CW13 76). Therefore the man of Phase 22, caring little for personality as Mask, content to bow before fate which he accepts intellectually as part of the larger system of the universe, seeks Unity of Fact that he wishes to know only through "a single faculty" (CW13 78), for now the faculties grow ever more separate. In terms of art and poetry, "Symbols may become hateful to us, the ugly and the arbitrary delightful that we may the more quickly kill all memory of Unity of Being" (CW13 79). These qualities summarize Yeats's perception of the Western world in the mid-1920s, which to him had lost the crucial inner desire to unite all human pursuits into a single pattern of a ritualistic performance of life.

Commenting in "Dove or Swan" on the world as it seemed to him in 1925, Yeats comes to "discover already the first phase—Phase 23—of the last quarter in certain friends of mine, and in writers, poets and sculptors admired by these friends" (CW13 174). Yeats classifies J. M. Synge's and Rembrandt's individual Phases as belonging to Phase 23, hence their ability to observe and incorporate reality into their work: "Artists and writers of Phase 21 and Phase 22 have eliminated all that is personal from their style, seeking cold metal and pure water, but he [the man of Phase 23] will delight in colour and idiosyncrasy, though these he must find rather than create. Synge must find rhythm and syntax in the Aran Islands, Rembrandt delight in all accidents of the visible world" (CW13 81). The replacement of creation with emulation and the gift for meticulous rendition of the surrounding world together with its idiosyncrasies broadly define Yeats's perception of contemporary writing that boasts the qualities characterized by Phase 22: impersonality, fragmentation of symbol, intellect rather than emotion and Darwinian systematization. But the modern avant-garde (though Yeats never uses that term—he means the entire group, not individual poets), including Pound, Eliot, Joyce and Lewis among English-speaking writers, already looks to the detailing of reality that characterizes Phase 23. They (together with Pirandello) "either eliminate from metaphor the poet's phantasy and substitute a strangeness discovered by historical or contemporary research or who break up the logical processes of thought by flooding them with associated ideas or words that seem to drift into the mind by chance" (CW13 175). Whereas Yeats sought intensity of unified experience, he regarded the moderns as seeking the most precise embodiment of the world as it is.

Yeats seems to regard Unity of Fact as representing a materialist perception of reality that he foresaw would soon become the dominant ideology. His brief discussion in *A Vision A* of the quality of the moderns' works and the prediction that shortly the world would come under the domination of antithetical ideals that intellectual elites, for now called "covens," would espouse is excluded from *A Vision B*. Although the date of his writing of this section (February 1925) remains unchanged in *A Vision B*, the ending of the 1936 edition

is the product of Yeats's extensive revisions of the treatise that he completed just before embarking on preparations for *The Oxford Book*. In the later version, in lieu of discussing the moderns, he returns to a symbolic evocation of the system, "testing my convictions and those of others by its unity, attempting to substitute particulars for an abstraction like that of algebra" (AVB 301). He concludes that his "desert geometry" must stand against the prevalent ideologies of the day, the "socialistic and communistic prophecies" (AVB 301). This reference to socialism and communism falls back on the idea, silenced in *A Vision A* but given some prominence in the Card File, that "Socialism may last on through part of 23. At 24 organization 'by production' comes & at 24 all are brought into subordination to the skillful, the technically skillful & here again there may be violence" (YVP3 84). The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, imagined as the "Mere anarchy [...] loosed upon the world" (CW1 187), was a disturbing harbinger of incipient collapse of the West, but in 1925 socialism, let alone communism, posed less of an immediate threat to Yeats than another outbreak of civil war in Ireland.

By 1935, when the final revisions to *A Vision B* were completed, the idea of socialism holding sway over the world had come to unnerve Yeats, who for a moment (the high point coming in 1933) had hoped that the Blueshirts under General O'Duffy in Ireland and fascists in Europe would ensure that the elite covens thrived. However, by 1936 he realized fascism was no better than the communism that he had despised all along. In 1932, he had told Maud Gonne, an anti-Semite and supporter of Hitler and Mussolini as adversaries of England, "I dislike both parties [fascists and communists] as I like liberty but we shall all have to join one or the other or take to a begging bowl" (G-YL 448). In one of his notebooks from the 1930s, he further observed that "Communism, fascism are inadequate because society is the struggle of two forces not transparent to reason, the family and the individual."⁶ The idea of the struggle between the family and the individual, rather than fascist or even Nazi, as some would argue,⁷ underpins Yeats's interest in eugenics that started in 1936.⁸ It needs to be noted that this formula is in a large measure a re-deployment of the fundamental point that Yeats explored in *A Vision* and before that in "If I were Four-and-Twenty" as well as in numerous poems and plays; the family stands for one's fate and the individual for the unexpected idiosyncratic variation possible only for the artist. In this sense, for Yeats, socialism and communism, with their shared emphasis on the proletarian mass in conflict with the bourgeoisie and with fascism, with what in a letter to Desmond FitzGerald Yeats called its "dynamic element [...] the clear picture to be worked for" (CL *InteLex* 5853), are only transitory moments on a path to something else that is "lying deeper than intellect" and "is not affected by the flux of history" (CL *InteLex* 5853). The ending of *A Vision B* responds to these critiques of socialism and communism,

and implicitly fascism as well. What these ideologies offer is merely a way of compelling the nation to increase its material power; they ask people to subscribe to Unity of Fact and not Unity of Being, which results in a depreciation of man's abilities, for "any hale man can dig or march" (CW5 230), as Yeats mockingly put it in *On the Boiler*.

When Yeats's delineation of the nature of the present world, as offered in both editions of *A Vision* and his other writings, is coupled with his remarks on Pound, Eliot, Joyce and Lewis, it transpires that the moderns constituted for Yeats a completion of his Instructors' prophecies that the age would veer towards fact, intellect and fragmentation, whether of a socialist or fascist kind. In his introduction to *The Oxford Book*, Yeats identifies a pattern of rebellion against the Victorian rule of rhetoric, logic and scientism that dates back to Walter Pater, who "offered instead of moral earnestness life lived as 'a hard gem-like flame'" (CW5 183). Pater's example was then followed by the members of the Rhymers Club: Arthur Symons, Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson (and a number of others), all of whom feature prominently in Yeats's anthology. Despite their deficiencies, the Rhymers are given credit for having succeeded in purging logic, rhetoric and scientism from poetry and drama, which by the mid-1930s were to embody beauty in the language purified of weary imagery of longing for spiritual perfection.

The poets who came between the Rhymers and the "modern writer," such as Laurence Binyon and Sturge Moore, continued, after Robert Bridges, to strive for "words often commonplace made unforgettable by some trick of speeding and slowing" (CW5 188). In the October broadcast, Yeats concludes that he and they "wrote as men had always written" but "then established things were shaken by the Great War" (CW5 94–95). In its aftermath, the beliefs in progress and development had been undermined, and "influential young men began to wonder if anything could last or if anything were worth fighting for. In the third year of the War came the most revolutionary man in poetry during my lifetime, though his revolution was stylistic alone—T. S. Eliot published his first book" (CW5 95). Yeats indirectly links World War I, general disillusionment with the world, and the arrival of Eliot on the poetic scene. This connection is revealing in that the war was for Yeats an outgrowth of the mechanical age that cared little for poetry.⁹ The fact that the general fall of values which resulted from the War is mentioned in the same breath as the arrival of Eliot seems to indicate that the revolutionary poet was the product of the horrific times. This is corroborated in his introduction to *The Oxford Book*, in which Yeats argues that "Eliot has produced a great effect upon his generation because he has described men and women that get out of bed or into it from mere habit; in describing this life that has lost heart his own art seems grey, cold, dry" (CW5 190–191). He goes on to compare Eliot to Alexander Pope, "working without

apparent imagination, producing his effects by a rejection of all rhythms and metaphors used by the more popular romantics rather than by the discovery of his own, this rejection giving his work an unexaggerated plainness that has the effect of novelty" (CW5 191). Eliot is thus shown as a psychological realist, always on the lookout for the adequate description of the necessarily modern state of mind. Although he does not acknowledge it, Yeats recognizes in Eliot's poetry the working of the objective correlative that Eliot would go on to describe in "Hamlet and His Problems" that was included in *The Sacred Wood*, a collection of essays for which Yeats had "a reasonable liking" (YGYL 97). For Eliot, emotions must be expressed in art through "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."¹⁰ Shakespeare's failure to justify Hamlet's bafflement marks his failure to tackle what Eliot calls "intractable material" that proved too difficult, and Eliot identifies *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* as "Shakespeare's most assured artistic success."¹¹ Yeats would have agreed to a point with Eliot's judgement, for he also thought highly of *Antony and Cleopatra* and produced *Coriolanus* at the Abbey Theatre, but his reasons for appreciating Shakespeare are markedly different from Eliot's.

In his early essay "At Stratford-on-Avon," Yeats reports the "Week of Kings": history plays to be performed at the Stratford festival in April 1901. He argues that "To pose character against character was an element of Shakespeare's art" and so the two typical figures in all of Shakespeare's oeuvre are represented by Henry V and Richard II. Whereas the former "has the gross vices, the coarse nerves, of one who is to rule among violent people" and he is "remorseless and undistinguished as some natural force," the latter is possessed of "that lyricism which rose out of [his] mind like the jet of a fountain to fall again where it had risen" (CW4 81). For Yeats, Richard II is Shakespeare's real hero and greatest creation not because his emotions are adequately and objectively represented but for the precisely opposite reason: he symbolizes the incomprehensible force of poetic utterance, his mind being one of those fountains that Yeats admired in Blake and Shelley.¹² Almost a decade later, he defined tragic art, the art that in "At Stratford-on-Avon" he saw performed, as being "passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding" and added that it "moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of utterance" (CW4 178). Thus while Eliot stresses dispassionate presentation that is susceptible of being explained, Yeats desires intensity of emotion that eludes comprehension but makes "our minds expand convulsively or spread like some moon-brightened image-crowded sea" (CW4 178-179).

Looking at Eliot's poetry, Yeats sees the objective ideal that led the younger poet to appreciate *Coriolanus* not for the passion of his revenge but for the

adequate expression of the cause of his hankering after vengeance. Eliot's poems that Yeats chose for *The Oxford Book* included "Preludes," whose third part Yeats alludes to in his introduction:

You tossed a blanket from the bed,
 You lay upon your back, and waited;
 You dozed, and watched the night revealing
 The thousand sordid images
 Of which your soul was constituted[...] (*OBMV* 279)

Yeats would have read the poem as a flat representation of man's confusion and inner desolation that leads to "The morning" that "comes to consciousness / Of faint stale smells of beer / From the saw-dust trampled street" (*OBMV* 279). Eliot's evocation of man in "Preludes" but also in "The Hollow Men" (in which, however, there is for Yeats "rhythmical animation" [*CW*5 191]) emphasizes the pointlessness and dreariness of earthly existence, days that only "Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust" (*OBMV* 290). This image of downtrodden man who is nothing without God stands at odds with Yeats's idea, expressed in his introduction to the never-realized *Edition de Luxe* of his work, that the poet "is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast," for in his work "he has been re-born as an idea, something intended, complete" (*CW*5 204). Writing of "men and women that get out of bed or into it from mere habit," Yeats pictures just such "a bundle of accident and incoherence," breakfast being "an interruption of the poet's proper business of engaging with his own dream world, and the phatic chit-chat of the morning repast constitut[ing] a rather jarring contrast to the inner theatre of the night."¹³

Eliot's vices that Yeats exposes have nothing to do with impersonal theory of poetic creation, a point of dissension between Eliot's modernism and Yeats's romantic symbolism that is frequently cited. Richard Greaves, paying particular attention to Yeats's poetical and critical work of the 1907–1914 period, argues pithily that "Whereas Eliot sees the poet's mind as something to be held open, in order that his personality should remain out of his work, and that the 'significant emotion' available through the tradition should form itself there for him to transmit, Yeats speaks of creating a secondary personality through his work."¹⁴ While the point is partly tenable for the early twentieth-century Yeats, it is problematic for the later Yeats, who told Olivia Shakespear: "I think I have finished with self-expression and if I write more verse it will be impersonal, perhaps even a going back to my early self" (*L* 816). Despite the fact that this is in a way a declaration of artistic death (Yeats suffered from writer's block after Lady Gregory's death), impersonal poetry is not devalued but associated with

early verse. Indeed, John Kelly has recently shown that Eliot and Yeats had a lot in common, including a desire for authentication of the spiritual world, opposition to the rationalization of theology and, importantly enough, criticism of the idea of originality.¹⁵ Moreover, Edna Longley has demonstrated that particularly in *The Cutting of an Agate* (comprising articles that were probably familiar to Eliot), Yeats delineates the notions of tradition and personality that may have stood behind some of Eliot's own pronouncements.¹⁶ This is further corroborated by Eliot, who observed in a letter to Gilbert Seldes that Yeats was perhaps the only one to share his and Pound's preoccupation with "the value and the significance of the method of moulding a contemporary narrative upon an ancient myth."¹⁷ Longley sees the difference between Yeats and Eliot in the fact that while the former "made almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition" (CW3 115), the latter deplored such an idea, remaining loath to vest poetry with the same power as religion.¹⁸ However, what is ignored in these accounts of Yeats's perception of Eliot is the fact that for Yeats, Eliot embodies a primary moment in the thousand-year cycle of the world; his realism, devotion to objectivity and intellectual apprehension of literature make Eliot a model poet of Unity of Fact rather than of Unity of Being. What his work lacks is the "phantasmagoria" that separates the poet from the incoherent man (CW5 204).

Yeats did not deplore all of Eliot's work. In the introduction to *The Oxford Book* and in a letter to George Yeats, he praises *Murder in the Cathedral*, mentioning the passionate moment of Thomas's speech. But another passage must have struck Yeats. When the priests try to lock the cathedral so as not to let in the knights intent on murdering the Archbishop, Thomas commands them to "Unbar the door!" and scolds them for "defer[ing] to the fact."¹⁹ Thomas dismisses fact and hopes to stand "in God's holy fire," to use Yeats's phrasing (VP 407). Moreover, after the four tempters have tried to lead Thomas astray, he finally resolves that he must go the path of self-sacrifice but recognizes that "The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right deed for the wrong reason."²⁰ This would have sounded familiar to Yeats, in whose *Countess Cathleen* the angel explains that Cathleen's sin of selling her soul is forgiven, for "The Light of Lights / Looks always on the motive, not the deed" (VPl 167). For Yeats, Eliot was capable of reaching beyond his declared ideas, like he did in *Murder in the Cathedral* but also in *The Waste Land*, which Yeats initially found "very beautiful, but here & there are passages I do not understand—four or five lines" (CL *InteLex* 4264).²¹ In the 1924 preface to *The Cat and the Moon*, Yeats goes so far as to draw a parallel between Eliot's poem and the work of Lady Gregory and Synge (VPl 1308). However, by 1935 *The Waste Land*, though "moving in symbol and imagery," had been dismissed for its "monotony of accent" (CW5 191). In the introduction and the broadcast, and with the doctrine of history clearly laid out in recently-revised *A Vision*, Eliot is moulded into a figure of a

modern poet not so much for being impersonal (though it is obviously noted by Yeats) as for his obsession with realism, what might be termed Unity of Fact: "Eliot's genius is human, mundane, impeccable," all of which contrast with W. J. Turner, who Yeats ensigns for his romantic school and pitches as direct opposite to Eliot because he gained "a power of emotional construction" (CW5 195). Where Eliot describes, possibly mocks and so effectively ceases to write poetry, Turner organizes his material and unravels patterns.

Turner provides a counterbalance to the chaotic modern poetry, particularly Pound's: "Ezra Pound has made flux his theme; plot, characterization, logical discourse, seem to him abstractions unsuitable to a man of his generation." These remarks are based on Pound's "immense poem in *vers libre* called for the moment *The Cantos*" (CW5 192). Belonging to Phase 12, Pound's poetry responds to the increasing fragmentation of the world that starts at Phase 19 of the historical cycle. Furthermore, Yeats's emphasis on the fact that the flux of *The Cantos* is, following Pound's view, only suitable "to a man of his generation" suggests that the chaos that Pound thematizes is in fact the contemporary discontinuity of Phases 22–23. A similar charge is pressed against Basil Bunting in Yeats's 1930 Diary: "A poet whose free verse I have greatly admired [Bunting] rejects God and every kind of unity, calls the ultimate reality anarchy, means by that word something which for lack of metaphysical knowledge he cannot define" (Ex 295). Although Yeats's appraisal of Pound's poetry ranged from criticism to appreciation, Pound's early verse received more acclaim.²² In *A Packet for Ezra Pound*, Yeats finds the ideas of cyclical-ity elaborated in *A Vision* in Pound's "The Return" and the poem duly finds its way into *The Oxford Book*. Also, it seems to be the poem that Yeats has in mind when he argues that in Pound "I find more style than form; at moments more style, more deliberate nobility and the means to convey it than in any contemporary poet" (CW5 193). In a speech given at *Poetry's* banquet during his 1914 visit to the US, Yeats called "The Return" "the most beautiful poem that has been written in the free form, one of the few in which I find real organic rhythm" (UP2 414). This praise would be true of parts of *The Cantos* too, but, remembering the descriptions of the nature of the contemporary Phase of the world's cycle, in the Introduction Yeats goes beyond his tentative remarks included in *A Packet for Ezra Pound* (AVB 4–5):

There is no transmission through time, we pass without comment from ancient Greece to modern England, from modern England to medieval China; the symphony, the pattern, is timeless, flux eternal and therefore without movement. Like other readers I discover at present merely exquisite or grotesque fragments. He hopes to give the impression that all is living, that there are no edges, no convexities, nothing to check the flow. (CW5 193)

While in 1929, Yeats reservedly suggested that he “cannot find any adequate definition” for the pattern of *The Cantos* (AVB 5), in the introduction, he comes to regard the epic as an experiment that essentially failed to “wring lilies from the acorn,” as Pound put it in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*.²³ In his estimation of *The Cantos*, Yeats uses Pound’s own idea from Canto VII: “Life to make mock of motion: / For the husks, before me, move, / The words rattle: shells given out by shells.”²⁴ Yeats concludes that “since the appearance of the first Canto I have tried to suspend judgement” (CW5 193) and so echoes Eliot, who claimed that “We will leave it [“Three Cantos”] as a test: when anyone has studied Mr. Pound’s poems in chronological order [...] he is prepared for the Cantos—but not till then.”²⁵

Yeats told Pound that he “should like to use Canto XVII” (*CL InteLex* 6440), the only Canto to have made it to *The Oxford Book*, excusing such a limited selection with Pound’s high financial expectations. Still, Canto XVII adeptly illustrates Yeats’s criticism of Pound’s project, for its description of what Pound in a letter to his father called “a sort of paradiso terrestre”²⁶ turns out to be an evocation of stillness rather than a lively landscape that is suggested by the opening line, “So that the vines burst from my fingers” (*OBMV* 243). It continues,

Flat water before me,
 and the trees growing in water,
 Marble trunks out of stillness,
 On past the palazzi,
 in the stillness,
 The light now, not of the sun. (*OBMV* 244)

This stasis cannot be the paradise, as Albright, silently following Yeats, noted: “there is an undertone of the artificiality, of surrogation: marble columns have replaced tree-trunks.”²⁷ Therefore it is the fragmentation of the imagist technique (“arbitrary symbols” for Yeats) and over-intellectualization at the expense of emotion that for Yeats prove to be the determining features of Pound’s verse.

The tension in Canto XVII between lively metamorphosis and deadened permanence²⁸ is approached by Yeats in “Byzantium”:

At midnight on the Emperor’s pavement flit
 Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
 Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
 Where blood-begotten spirits come
 And all complexities of fury leave,
 Dying into a dance,
 An agony of trance,
 An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve. (*VP* 498)

This is an evocation of a land beyond the fleshly realm, full of the “holy fire” of the earlier “Sailing to Byzantium” and as such it evokes a paradise that a symbolist poet yearns to attain but knows “that moment though eternal in the Daimon passes from us because it is not an attainment of our whole being.”²⁹ The instant the poet beholds the Byzantine glory of all complexities “Dying into a dance, / An agony of trance,” he sees as much as participates and embodies the fleeting equipoise that, representing the perfect proportion of the dancing body that one cannot tell from the dance, invokes Unity of Being. Yet, Byzantium is no “paradiso terrestre” and so Unity of Being is broken as the poet’s eye moves to behold a vision of souls entering the paradise. Despite its being a disembodied place, Yeats’s Byzantium is full of fleshly life: its blood, agony, and trance. Compared to the Zagreus world of marble repose, Byzantium is a breathing city, its offer of Unity of Being nearly tangible. Canto XVII thus represents logopoeia in its emotionally starkest form rather than living verse.³⁰ With this point in view, Yeats regarded Dorothy Wellesley as an opposite to Pound. All his work, he told Wellesley, was “a single strained attitude instead of passion, the sexless American professor for all his violence” (*LDW* 23). By contrast, “To Dorothy Wellesley nature is a womb, a darkness; its surface is sleep, upon sleep we walk, into sleep we drive the plough, and there lie the happy, the wise, the unconceived” (*CW5* 197). Whereas she offered emotional and rhythmical intensity, Pound, according to Yeats, saw nothing but patterns, symphonies, fugues and violent systematization of Unity of Fact.

The youngest generation of “moderns” that Yeats included in *The Oxford Book*, “the Auden school” included MacNeice, Spender and Day Lewis. In the broadcast, he put them in the line of Eliot and the war poets, adding that “Some of these poets are Communists, but even in those who are not, there is an overwhelming social bitterness” (*CW5* 95). Yeats’s estimation of those poets, “a school [...] I greatly admire” (*CW5* 193), is at least as ambiguous as his perception of Eliot and Pound: “I can seldom find more than half a dozen lyrics that I like, yet in this moment of sympathy I prefer them to Eliot, to myself—I too have tried to be modern” (*CW5* 200).³¹ Although his preference is firmly on the side of Wellesley, Turner, and the Irish new romantics such as Gogarty, the poets of the 1930s have an allure for Yeats, even if only to perpetuate the conflict between heroic and objective-materialist poetry. This transpires from his early letter to Wellesley where he explains the heroic mood by his customary reference to Ernest Dowson’s “Villanelle of the Poet’s Road”: “Unto us they belong, / Us the bitter and gay, / Wine and women and song” (misquoted in *LDW* 7; quoted in *CW3* 241); this he then compares to the new generation of poets:

When there is despair, public or private, when settled order seems lost, people look for strength within or without. Auden, Spender, all that seem the new movement *look* for strength in Marxian socialism, or in Major Douglas; they want marching feet. The lasting expression of our time is not this obvious choice but in a sense of something steel-like and cold within the will, something passionate and cold. (*LDW* 7)

There is a degree of unacknowledged celebration in the suggestion that “they want marching feet.” Marching held some appeal to Yeats who only a few years before wrote songs for the Blueshirts, much given to parading in uniform. Also, by recognizing “something passionate & cold” about the verse of Auden and Spender, Yeats admits them to his singing school, “cold / And passionate as the dawn” (*VP* 348). Furthermore, as with Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, it was drama—in this case Auden and Christopher Isherwood’s collaboration—that appealed to Yeats more than the poetry. In March 1937, he told Doone that he “thought your production of the Auden play [*Dog beneath the Skin*] almost flawless the play it self in parts magnificent” (*CL IntelLex* 6858). What Yeats must have found congenial in the play was its radically anti-realist and blatantly immoral portrayal of the modern world’s failures. The decay of aristocracy, dishonesty of press, infantile solipsism of poetry, idolatry of science, and the inability to respond to the madness of production-obsessed regimes (in the play, the regime is implied to be the Nazis) all lead to “Despair so far invading every tissue [that] it has destroyed [...] the hidden seat of the desire and the intelligence.”³²

What Yeats could not accommodate in the “Auden school” was their mutual resemblance, which was not politically motivated but rather resulted from “the contemplation of fact [that] has compelled them to seek beyond the flux something unchanging, inviolate, that country where no ghost haunts, no beloved lures because it has neither past nor future” (*CW5* 201). Although such features of their poetry as searching for “something unchanging, inviolate” would seem reminiscent of Yeats’s own work, they fail in Yeats’s eyes in a similar manner to Pound in that the search for what lies beyond the chaos of the present moment leads to a still paradise. This is evident in his observation that “We have been gradually approaching this art [of ‘the Auden school’] through that cult of sincerity, that refusal to multiply personality which is characteristic of our time”; therefore, in the work of the poets of the 1930s “stands not this or that man but man’s naked mind” (*CW5* 200). It is “the Auden school” who are blamed for their dismissal of personality in favor of psychological objectivism, which Yeats already recognized in Eliot. Yeats discovered that remote and unattainable sincerity in poems like Auden’s “This Lunar Beauty,” which he included in *The Oxford Book* but which Auden himself later rescinded: “This lunar beauty / Has

no history / Is complete and early" (*OBMV* 429). While Auden is made into a cold quester after ideals, MacNeice is criticized for contemplating "the modern world with even greater horror than the communist Day Lewis" (*CW5* 201). In all those poets' work, there is no moment of transformation of the lived experience into poetic matter. Auden deflates the romantic ideal, as in these lines from "It's no use raising a Shout": "I don't want any more hugs; / Make me some fresh tea, fetch me some rugs" (*OBMV* 427); MacNeice mockingly looks about and sees the young who "Are always cowardly and never sober / Drunk with steam-organs thigh-rub and cream-soda" ("The Individualist speaks" *OBMV* 419); Day Lewis bitterly exposes inanity of ideals like love that surrender to material pressures: "Come, live with me and be my love, / And we will all the pleasures prove / Of peace and plenty, bed and board, / That chance employment may afford" (*OBMV* 415); finally Spender declares that "An 'I' can never be Great Man" because of its egotistic denial of life circumstances (*OBMV* 433).

For Yeats, the Auden school and communism both follow on from Stendhal's realism. In his 1930 Diary, he asserts that "Because Freedom is gone we have Stendhal's 'mirror dawdling down a lane'" (*Ex* 333), thus suggesting that the problem with realism (which Yeats tended to see narrowly, mainly in reference to the French nineteenth-century realist novel) is its inability to create "those extravagant characters and emotions which have always arisen spontaneously from the human mind when it sees itself exempt from death and decay, responsible to its source alone" (*Ex* 333). The same ineptitude extends to the Auden school, who will express "man's naked mind" but only in so far as it operates on a daily basis, while the mind's actual thoughts, when it folds into itself, are neglected. Therefore from mind to material reality, the 1930s poets seek Unity of Fact in representing the surrounding world. What matter are impersonal (though this is not their greatest sin) objective depiction, intellectual rather than emotional cognition and materialist bias.

If Eliot and Pound were the harbingers of Phase 23 of the historical cycle, revelling in reality, training their infallibly observant eye on each fragment of the world, and exposing the minutiae of the working of the human mind, then Auden, MacNeice, Spender, Day Lewis may be taken to signal Phase 24:

Instead of burning intellectual abstraction, as did Phase 23, in a technical fire, it [Phase 24] grinds moral abstraction in a mill. This mill, created by the freed intellect, is a code of personal conduct, which being formed from social and historical tradition, remains always concrete in the mind. All is sacrificed to this code; moral strength reaches its climax. (*CW13* 84)

A man of this Phase does not look to tradition in a search for ancestral emotion that is renewed in song but for a code of conduct to be blindly followed. The

moral candor of the poems written by the 1930s generation that Yeats chose for *The Oxford Book* shows that in his estimation, Auden and company kept focus on the role of the poet as engaged in social issues. In a letter to Margot Collis, Yeats confessed, "I am trying to understand for the sake of my Cambridge [sic] Book of Modern Verse the Auden, Eliot school" and added "must define my objections to it, and I cannot know this till I see clearly what quality it has [that has] made it delight young Cambridge and young Oxford" (*CL InteLex* 6189). Three days later he restated his problem in a letter to Olivia Shakespear: "My problem this time will be: "How far do I like the Ezra, Eliot, Auden school and if I do not, why not?" Then he asks, "Why do the younger generation like it so much? What do they see or hope?" (*L* 833)³³

Eventually, Yeats's selections from the modern movement for *The Oxford Book* came to symbolize the historical moment in the cycle of the world as envisioned by George's Instructors; the fact that reviewers almost unanimously condemned his anthology only confirmed him in his opinion. The romantic group, Wellesley, Turner, and the Irish poets, were brought together as a bulwark against the inexorable pull of modernity. As he declared in a letter to Laura Riding, the anthology was his "table of values" (*CL InteLex* 6541). In this sense, *The Oxford Book* reprises the role of *A Vision* which, as Yeats told Edmund Dulac in 1924 after completing the first edition, meant for him "a last act of defense against the chaos of the world" (*CL InteLex* 4525). Looking over his statements on Eliot, Pound, and Auden and his circle, one may remember that Yeats regarded his gyres as "stylistic arrangements of experience" that "have helped [him] to hold in a single thought reality and justice" (*AVB* 25). Complex though his appraisal of the moderns was, in the second part of the 1930s, Yeats made a last effort to find a way to reconcile reality and justice in his estimation of the poetry that he knew was avowedly preoccupied with both.

Notes

1. When completing the paper the author has been supported by the Foundation for Polish Science (FNP).
2. T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1976), 297.
3. The effects of this reading on Yeats's post-1935 poetry are traced by Michael Cade-Stewart, "Mask and Robe: Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) and *New Poems* (1938)," *YA* 18, 221–258.
4. Louis MacNeice, *The Letters of Louis MacNeice*, ed. J. Allison (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 289.
5. The term modern poets, rather than modernist, is used throughout the present paper to collectively refer to Pound, Eliot, Auden, MacNeice and Day Lewis. I avoid modernist so as not to confuse the meanings of modernism that would have been familiar to some poets in the 1930s, following the first use of the term by Robert Graves and Laura Riding in their anthology *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), and what currently is denoted by it.

6. Quoted in R. F. Foster, "Fascism," in *W. B. Yeats in Context*, ed. David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 218.
7. The most consistent argument for Yeats's involvement with fascism and Nazism is developed by W. J. McCormack, *Blood Kindred* (London: Pimlico, 2005).
8. David Bradshaw, "Eugenics: They Should Certainly Be Killed," in *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, ed. David Bradshaw (Maldon: Blackwell, 2003), 48.
9. See Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry: W. B. Yeats to Michael Longley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61.
10. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1960), 100.
11. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, 98.
12. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, in *Poems and Prophecies* (London: Everyman's Library, 1976), 256. Yeats commends that fragment in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" (*CW4* 60); Yeats refers to a number of fountains in Shelley's work (*CW4* 62), principally to *The Revolt of Islam*, in *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 67, 105, 109, 151; *Prometheus Unbound*, in *Poetical works*, 250, 246; and *Rosalind and Helen*, in *Poetical Works*, 169.
13. Charles I. Armstrong, *Reframing Yeats* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 17.
14. Richard Greaves, *Transition, Reception and Modernism in W. B. Yeats* (London: Palgrave, 2001), 24.
15. John Kelly, "Eliot and Yeats," *YA* 20, 185, 191–92. Kelly sees a fundamental affinity between "Yeats's dictum that it 'is not permitted to a man, who takes up pen or chisel, to seek originality, for passion is his only business.'" Although by "passion" Yeats means an intense emotion that has been refined through centuries of existence in the *Anima Mundi*, his insistence on a heightened drama would have been uncongenial to Eliot, a point that Kelly pays little attention to.
16. Longley argues that "In 'Poetry and Tradition,' Yeats describes himself as 'seeing all in the light of European literature,' regrets that power has passed to 'small shopkeepers, to clerks,' and ends by lamenting (Ireland's) failure to 'fill our porcelain jars against the coming winter.' That almost seems a template for 'The Waste Land.' Yeats and Eliot also overlap in recommending tradition to other poets. First, they both attack Wordsworthian subjectivity. Yeats's 'perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender' surely influences Eliot 'not expression of personality, but an escape from personality.' [...] Second, Yeats advises 'long frequenting of the great Masters;' Eliot says: 'Tradition [...] cannot be inherited [...] you must obtain it by great labour.'" *Yeats and Modern Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 45. See also Kelly, "Eliot and Yeats," 211–12.
17. T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: 1923–1925*, ed. Valerie Eliot, Hugh Haughton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 39.
18. Longley, *Yeats and Modern Poetry*, 47–48.
19. T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 79.
20. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, 52.
21. There may have been a note of ingratiation in the praise, given that Eliot was then serializing Yeats's *Trembling of the Veil* in the *Criterion*. If so, Eliot decided to play along, expressing "a very great satisfaction that you like *The Waste Land*." *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, 22.
22. This is partly due to the fact that Pound's early poetry was written in the Yeatsian vein. The last poem of Pound that Yeats praised was the first half of part one of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*: "The first 14 pages [of *Mauberley*] have an extraordinary distinction, & an utterly new music. [...] [T]here certainly you have discovered yourself—a melancholy full of wisdom & self knowledge that is full of beauty—style which is always neighbour to nobility when it is neighbour to beauty, a proud humility, that quality that makes ones hair stand up as though one saw a spirit. You have gripped all that now" (*CL IntelLex* 3771).

23. Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (London: The Ovid Press, 1920), 9.
24. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1983), 27.
25. T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 182.
26. Ezra Pound, *Ezra Pound to his Parents. Letters 1895–1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 565.
27. Daniel Albright, “Early Cantos I–XLI,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 79.
28. See Sean Pryor, *W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and The Poetry of Paradise* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 73.
29. Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 221.
30. Pound defines it as “the dance of the intellect among words.” *Literary Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 25.
31. This is a perplexing pronouncement. Yeats may have been alluding to just that statement when he wrote to Eliot to make matters straight: “This morning I got, in a letter from a friend, an extract from *The Observer* saying that in my forthcoming anthology I preferred MacNeice & Auden to you. I have done nothing of the kind” (*CL InteLex* 6704).
32. W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, *The Dog beneath the Skin, or Where Is Francis?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), 56.
33. The dating of this letter in *CL InteLex* 6191 is 28 February 1935.