Yeats’s Meditative Spaces: Between Modernity and Coloniality

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The twentieth-century debate between modernist and postcolonial scholars around the figure of W.B. Yeats should move beyond purely modern or postcolonial frameworks. Yeats’s poems can be read as meditations through which the Irish poet both anticipates the promise of a postcolonial, modern world, and yet remains attached to the lasting structures of its twinned dark excess: coloniality. As such, it is necessary to read Yeats as a poet confronted by a modernity that disguises its coloniality, or put another way, to conceptualize a heterogeneous reading of Yeats that goes beyond the purely emancipatory readings offered by previous readers of his oeuvre.

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Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

—W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” (1939)

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“F or poetry makes nothing happen,” Auden famously writes in his elegy to W.B. Yeats, a poem that both commemorates and criticizes the Irish poet and his indubitable influence on the poetics of twentieth-century literature. Auden commemorates his predecessor for his artistic achievement and for his revitalization of form and style—particularly for his use of contemporary events as poetic spaces for occasional yet powerful meditations. In fact, Auden’s subject matter is self-consciously apt, insofar as he uses a contemporary event—the death of W.B. Yeats—to ponder the poetic grandeur and concrete limitations of the poet’s literary achievement. But Yeats was also a man of eyebrow-raising politics, a vituperative, affected aristocrat and recalcitrant aesthete who often failed to engage with the social and political degradation of war-torn Europe. This is why Auden’s brutally honest elegy is also the indictment of an atavistic poet who retrenched himself from inconvenient social realities. Now that Yeats’s body—his corpus—“is scattered among a hundred cities,” Auden prophetically foresees a time when the poet will no longer have agency over the meaning of his words. Yeats pays the price of canonization: his poetry will change according to the reception of future audiences; his poetic lines will be “modified in the guts of the living.”

With his liminal elegy, Auden initiates commemoration and indictment, celebration and accusation, a pattern of extremes that runs through the reception of Yeats’s oeuvre. In a prose piece written the same year, Auden uses a wry, forensic style to further dissect the legacy of the Irish poet. Titled “The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats,” the essay is structured as a court proceeding wherein the indictment of “the public prosecutor” is followed by the arguments of the “counsel for the defense.” The prosecutor’s argument is centered on what he considers the requirements to be considered a great poet: “... a profound understanding of the age in which he lived, and ... a working knowledge of and sympathetic attitude towards the most progressive thought of his time” (“Public” 3). Yeats, he argues, celebrated the life of peasants from the lofty heights of his tower, all the while ignoring their rumbling stomachs and the very real needs of their material existence. In short, he was a petit bourgeois with a “feudal mentality,” careful not to offend “neither the Irish Republican nor the British Army ...” (“Public” 4). In response, the defense trounces the prosecutor’s trenchant critique with one seemingly simple question: do we read poetry in search for social policy? Despite Yeats’s conservative temperament, Auden concludes, his poems “express a sustained protest against the social atomization caused by industrialism” (Auden, “Public” 7).

Auden’s conclusion synthesizes a Marxian reading of Yeats’s poetry, one that echoes Engels’s reading of Balzac as a writer who “was compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices” (“Engels to Margaret Harkness,” 116)—a writer who portrayed social reality despite his own idiosyncrasies. This view, while inherently reductive, is indicative of the way literary reception can accommodate a poet’s eccentricities for the sake of periodization or even ideological adjustment. Auden admires Yeats’s diction, as well as his occasional verse, but
eschews his regressive politics and esoteric interests. He thereby builds a model of Yeats as a modernist poet who fits well within both his own poetic genealogy and socially engaged cultural project.

Yet it is not only poets who meld the canon with their artistic tools. Most often literary critics, with their analytical armamentarium, give shape to a poet’s features and construct spaces of interpretation designed to fit their own critical, political, even professional interests. Since the early 1980s, a number of critics have studied Yeats’s poetry through the lens of postcolonial theory and criticism. Their project has enlarged the corpus of Yeatsian studies and revealed important elements in his poetic work that engage with political agency, the legacy of colonial rule, and the paradoxes of independence and cultural sovereignty. All of these issues are resonant in postcolonial literature, and considering Yeats’s, indeed Ireland’s, postcolonial status affords unexpected resonances and important contrasts with writers from decolonized and peripheral spaces.

Yet the idea of Yeats as a postcolonial poet is much more tenuous and opaque than postcolonial critics are willing to consider, and their work has often been met with skepticism, usually by scholars of Irish Studies. Sadly, their debates have become as reductive and judicial as Auden’s forensic essayism. My purpose here is not to replicate their arguments. I will argue that instead of labeling Yeats as a “postcolonial poet,” it is much more productive to consider the implications of Yeats’s unique position within both coloniality and modernity. After a brief discussion of the term coloniality, I will conceptualize a number of Yeats’s occasional or public poems as meditative spaces in which the poet’s ambivalence toward modernity mirrors his ambivalence toward the lasting presence of colonial structures.

The library of Yeatsian criticism is vast, as is Yeatsian criticism in a postcolonial key. The works of Seamus Deane and Declan Kiberd are usually acknowledged as important primers, though as Conor McCarthy notes, the conversation was further cemented by Edward Said and his essay “Yeats and Decolonization,” published as a Field Day pamphlet in the late 1980s (McCarthy 312). To summarize, Said views Yeats as a national poet, the artist whose voice serves as the foundation of political and cultural independence. Crucially, Said situates the Irish poet within a colonial matrix and argues that his use of Irish place names should be understood as a poetics of recuperation, wherein the act of naming displaces the hegemony of imperial space. “Before [anti-imperialist resistance], there is a pressing need for the recovery of the land,” he writes, “which, because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, is recoverable at first only through the imagination” (Said 11). Identifying Yeats as an anti-colonial poet, Said reads his early work as an effort “to seek out, to map, to invent, or to discover, a third nature, which is not pristine and pre-historical . . . but one which derives historically and abductively from the deprivations of the present.” Said calls this impulse toward recuperative naming “the cartographic” (Said 12; emphasis original).

Said’s interpretation of the role of names in Yeatsian poetics affords a new understanding of his early poetry, but it also elides and sublimes a number
of complexities. In an early poem, “The Ballad of Father O’Hart,” Yeats uses the figure of a provincial Catholic priest who is stripped of his lands during the “penal days” (CP 10), referring to the period of the penal laws (1695–1727), which forbade Catholics from owning land in Ireland. The priest’s death is cause for great sadness and spiritual consternation. The natural geography itself wails his passing:

And these were the works of John
When, weeping score by score,
People came into Coloony;
For he’d died at ninety-four.

There was no human keening
The birds from Knocknarea
And the world round Knocknashee
Came keening in that day. (CP 11)

In order to recuperate the historical appropriation of the land, the poet foregrounds the Gaelic names of Irish places by building rhythmic patterns out of their assonant qualities.

However, these names have a more complex role than mere nationalist posturing or historical recuperation, since Yeats also depends on legibility and translatability, and as such he Anglicizes the Gaelic names in a move that mirrors the imperial conquest of space. This is particularly evident in what is perhaps Yeats’s most famous poem, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” wherein the poet yearns for the rural landscape of his native Sligo, encapsulated in the metonymy of the small island of Innisfree. But Yeats does not use the Irish name—Inis Fraoigh—and perhaps more crucially, he is said to have been inspired to write the lyric while living in London, after seeing a fountain in the urban setting of the imperial metropolis.

Said is perhaps too quick to consider Yeats as a national poet of decolonization. He was definitely involved as a nationalist poet of the Irish revival, and he was intimately concerned with the project of the Irish Free State, but he also cultivated the pose of the nationalist poet for his own artistic goals. Moreover, he was keenly aware of his English readers and he was not conversant in the Irish language. As Said himself admits,

For Yeats, the overlapping he knew existed between his Irish nationalism and the English cultural heritage that both dominated and empowered him as a writer, was bound to cause an over-heated tension, and it is the pressure of this urgently political and secular tension that one may speculate caused him to try to resolve it on a ‘higher,’ that is, non-political level. (Said 13)

But Said makes this distinction when he analyzes Yeats’s late period, with the aged poet’s colorings of Byzantium and the abstruse, esoteric systematics of A Vision, and he fails to recognize that the poet’s nationalist project is intimately tied
to his ambivalence toward modernity and the prevalence of a colonialismentality even in his early poetry.

Said cites in his reflection on “Yeats and Decolonization” a revealing quote from Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth:*

> colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverse logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts it, disfigures and destroys it. (210)

These same lines serve as epigraph to Walter Mignolo’s essay “Delinking,” and the parallelism with Said is revealing since they arrive at different conclusions with regards to the legacy of colonialism on the colonized cultural landscape. Echoing the work of Peruvian sociologist, Aníbal Quijano, Mignolo grants that postmodern and postcolonial critics have initiated the critique of Totality, but he argues that it is necessary to develop this critique “from the perspective of coloniality and not only from the critique of post-modernity” (“Delinking” 451). Crucially, and I would argue problematically, Mignolo asserts that their own “critique of the modern notion of Totality doesn’t lead necessarily to post-coloniality but to de-coloniality” (“Delinking” 452). It is through this door, opening onto a utopian alternative—a de-linkage—from western modernity, he argues, the means through which “the analytic of coloniality and the programmatic of de-coloniality moves away and beyond the post-colonial” (“Delinking” 452).

Here my analysis parts ways from Mignolo’s de-coloniality. While I agree with his conception of coloniality as the “invisible and constitutive side of modernity,” I view with suspicion his program of de-linking, since it seems more performative than programmatic. In other words, I disagree with Mignolo’s de-colonial futurity but I find his conceptualization of coloniality engaging, since it describes the formation of elites that remained situated in the metropolitan or imperial project. Thus, coloniality affects both power and knowledge structures, since they become instruments of colonial control. Expanding on Quijano and Mignolo’s conceptualization, Nelson Maldonado-Torres adds that if “the coloniality of knowledge had to do with impact of colonization on the different areas of knowledge production, coloniality of being would make primary reference to the lived experience of colonization and its impact on language” (242). Separate yet emanating from colonization, coloniality is the obverse or constitutive Other of modernity, an ambivalence, I argue, that is an important presence in Yeats’s poetics.

As a member of the Anglo-Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, Yeats is caught up in the discourse of coloniality, and his poetry bears the “marks of a temporality stranded between the time of a dying colonialism and a stillborn nationalism” (Gikandi 176). In Yeats’s work, this fractured temporality is projected onto real spaces, such as the ancestral houses of the Anglo-Protestant ascendancy. This
conflation of time and space is most palpable in Yeats's poems on public and political events.

For instance, in an atavistic gesture, Yeats revives the seventeenth century British tradition of country-house poems when he writes "Upon a House shaken by Land Agitation" in order to defend the landed state of his benefactress, Lady Gregory, from redistributive land reform. The poem is both a celebration of large ancestral houses as symbols of aristocratic cultural values, and a skeptical prodding of the dynamics of political change. It takes the form of a questionnaire directed at modernity:

How should the world be luckier if this house,
Where passion and precision have been one,
Time out of mind, became too ruinous,
To breed the heedless eye that loves the sun?
And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow
Where wings have memory of wings, and all
That comes of the best knit to the best? Although
Mean roof-trees were sturdier for its fall,
How should their luck run high to reach
The gifts that govern men, and after these
To gradual Time's last gift, a written speech
Wrought of high laughter, loneliness and ease? (CP 95–96)

With three rhetorical questions, Yeats indict modern political change and argues for genealogical continuity. He presents aristocratic dwellings as timeless places of gaiety and non-productive yet spiritual reveries. These are spaces from whence civilizing values emanate to the rest of society. To be cultured is to come from ancestral states, "where wings have memory of wings," that is, from places that have long cultivated higher values for their own sake. To be cultured, in other words, is to be part of a long process of cultivation, a word that comes to us through the Latin colere, and which is intimately tied to the semantic mappings of colonization (OED). By arguing against the debasement of aristocratic "high laughter, loneliness and ease," Yeats betrays a sensibility that is both skeptical of modernity and caught up in the structures of coloniality.

Returning to the ballad form with savage irony, Yeats writes a trenchant poetic critique of Irish society in "September, 1913." Courting controversy, and perhaps public notoriety, he published his polemic in The Irish Times, a publication with notorious Unionist allegiances. The poet addresses his readership with in an acerbic tone, inquiring with an indignant irony:

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone... (CP 108)
Exploiting the ambiguities of an unnamed addressee, "you," Yeats seems to direct his condescending speech at the whole of Irish society. The skeptical speaker questions the value, currency, or even viability of the nationalist project for a people without aspirations. He portrays them in pathetic spaces, such as the metonymical "greasy till," lowering their gazes from larger emancipatory projects in order to count meager coins and bead after lacquered bead in mercantile and Catholic prayer. These are people who "were born to pray and save," and as the tragic refrain concludes: "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave" (CP 108). In the end, the poem serves as Yeats's farewell to the nationalist cause, since the fallow consciousness of Ireland is far too meager for sovereignty.

Nevertheless, a yearning for the hopes of the nationalist cause flutters under the surface of Yeats's critique, since his tone reveals a real striving for change amid the stasis stifling Irish society. In fact, Yeats rescinds his defeatist valediction in what would become one of the most famous political poems of the twentieth century, "Easter, 1916." Returning to the static atmospheres of "September, 1913," he depicts in the first stanza a series of urban spaces populated by unassuming characters, socialites, businessmen, and dilettantes. They come from spaces reminiscent of the "greasy till": "counter or desk among grey Eighteenth-century houses" (CP 180). Crucially, this group belongs to the Catholic high caste of Dublin, and Yeats passes them in the street, regarding them with gestures, "a nod of the head," or "polite meaningless words..." (CP 180). These gestures convey a repetitive quotidian reality, with little promise of change in the air. And yet, the quantity of days leads to an utter transformation, a momentous qualitative change, "A terrible beauty is born" (CP 180).

Interestingly, in the context of a poem about urban spaces, the most dramatic, synergistic images are presented through a series of rural motifs:

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brime,
And a horse plashes within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of it all. (CP 181)
The rapid succession of images and the foregrounding of time ("minute by minute") create a poetic photomontage, a dizzying cinematic effect that operates as a formal metaphor for revolutionary change. The procession of images also functions analogically; they all waver between permanence and impermanence: "the shadow of a cloud on the stream," and the imprint of a "horse-hoof" on a country road are fleeting moments that create a kind of geological legibility on the changing landscape. In other words, these tiny changes accrue within the landscape and slowly lead to irrevocable and momentous change: a stone muddying the waters of the stream, or what Benjamin would call a whirlpool, an eddy on the river of becoming.

This particular stanza (in what is arguably Yeats's most discussed poem) has received a considerable amount of critical attention. As Marjorie Perloff points out, critics have often attempted to trace philological resonances back to specific moments in Yeats's life and archive (such as his descriptions of childhood in rural Ireland, his correspondence with Maud Gonne, etc.), without entirely removing the opaque halo surrounding the stanza. Indeed, a paratext to "Easter, 1916," namely Yeats's play The Dreaming of the Bones ("Time—1916") contains an important number of stylistic and thematic similarities, but it does not entirely settle the dislocation of the poem's climactic stanza. As one of three dramatic works known collectively as "the Cuchulain cycle," the play can be read as an overtly nationalist document, and despite the "Young Man's" ambivalent wanderings in rural Ireland, this nationalist reading seems to be entirely warranted.

The most crucial point about this stanza is precisely its dislocation. In other words, fully understanding what Yeats is doing in the poem is not only a matter of reading or peeling back Yeats's multifaceted thematic framework, but also of accounting the way the stanza depicts the experience of change in both historical time and natural history. It is in these dislocated images, marked by their historical time, where the allegorical mode displays the nakedness of the postcolonial instant. As Benjamin observes, "The wrenching of things from their familiar contexts ... is linked to the destruction of organic contexts in the allegorical intention" (Origin 173).

The overall effect of this succession of images can be characterized as one of arrested or petrified change. In Benjaminian terms, we might say the stanza as a whole unfolds as a dialectical image, an Ur-Image [Urbißt], "that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the river of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis" (Origin 45). By re-focusing a poem about urban spaces and human, political change onto the expressionless features of the primordial landscape, Yeats both celebrates and dislocates the momentous arrival of historical change. In other words, the jolt of revolution, the postcolonial instant, is ultimately allegorized; it is displaced and mediated by the longue durée of natural history. Additionally, the poem foregrounds the allegorical schematizations of History, given that its commemorative title—steeped in the resonant, regenerative rhythms of Easter—can be characterized as a deliberate adoption of genre and convention. Yeats uses
allegorical representation, in other words, as an expression of convention (Origin 175). The poet both names and allegorizes the uprising in an elegiac mood of collective mourning. As Benjamin astutely observes elsewhere: “To write history means giving calendar dates their physiognomy” (“Central Park” 165).

Retrospectively, Yeats himself seems to echo this characterization. As he later describes his poetic view of the rebellion in the brooding lines of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion:”

It was the dream itself enchanted me:
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of. (CP 28–32)

This poignant stanza memorializes the allegorical schemas Yeats created in his younger years. Crucially, Yeats distinguishes between the actual, concrete “things”—the facts and details about the rebellion—and the event’s allegorical transfiguration, “the dream itself”: the emblematic face superimposed on it. Looking back at his youthful poetry, he limns his art as a bestiary of senescent emblems, mere symbolic husks, “allegorical dreams . . .” (CP 10–11). In other words, Yeats seems to atone for his aesthetic-political myopia in the face of historical change. But whereas here the mature poet recognizes the allegorical valences of his earlier poetry, the younger Yeats had quite explicitly divorced his ars poetica from mere “allegorical amusement” and had emphasized instead the unity of the symbolic mode.

Yeats’s retrospective meditation in “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” points us to the much-discussed volte-face in his poetics, and to the crucial recalibration of his fin-de-siècle aesthetics after The Wind Among the Reeds (1899). As the young Paul de Man concludes in his dissertation, “Mallarmé, Yeats, and the Post-Romantic Predicament,” and in its subsequent, revised version:

... Yeats never really abandoned the emblematic style of The Wind Among the Reeds. Learning from the failure of this book, he now becomes much more cautious, strategically avoids some of the stylistic pitfalls and masks his real predicament behind a screen of ambiguities which has succeeded in convincing a majority of readers that he is much more assertive and self-confident, though a much less considerable poet than he really is” (Rhetoric 184).

De Man identifies the ambiguous kernel of Yeats’s aesthetic revolution, eloquently explaining the poet’s ambivalent gesture of changing seemingly everything about his art, only to leave it essentially unchanged. “The style is not really new,” de Man observes, “because the underlying problem has not changed ... the emblems are in reality pseudo-emblems, dead allegories that cover up the defeat of the natural image” (Rhetoric 172). Interestingly, this is one of the few instances in which de Man uses the more accurate concept of allegory to describe Yeats’s poetic ambivalence, and he replicates instead the confused categories of “image and
emblem” Yeats himself conceptualized. While de Man’s later work would develop a multi-level understanding of allegory and its importance in modern literary expression and criticism, his dissertation on Yeats (written under the guidance of Reuben Brower) is still embedded in a New Critical paradigm, with its attendant, orthodox dance around the unity of the literary symbol (Waters 140).

Like Yeats’s poetics, de Man’s critical framework would undergo a radical transformation. After discovering Walter Benjamin’s important yet forgotten allegorical analysis, he would take heed of its theoretical conclusions, in however adulterated form. As Lindsay Waters points out, “Benjamin had already traveled in the 1920s the route de Man was to travel much later…” (149). Benjamin’s allegorical conceptualization would provide de Man a way out of the forest of symbols enclosed in the parcelled lands of New Criticism. Thus, the younger critic is on the right track when he uses the category of emblem to describe the multifarious valences of Yeats’s allegorical framework. But despite his eloquent description of Yeats’s ambivalent poetics, de Man’s vague conceptual framework ends up muddying his analytical insights. By remaining close to the organic vocabulary of image and symbol, de Man in his early work on Yeats evinces the residual influence of romantic criticism with its emphasis on wholeness, continuity, and immediacy. As Waters concludes, it would take “the added power of Benjamin’s critique of the organic symbol and his positive notion of allegory…” for Paul de Man to move away from a conception of the “symbol as the fusion of image and idea,” and toward his own post-structural theory of language and interpretation as allegorical constructs (149).

To be sure, there is no textual evidence of Yeats himself ever coming into contact with the critical work of (the much younger) Walter Benjamin. Conversely, the Jewish critic addresses Yeats’s work in his book on the German Baroque mourning-play, The Origin of German Tragic Drama [Trauerspiels]. Conceptualized as a study of the early modern allegory as a literary figure shot through by the arrival of secular history, Benjamin’s habilitation thesis (or Habilitationsschrift) is also a polemic against what he considers a prevalent confusion in the critical concepts of his contemporaries—artists and scholars who celebrate the “organic unity” of the symbol while simultaneously decrying the supposed turgidity of allegorical conventions. “Even great artists and exceptional theoreticians, such as Yeats,” he writes,

still assume that allegory is a conventional relationship between an illustrative image and its abstract meaning. Generally authors have only a vague knowledge of the authentic documents of the modern allegorical way of looking at things, the literary and visual emblem-books of the baroque” (Origin 162).

In this passage, Benjamin cites the German translation of Yeats’s Ideas of Good and Evil, specifically his essay on “William Blake and His Illustrations to The Divine Comedy.” In it, Yeats sets out to explain the symbolic power of Blake’s images, and includes a few critical remarks against allegorical modes of expression. For Yeats, the symbol is “the only possible expression of some invisible essence,” and
he describes its organic radiance—"a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame" (Ideas 176)—in a paradoxical formulation that more accurately describes the dialectical play of shadows typical of allegory, instead of the transcendental synthesis the symbol aspires to.

Seemingly unaware of this paradox, Yeats argues that compared to the uniqueness of the symbol, "allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or a familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not to imagination: the one is a revelation, the other an amusement" (Ideas 176). Symbols are otherworldly, super- or supra-natural emanations conveyed to the soul; allegories are mere conventional correspondences, the equivalent of a lantern projecting captioned images to amuse and instruct a child in his insulated room. For Yeats symbols are more immediate, pure vehicles of expression because they are poignant images aimed at the complex screens of our emotional lives. While allegories also use images and correspondences to convey a particular expression, they emphasize ideas instead of emotions since they direct their fanciful amusements at the intellect and its schematizations. In short, Yeats's essay on Blake—an exultant celebration of the visionary bard and dismissal of the allegorist—recapitulates a post-Enlightenment conceptualization (and valorization) of the symbolic mode as the primary medium of poetic expression.

In a related essay from Ideas of Good and Evil, "The Symbolism of Poetry," Yeats characterizes two distinct orientations that constitute the symbolic mode, namely, the symbol's emotional and intellectual tendencies. The intellectual tendency of the symbolic mode is the more prevalent, Yeats argues, since "outside the very definite traditions of mysticism and the less definite criticism of certain modern poets, these alone are called symbols" (Ideas 250). In other words, the more general, intellectual notion of symbolic apprehension defuses the potential of the symbol and transforms it instead into a mere a literary convention. Instrumentalized and codified "according to the way we speak of them and the companions we give them..." intellectual symbols gradually become "associated with ideas that are more than fragments of the shadows thrown upon the intellect by the emotions they evoke" (Ideas 250). According to Yeats's fragmentary symbolic theory, the intellect's measuring instruments ultimately transform the emotional resonances of the symbol into "the playthings of the allegorist or the pedant, and soon pass away" (Ideas 250).

Crucially, this symbolic division of labor—between emotions and ideas—betrays the supposed unity of the symbol. Consequently, this intractable, bipartite distinction slowly bogs down Yeats's analysis. He dismisses the trappings of allegory, and his aesthetics remain attached to the apotheosis of the symbol. By contrast, Benjamin seeks to avoid this misguided dance around the symbolic mode, "this distorted conception of the symbol... a romantic and destructive extravagance which preceded the desolation of modern art criticism" (Origin 160).

This brief excursus comparing Benjamin's allegorical aesthetics and Yeats's more conventional celebration of the symbol shows both the potential and the
limits of reading the one against the other. Despite these crucial differences, if one examines and compares each of their occult and mystical interests, specifically their Gnostic eschatological configurations—Benjamin's backward-facing angel and Yeats's slouching beast—a constellation of early twentieth-century anxieties about history, temporality, and spatiality unfolds itself in the gray skies of an incipient modernity. Yeats, for instance, in an abstruse footnote to "The Second Coming," explains that unlike the "narrowing gyre" before the birth of Christ the "widening gyre" prophesies that modernity "has almost reached its greatest expansion." Importantly, he goes on to describe the advent of this epoch dialectically, using imagery and concepts that come exceptionally close to Benjamin's own messianic formulations:

The revelation which approaches will however take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre. All our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not the continuance of itself but the revelation as in a lightning flash, though in a flash that will not strike only in one place, and will for a time be constantly repeated.... (Yeats, Variorum 825)

In comparison, Benjamin uses the following language to simultaneously distinguish and elide differences between secular or profane time—erected on the order of happiness—and messianic time, in "Theologico-Political Fragment":

It is the precondition of a mystical conception of history, encompassing a problem that can be represented figuratively. If one arrow points towards which the secular dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the messianic direction. (305–6)

The question of how two very different writers from such dissimilar cultural and political backgrounds could reach such similar conceptions around myth and history is ultimately beyond the scope of this essay. However, a quick examination of their interrelated ideas affords one a space in which Benjamin's revitalized allegorical theory and Yeats's poetic allegorizations can be viewed in tandem—through the prismatic effects of the dialectical image.

The dialectical image rehearses both the promise and perilousness—the "terrible beauty"—of modern change. Yeats portrays the Easter rebellion as an event that changes the configuration of the past and signals the composition of a new future. It is what Fredric Jameson defines in A Singular Modernity as

a promise within a present of time ... a way of possessing the future more immediately within that present itself. It is in this sense something of a Utopian figure, insofar as it includes and envelops a dimension of future temporality; but then in that case one would also add that it is an ideological distortion of the Utopian perspective, and constitutes something of a spurious promise intended in the long run to displace and replace the Utopian one. (35)
As a writer obsessed with historical change, evident in his cyclical theory of epochs and “widening gyres,” Yeats uses the concept of a total transformation (i.e. modernity) as a rhetorical strategy. He grafts the structure of his transformative trope of the narrative of history onto the natural landscape. Since the topological structure can be applied to dissimilar spaces and temporalities, the cycle will always begin anew; the gyre will keep ceaselessly turning. This leads to Yeats’s ambivalence toward the utopian yet tragic possibilities embedded in the project of modernity.

Yeats’s ambivalent stance toward modernity, and its obverse, its constitutive other, coloniality, is particularly palpable in his “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” his long poem about the Irish internecine conflict (1922–1923). Structured in seven parts, the poem calls attention to a dislocated consciousness that ambivalently veers in time and space. The first part, “Ancestral Houses,” returns to the Yeatsian celebration of large states as places of continuous aesthetic cultivation. The poet describes these as spaces where “Life overflows without ambitious pains / And never stoop to a mechanical / Or servile shape, at others’ beck and call” (CP, 200). Yet, in the context of generalized conflict, when the prerogative of the Anglo-Protestant ascendancy is rapidly declining, the houses have become mere husks of their glorious past, an “empty sea-shell flung / Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams.” These spaces that had once served as sites of creativity are now in a rapid stage of degradation.

Returning to an old trope, Yeats uses the form of the rhetorical question as a space for the indictment of modernity:

O what if leveled lawns and graveled ways
Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease
And Childhood a delight for every sense,
But take our greatness with our violence?

In the same manner as “Upon a House shaken by Land Agitation,” Yeats worries that dynastic degeneration has led to cultural degradation, and the violence that surrounds him is a palpable symptom of his worst fears.

Bringing the themes of the first poem closer to his spatial vicinity, Yeats titled the second movement “My House,” thereby creating a connection to “Ancestral Houses.” This is—in concrete terms—the poet’s working space and is therefore a kind of ars poetica, a myse en abyme of Yeats’s meditations. Tellingly, he returns to the poetics of photomontage and depicts space in the process of accruing change:

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 splashing of a dozen cows.... (CP 201)

Unlike the dizzying succession of images of “Easter, 1916,” here the effect is much
more controlled. The images rapidly succeed one another, but they are caught in
a state in between movement and petrification. The “ragged elms” and “thorns”
are old, perhaps dying, part of a landscape where even slow, bovine movement
causes fear. Like a civil war in which everyday life is static, the landscape that
surrounds the poet’s house is in a state of senescence. A sense of degradation is
palpable in the poem’s fourth movement, “My Descendants,” which depicts how
“the torn petals strew the garden plot; And there’s but common greenness after
that” (CP 203). For Yeats, a new commonness reigns, a quotidian state of violence
lording over a degraded Irish State.

In these spatial meditations, the poet’s ambivalence toward modernity and
coloniality reaches metaphysical dimensions. If he once celebrated the utopian
possibilities of Irish sovereignty, he is now deeply skeptical. This leads to a poetic
tone that veers in between vituperative rage and dejected anomic. In a passage
that could serve as an imagistic primer for the whole of his “Meditations,” he
yearns for destruction:

May this laborious stair and this stark tower
Become a roofless ruin that the owl
May build in the cracked masonry and cry
Her desolation to the desolate sky. (CP 203)

Like a destructive character tearing down the structural beams and foundations
of his poetic abode, the poet threatens to destroy the very space that houses
his expression. This yearning for ruination echoes a romantic plea for the ele-
ments to paradoxically continue the poet’s aesthetic project after his—and human
society’s—inevitable demise.

In the most hauntingly honest and immediate section of the poem, “The
Road at My Door,” Yeats presents himself as a pathetic, anachronistic figure, a
poet caught on the threshold of an aestheticist interior and a political exterior as
those realities pass by his door:

An affable Irregular,
A heavily built Falstaffian man,
Comes cracking jokes of civil war
As though to die by gunshot were
The finest play under the sun.

A brown lieutenant and his men,
Half dressed in national uniform,
Stand at my door, and I complain
Of the foul weather, hail and rain,
A pear tree broken by the storm.
I count those feathered balls of soot
The moor-hen guides upon the stream,
To silence the envy in my thought;
And turn towards my chamber, caught
In the cold snows of a dream. (CP 204)

With simple descriptions and language, Yeats is here beginning to approach the aesthetics of commitment favored by Auden. The poetic persona stands in the midst of quarrelling factions, and yet he does not pass judgment. In fact, he is almost sympathetic toward them, and even jealous in his description of warfare as “the finest play under the sun.” Instead of criticizing the violence around him, the speaker self-consciously criticizes his own expression, describing himself in pathetic terms: a figure complaining about meaningless things to men caught in the grips of a real human conflict. This effect is reinforced by the speaker’s identification with a “moor-hen,” a warbling bird swimming on a stream strewn with the debris of war. The speaker retires to the protection of his ivory tower, envious of the action he cannot participate in, dejected by his own fallow pensiveness. As he closes the door, he thinks perhaps about the poems he had written celebrating revolutionary violence, or perhaps, for once, he surmises that poetry, being so distant from the world of action, makes nothing happen.

By conceptualizing Yeats’s public poems as meditative spaces I have attempted to show not only the elements in his poetics that should be studied in the context of decolonization and postcolonial theory, but also the limits and limitations of this strategy. Indeed, as I read the corpus of postcolonial criticism on Yeats, I began to suspect that critics often elide the ways in which he remained skeptical of modernization and how he often refused to let go of a colonial mentality obsessed with land and ancestral houses. Edward Said, for instance, sublimates Yeats’s more embarrassing and ethically compromised politics—“his outright fascism, his fantasies of old homes and families, his incoherently occult divagations”—as “a particularly exacerbated example of the nativist (e.g. nègritude) phenomenon …” (14). By foregrounding the more complex, indigestible features of Yeatsian poetics, I have shown that it is necessary to take stock of these features, and to conceptualize Yeats as a poet ultimately ambivalent about the project of modernity, and consequently, its residual and constitutive Other: coloniality.

Nevertheless, the debate over Yeats’s status as a postcolonial poet does not take place in a vacuum, and the question has often been tied to the idea of Ireland as one of the first spaces marked by the narrative of postcolonization. As Colin Graham observes:

Basic to the problems inherent in Said’s notion of Ireland’s place in the post-colonial world is his unquestioned assumption that Ireland was colonised and decolonised in the same way as all other nations which have been formed from the demise of the British Empire (and those other nations too may find Said’s all-embracing model problematic). (Qtd. in McCarthy 320)
There is a larger, general argument underlying Graham’s critique of postcolonial studies: its supposed tendency toward homogenization. While this notion is generally problematic, it is indeed true that Ireland, as a metropolitan colony, should be considered a peculiar space that nonetheless bears the traces of the postcolonial. Its position is peculiar for two reasons: first, Ireland had some semblance of representation in the House of Commons after the Act of Union (1800), and second, a large contingent of its population participated in the colonizing project in distant places like India and Africa. As Edna Longley writes, “although Ireland was ... variously caught in imperial systems, the Free State left the UK before it left the Commonwealth,” and she points as evidence a passage from Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “Stephen Dedalus’s university classmates entering the exam for the Indian ‘civil’” (79). Consequently, postcolonial studies should consider the complexities of the Irish experience as both an aggrieved colonized space and a problematic participant in the imperial project of colonization.

Longley is deeply skeptical of postcolonial studies, and as such her reflections tend to be reductive and dismissive of the valuable contributions postcolonial scholars have made to Yeatsian criticism. Nevertheless, her polemics elucidate some of the blind spots and aporias of postcolonial theory. Chief among these is the tendency to not properly historicize the context of literary creations and to elide the complicated ways authors remain deeply tied to colonial structures. These regressive elements are present even as authors participate and advocate nationalist projects, since “coloniality survives colonialism” (Maldonado-Torres 243). Ironically, critics and theorists from radically dissimilar political camps, such as Walter Mignolo, usually coincide in Longley’s skepticism and critique of postcolonial theory. While Mignolo is a keen analyst of the resilient structures of colonialism and their influence in the modernist project, his merely gestural emphasis on an alter-native utopian project tends to muddle his larger critique of postcolonial studies. Part of the problem, as evinced in Said’s essay, is the tendency to focus on the emancipatory potential of a writer’s oeuvre, and to subsume the more unseemly traits of their artistic expression. Yet, it is in the contrast between these two poles, in between the spaces of progressive meditation and regressive ambivalence, where the real work of interpretation ultimately takes place.

Works Cited


Yeats’s Meditative Spaces: Between Modernity and Coloniality


