

WIT PIETRZAK (ŁÓDŹ)

CUCHULAIN, PRUFROCK AND POETRY OF DEPERSONALISATION

In the present article Yeats's late poem "Cuchulain Comforted" is discussed with a view to showing its unusual tonal and emotional affinity with T. S. Eliot's early "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Between late 1934 and early 1936 Yeats immersed himself in contemporary poetry preparing the material to be published in *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936). Even though he admitted that Eliot may have revolutionised English poetry, Yeats considered *The Waste Land* and the earlier verse to have been important stylistically only. However, it seems that Eliot's lesson in irony and defeatism, characteristic of his early poems, sank deep in Yeats's consciousness. In "Cuchulain Comforted," the Prufrockian painful submission to the social norms recurs in the form of the hero's uneventful fusion with the company of shrouds, a fusion in which Cuchulain untypically gives up his otherwise indomitable agency.

Keywords: Yeats, Eliot, depersonalisation, influence, modernism

W. B. Yeats's response to T. S. Eliot's poetry was occasionally ambiguous, though mostly deprecating. He regarded the younger poet as "the most typical figure of the reaction [against the old convictions]" (1954: 792), putting Eliot at the helm of the poetic revolution. Admittedly, this was hardly a word of praise, since for Yeats the "new school" represented a marked step backwards in the development of the best tradition of English poetry. Therefore when in October 1934 Yeats accepted to prepare the selections for *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), he was faced with a question, which he formulated in a letter to Olivia Shakespear in October 1935, "How far do I like Ezra, Eliot, Auden school and if I do not, why not" and also "Why do the younger generation like it so much?" (1954: 833). Although Eliot is here mentioned after Pound, in the actual Introduction to the anthology as well as in the later years it was to be Eliot that would attract more of Yeats's attention, and criticism. In the light of Yeats's pronouncements against the modernist poetry as manifested in Eliot's work, it would seem that the work of either poet should bear little resemblance. However, in the realm of drama Yeats's influence on the younger playwright is evident; neither is Eliot's "Burnt Norton" so far apart from the meditative lyrics of *The Winding Stair* for which, in turn, Eliot reserved particular praise (Eliot 1979: 258). But this poetic affinity was not one way only. In the present essay, it is

argued that in one of his very last poems, “Cuchulain Comforted,” Yeats, by casting Cuchulain as a passive failure of the heroic ideal, reveals in a Prufrock-like gesture that his hope for tragic and joyous poetry may have been a deception. Thus one of the most enduring personas in Yeats’s oeuvre figures a surrender to depersonalisation in the poet’s late work that has so often been noted for its reckless affirmation of creative joy in the face of dissolution.

In the Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats singles Eliot out for criticism that is outmatched in its intensity only by his remark on the poets of the World War I:

Eliot has produced his 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. He is an Alexander Pope, working without 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. He has the rhythmical flatness of the ‘Essay on Man’ [...]. (1994: 190–191)

Yeats focuses on the early pieces such as “Preludes” (which were nonetheless included in *The Oxford Book*) but also on *The Waste Land*, “The Fire Sermon” in particular, in order to show examples of stylistic flatness and imaginative destitution. The qualities of style and imaginative power that Eliot ostensibly lacks represented for Yeats the essence of good poetry. Ever since his early experiments with chanting verse performed in tandem with Florence Farr, Yeats understood that words carry “a special mode of beauty” (2007: 19) and the poet’s task is to amplify it through their arrangement in a lyric. Imagination plays a similar role for Yeats in that it “divides us from mortality by immortality of beauty” (2007: 85), we only ever live truly in imagination. Since a majority of Eliot’s poetry, as Yeats views it in the Introduction, embodies deliberate rhythmical jaggedness and imaginative deadness, little wonder that Yeats withholds from Eliot the sacred laurel of poethood, considering him “satirist rather than poet” (1994: 191). Yeats’s judgement, as Foster suggests, “must have delivered a bruising blow” to Eliot with whom they had been on good personal terms for over a decade (Foster 2005: 558)¹. In spite of Yeats’s suspicious attitude, Eliot was eventually awarded thirteen pages in the anthology (also at the time when he was compiling *The Oxford Book* Yeats deemed Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* “exceedingly impressive” [Yeats and Yeats 2011: 394]), although neither “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” nor *The Waste Land* were included.

Yeats returned to Eliot in his 1936 BBC Broadcast on modern poetry. There, he speaks of the younger poet in less critical terms, calling Eliot “the most revolutionary man in poetry during my life-time,” though he adds that “his revolution

¹ On 3 December 1922 Yeats reported to his wife, “I am charmed by Eliot & find that I have a reasonable liking for his ‘Sacred Wood’” (Yeats and Yeats 2011: 97).

was stylistic alone” (1994: 95). Once again Yeats observes that Eliot stands for the modern revolution in poetry. The new school assert that “poetry must resemble prose, and both must accept the vocabulary of their time; nor must there be any special subject-matter” (1994: 95). This change in style was anathema to Yeats who clung to the ideal that he had asserted thirty years earlier: a poet must be “content to find his pleasure in all that is for ever passing away that it may come again, in the beauty of woman, in the fragile flowers of spring, in momentary heroic passion [...]” (2007: 209). Eliot, because he regards the depiction of everyday events in the idiom of the time as the foundation of poetic expression, is therefore deemed a realist (1994: 100). The notion of realism as Yeats understands it is explained in his Introduction to Joseph M. Hone and Mario M. Rossi’s *Bishop Berkley: His Life, Writings, and Philosophy* (1931), where Yeats aligns literary romanticism with idealist philosophy and modern verse with “a new naturalism that leaves man helpless before the contents of his mind.” This new naturalism derives from “the realist philosophy which thinks that the secondary and primary qualities alike are independent of consciousness; that an object can at the same moment have contradictory qualities” (1994: 109). Although the Eliot of “Ash-Wednesday” and “Gerontion” may not fit in this category, his early poems collected in *Prufrock and Other Observations* do, for they show men and women “repeating over and over the same trivial movements” (1994: 99). This could not be reconciled with Yeats’s idea expressed in “A General Introduction for my Work” that in poetry man becomes “something intended, complete” (1994: 204). According to the older poet, Eliot describes the world with its contradictions and mundaneness but refuses to seek its completion in imagination, which is his cardinal weakness.

Eliot was considerably more careful in his appraisal of the fellow poet’s achievements. Despite the fact that in the first years after they met they were not always on the best of terms, which must have been due to Yeats’s occasionally ambiguous feeling towards the younger artist,² by 1923 Eliot, most crucially in “*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*,” had publically acknowledged Yeats’s role in shaping the new poetics. Even though Yeats must have balked at being co-opted in the school of the new naturalism that he would begin to denounce in less than

² For instance, there must have been some friction in late 1922. Eliot mentioned to Pound that he thought “Yeats does not particularly like [him]” but some six weeks later he reported again to Pound: “I have seen Yeats and passed a very agreeable afternoon with him and he has promised a contribution in prose for the following [issue of *Criterion*].” On the same day, writing to Ottoline Morrell, Eliot conceded that Yeats “is really one of a very small number of people with whom you can talk profitably about poetry, and I found him altogether stimulating” (Eliot 1988: 585, 610, 611). Although they had not seen each other for seven years, as Eliot notes, the sudden confession to Pound indicates there could have been some parlour talk on Yeats’s part that would have reached Eliot, leading him to such a conclusion. However, by the end of 1922 both were on good terms (Yeats and Yeats 2011: 97). The contribution was to be an essay on Dante but eventually Yeats submitted an extract from *The Trembling of the Veil*, which Eliot was pleased to accept (Eliot 2009: 22).

a decade, the idea of mythical method did seem appealing. Understood as “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot 2008: 167), according to Eliot it was pioneered by Yeats and then reemployed by Joyce. Eliot thus ascribes one of, in his opinion, major developments in literature to Yeats. Such praise in an article on a struggling man of letters may in part have been motivated by the need to place Joyce’s novel in a recognisable and (more or less) accepted context. Nevertheless, notions like control, order and shape chime well with the postulates Yeats would advance regarding his own artistic work in “A General Introduction.” Despite such endorsement of Yeats’s work, there are occasional suggestions, made in a more private context, that Eliot perceived Yeats as possessing mostly “advertising value” (Eliot 2009: 610). It was not until after Yeats’s demise that Eliot would put together another compelling argument in favour of his poetry and drama.

In the first annual Yeats lecture, delivered to the Friends of the Irish Academy at the Abbey Theatre in 1940, Eliot made a distinction between two kinds of impersonality. There is “that which is natural to the mere skilful craftsman” who can write an accomplished lyric or two that may be anthologised for their singular achievement; there is also the impersonality of “the poet who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express a general truth; retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol” (Eliot 1979: 255). While Yeats’s earlier poetry is of the former kind, his later lyrics show the latter perfection. Eliot refers here to his own “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” particularly to his point that “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (Eliot 1932: 21). According to Eliot, in poetry all individuality is transformed into an objective statement that unveils the general symbolic truth. However, this praise is clearly at odds with Yeats’s own perception of the function of poetry. Contrary to Eliot’s idea that the self is subservient to literary tradition, Yeats already in “Poetry and Tradition” asserts that the artist “is known from other men by making all he handles like himself” (2007: 186). Furthermore, in a letter to J. B. Yeats, the notion of personality is defined as “the individual form of our passions” (Yeats 1954: 548). Richard Greaves summarises this difference between Eliot’s and Yeats’s perception of the role of the self in creating poetry: “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 the work” (Greaves 2002: 24; Yeats 1972: 142). Terrence Brown suggests that in so defining the importance of Yeats’s work Eliot may have sought to draw “the Irish poet for his own critical purposes (the justification of his own work) within the circle of literary experimentalists who were presumably reacting to the general

crisis" (Brown 2010: 45). Another reason, which becomes manifest in the 1940 tribute to Yeats, seems to have been self-vindicating. Eliot demonstrates that Yeats's achievement lies in fulfilling the criteria which Eliot himself established over twenty years before and which Yeats obliquely disparaged in his Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. Therefore Yeats's criticism of Eliot's work is confounded by the former's later poetry whose merits rest on the same principles as those of, say, *The Waste Land*. In Eliot's view, in the capacity of critic Yeats was wrong to denigrate the younger poet's work but poetically Yeats had become a contemporary.

Eliot emphasises *Plays for Dancers*, particularly *At the Hawk's Well* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, as the work "in which [Yeats] had found his right and final dramatic form." For him, Cuchulain's exploits described in those plays become "a vehicle for a situation of universal meaning" (Eliot 1979: 260). However, apart from its experimental form,³ *At the Hawk's Well* has little in common with the poetry Eliot had written by the time the play was performed. The widest difference is visible in either poet's relation to the woman figure.

In *At the Hawk's Well*, Cuchulain is represented as a single-minded man of action. Neither the old man's advice to abandon the mad pursuit of immortality, nor the ominous hawk-cries of the guardian of the well can deflect Cuchulain from his quest. When the guardian's dance commences, however, Cuchulain wrongly assumes that his courage will suffice to overcome her supernatural allure and declares "I am not afraid of you, bird, woman, or witch" (Yeats 1972: 216). But the girl's power lies not in fear but in seduction. After the dance has continued for some time, the chorus announces that "The madness has laid hold upon him now." This is a deeply ironic situation, for Cuchulain loses his chance to become immortal due to his impassioned nature that has brought him to the well in the first place. Looking at the guardian's enchanting dance, he rises and boastfully threatens her: "Run where you will, / Grey bird, you shall be perched upon my wrist, / Some were called queens and yet have been perched there" (1972: 217). When he comes back to his senses, Cuchulain, unlike the old man who despairs, is unruffled by the fact he has missed the opportunity to drink from the well. His attention is riveted on the distant war cries. The old man informs him that the guardian "has up the fierce women of the hills, / Aoife, and all her troop, to take your life" (1972: 218). While the old man is fearful of the host, Cuchulain is poised to "face them." He no longer focuses on his dream of immortality, the supernatural fades when a real fight comes in view. Thus Cuchulain fails to reach the ultimate goal of his journey but at the same time he asserts his indomitable will to action, indeed a sort of will to power, if not magical than physical. He

³ Eliot was among the audience when *At the Hawk's Well* was staged in Lady Cunard's drawing room for the second time on April 4 1916, so he saw precisely what Yeats meant by his new aristocratic form.

comes to struggle with the guardian of the well and though he loses, in no way is he trepidated, in lieu launching into another struggle, one that will eventually precipitate his ruin in *The Death of Cuchulain*. Despite the fact that he eventually loses, first to the guardian of the well and, in the later play, to Aoife, Cuchulain remains unchanged in his desire to subjugate women.

Cuchulain's domineering attitude to women stands in particularly stark contrast to Prufrock who cannot overcome his coyness. When his obsessive attention is directed to a woman's arms "that are braceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, down with light brown hair!)" (Eliot 2002: 5), he finds himself, as throughout the poem, stricken with indecisiveness, repeating "How should I begin?" Whether it is because of the lady's flawed beauty ("hair!") or his own deeply-concealed intellectual aloofness that he remains passive, Prufrock cannot "force the moment to its crisis" (2002: 6) as Cuchulain repeatedly does in all plays in which he appears. Moreover, in the fragment that follows the description of the braceleted arms, Prufrock ponders over the possible way to address the lady. However, after the suspension points that seems to signify a moment's pause, he resignedly admits "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (2002: 5). By the end of the poem, Prufrock will have returned to the floors of the seas in an ostensibly joyous moment but at this point he seems to affirm his entrapment in the close encounter with the lady. The image of a crustacean recurs in a telling context in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," where the speaker remembers seeing "a crab one afternoon in a pool, / An old crab with barnacles on his back / Grabbed the end of a stick I held him" (2002: 17). The crab appears caught up in a pool, far from his natural oceanic environment, at the mercy of the speaker. It stupidly grabs the end of a stick just because it is held close to its pincers. In the context of the stanza, it does so not in self-defence or to climb out of its trap but simply follows an instinctual impulse. Prufrock finds himself in similar entrapment, though his reaction is to suppress the instinct; he does not speak openly to the lady, for there is protocol to be observed in such situations. Also the fact that the woman is represented synecdochically through separate parts of her body and metonymically through her dress and perfume indicates that Prufrock cannot form a full image of her, as if he is afraid to look at her directly but instead focuses on those elements that he can furtively glimpse. This jagged representation of the woman is mirrored in Prufrock's own perception of himself as mere claws rather than some particular species. Michael Whitworth, noting the many instances in Eliot's work where limbs, most frequently the speaker's own hands, become synecdoches of the individual, argues that this dismemberment evidences two aspects of Eliot's but also modernist poetry in general. On the one hand this suggest the impersonality of the author in tune with the point made in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." On the other, the "rebellious hands" may "emblemize the idea that writer, in common with all individuals in the modern world, has suffered a loss of

agency” (Whitworth 2010: 2). Prufrock, so seemingly individual with his rather uncommon surname and an added initial to give him even more distinctiveness, is dissolved in the poem to the point that his inaction seems to represent a total lack of identity.

The criticism of the chorus that ends *At the Hawk's Well* may thus be referred to a Prufrock-like figure. It is especially the penultimate stanza of the final song that denounces inaction and depersonalisation:

‘The man that I praise’,
 Cries out the empty well,
 ‘Lives all his days
 Where a hand on the bell
 Can call the milch cows
 To the comfortable door of his house.
 Who but an idiot would praise
 Dry stones in a well?’ (Yeats 1972: 219)

In an ironic flourish, the well mocks the self-content man who cherishes homely comforts over the life of tragic joy. The image of a hand calling the milch cows apparently of its own volition, like Prufrock’s imagined claws, invokes the man’s depersonalisation and inaction. He prefers to follow dead protocols rather than seek to live up to the passionate ideal of poets and artists who, “being permitted to shoot beyond the tangible, must go from desire to weariness and so to desire again, and live but for the moment when vision comes to our weariness like a terrible lightning” (1994: 14). Therefore *At the Hawk's Well* emphasises a life of indomitable struggle against the self’s disintegration, even at the cost of life. Whereas Cuchulain embraces his fate by asserting his identity stressed through genealogy, “He comes! Cuchulain, son of Sualtam, comes!” (1972: 218), Prufrock only wallows in self-pity over the inexorable passage of time that brings an uneventful death ever closer: “I grow old... I grow old...” (2002: 7).

However, despite the repeated suggestions that he is a background character in the drama of his own life, Prufrock, most cunningly, appears to harbour dreams of poetic grandeur. The epigraph to the poem is taken from canto xxvii of Dante’s *Inferno*. In Dante, the Pilgrim accompanies Vergil to the Eighth Circle of Hell, where liars and deceivers suffer fiery torment; there they meet Guido da Montefeltro who decides to tell Dante’s the story of his life because he assumes that nobody will ever leave the dark dungeon and so his words will never reach the living. Guido is of course mistaken, for Dante will come back to the world of men and so the deceiver deceives himself. Where the canto may be argued to inform “Prufrock” is in its notion of self-deception to which Guido falls prey twice. Firstly, pre-emptively absolved by Pope Boniface VII of the sin of deception he is about to commit, Guido provides false counsel. However, when he dies, he is reminded by the black Cherubim that “one cannot be absolved unless repentant, / nor can one both repent and will a thing” (Alighieri 1984: 319).

Secondly, Guido falls into his own trap when he chooses to narrate his story to Dante. The self-deceptions in canto xxvii are thus arranged typologically, with Guido's mistake in life being repeated in death. Since the part of the canto quoted in the epigraph to "Prufrock" is in Dante followed by a colon after which Guido proceeds to tell his story, "Prufrock"'s monologue seems to represent a third level of the typology.

After he images himself as "a pair of ragged claws," Prufrock proceeds to negatively characterise his situation through the masks of John the Baptist, Lazarus and Hamlet. He directly states that he is neither the prophet nor Prince Hamlet, while the syntax of a hypothetical clause leaves his identification with Lazarus, "come from the dead" (2002: 6), purely in the realm of speculative fantasy. Typically, the denial of the masks of the prophet and Hamlet has been taken to imply that Prufrock concedes that there is nothing heroic about him, though he shares destruction at the hand of a woman with the prophet and the paralysis of modern life with Hamlet (Miller 2006: 126). The denial of Lazarus seems more complex in that it draws attention to the fact that such an essentially poetic self-presentation may prove dangerous to the man's social image. Prufrock's evocation of Lazarus who has "Come back to tell you all," strikingly Yeatsian in tone and ambit, renders him vulnerable to a disheartening put-down, "That is not what I meant at all" (2002: 6). Therefore Prufrock seems to realise that giving oneself to poetry as imaginative reverie, so valued by Yeats, incurs the risk of seeming inane and derisory. Looking back at the personas of John the Baptist and Hamlet from this angle, Prufrock undeniably bodes far better than they did. After all, his head lands "upon a platter" only metaphorically and that refers to his social torments only (possibly at being mocked: "hair growing thin"). This is also evident in Prufrock's slightly resigned affiliation with a Polonius-like figure who is "Politic, cautious, and meticulous," though not too gifted; however, unlike Polonius and Hamlet, Prufrock uses his survival skills aptly enough, at least to a point, to acquit himself reasonably well in social situations. Thus it appears that in dismissing these masks Prufrock seeks to avoid peril not only to his social stature but also, implicitly, to his life.

Nonetheless, the masks that Prufrock toys with imply that he may not be such a depersonalised, passive figure as he would like us to think. For all his coyness, deep inside Prufrock harbours dreams of poetic fulfilment, hoping that there is a mythical depth to the apparently flat reality. There thus seems to be a degree of cunningness to Prufrock not unlike that of Guido de Montefeltro. A. D. Moody has suggested that Prufrock finds himself paralysed in a society that is like hell to him, much like Guido and that Prufrock's self-deception lies in the fact that he speaks his innermost thoughts not knowing they are or will be made into a poem (Moody 1994: 37). Yet Moody does not account for the deceiving nature of Prufrock himself. Eric Sigg observes that Prufrock is divided between the 'unconvincing social self', the mask he shows to the people, and what Sigg calls the central self that is a "megalomaniacal yet naïve" personality (1989: 92). It is

this central self, as it seems, that summons the images of John the Baptist, Lazarus and Hamlet, which the social self dismisses, with the exception of Lazarus, before they are even assumed. Therefore it may be argued that Prufrock deceives the people he meets that he is a self-conscious and awkward figure, which affords him an ironic distance to expose their mundaneness.

Prufrock maintains the distance from poetic evocation, thereby keeping himself safe from the perils of self-exposure, until he beholds the vision of mermaids that unexpectedly instantiates itself before him in the last stanza but three. Immediately after the inane questions “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?,” there come two affirmative sentences: “I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach. / I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each” (2002: 7). The shift from the future simple to the present perfect marks a moment when Prufrock tries to reimagine himself as a figure of mythical proportions. The fact he will “wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach” shows him to anxiously conform to the latest modes of the time, at the same time mocking his own meticulousness and being dead serious about it (Sigg 1989: 188). But when he turns his attention to the past, Prufrock suddenly remembers that there has been a supernatural manifestation in his life and the tense implies that its relevance extends to his present experience. Despite the fact that he resignedly admits “I do not think that they will sing to me,” he recalls that he has not only heard the mermaids but also seen them before he finally states that “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown” (2002: 7). The evocation of the mermaids becomes more and more florid and fluent as though Prufrock is reaching back to touch the so far dormant memories of a season in paradise.

Although the “we” is ambiguous (is this Prufrock and the mermaids who have entered the chambers of the sea? Or does it refer to the “you and I” of the beginning of the poem?), it seems that Prufrock has finally fashioned himself as a central figure of his own story. Despite his passivity in the fragment (he hears, sees, lingers but never acts), he manages to enter myth. Presumably it is Odysseus, who also listened to two mermaids singing each to each, that Prufrock fleetingly sees himself as. Here, however, comes the cruel irony. Parallel to the paradisaical vision of union with the mermaids runs the implication that they are lethal creatures that deceive sailors. Sigg observes that there is an akin aura of claustrophobia about the soiree Prufrock is attending and his visionary world (1989: 93); there is also a similar implicit dread of the woman that underlies the sexually-charged evocation of the mermaids. Such fear of the feminine may stem from Prufrock’s repressed (both homo- and hetero-) sexuality.⁴ The vision begins

⁴ In a surprisingly candid letter to Conrad Aiken, Eliot confessed that “I should be better off, I sometimes think, if I had disposed of my virginity and shyness several years ago: and indeed I still think that it would be well to do so before marriage” (1988: 75).

to seem threatening. Since the mermaids' song that he at first hears represents a mortal peril to man, Prufrock's admission that the mermaids may not sing to him sounds both rueful (perhaps to the central self) and relieved (to the social self). In the final vision paradise intertwines with hell. When he finally permits himself to enter reverie, Prufrock is woken by "human voices." The abrupt intervention of reality principle, similar to the one suggested in the Lazarus episode, is deadly only because he has permitted himself to be beguiled by the mermaids. Careful for the whole poem to keep his poetic aspirations hidden, Prufrock errs at the last moment; like Guido da Montefeltro (an approximation of *terza rima* is back in the last three stanzas), the deceiver of others, Prufrock in the end deceives himself. The moment he accepts to embrace the treacherous allure of his long-entertained poetic ambitions, Prufrock declares his life forfeit. Therefore Prufrock shows poetry to be a deceptive art of an infected inner self; far from putting off "the limited mortal man" (Yeats 2007: 103), as Yeats would have it, poetry all the more starkly precipitates the "*couchemar*" of mundane life in which the poet is painfully depersonalised, drowned in the ocean of "human voices" that belong as much to the treacherous mermaids as to the women with whom Prufrock has had such fraught relations. Just as he prepares for a life of dream, the nightmare returns with a vengeance, the last twist of the knife, indeed.

Such a cruel irony seems alien to Yeats in that he would hardly have accepted openly that poetic vision terminates in an exposure of its essentially deceptive nature. However, it is this characteristically early Eliotean twist of the knife that underpins Yeats's last Cuchulain poem. "Cuchulain Comforted" implies that the hero can embody the ideal creative existence only when he sheds his antithetical identity and dissolves into the impersonality of the Shrouds. The poem is a coda to *The Death of Cuchulain*, though it is markedly different from the play and from the other evocations of the Irish hero. Whereas in the play the hero remains defiant of the incipient death at the hands of the blind man, as Brown puts it, "Cuchulain quits himself as Cuchulain" (Brown 2001: 385), in the poem he is shorn of all his valour and rebelliousness. If the play is "in some sense a premonition of [Yeats's] own death" (Yeats 1964: 192), then the poem is a disturbing evocation of what awaits the poet of phase 17, the most conducive to achieving unity of being, in the afterlife. Yeats seems to have realised that "Cuchulain Comforted" was a new departure for him as poet.⁵ According to his wife, on 7 January 1939 he dictated a prose draft of the poem, which is surprisingly at one with the final version dated 13 January (Jeffares 1968: 512–513; Yeats 1964: 193). A lifelong reviser of his lyrics, Yeats may indeed have begun "to understand how to write" (Yeats 1964: 194). Ronald Schuchard, relying on Michael Yeats's account, gives

⁵ In a letter to Edith Shackleton Health written on 1 January 1939, Yeats mentions that he is "making a prose sketch for a poem – a kind of sequel – strange too, something new;" the poem is most likely "Cuchulain Comforted" as a sequel to *The Death of Cuchulain* (1954: 922).

a memorable description of Yeats composing the poem: “Alone there, all reciters and musicians away, his right arm rising, the last keeper of the bardic flame began conducting an inner music into rhythmical speech, chanting the emerging lines over and over” (2008: 400). This may appear to be the arch-poet dwelling with the vision as it slowly unravels before his mind’s eye, a possible moment of glimpsing the completion to a life of verse-making. However, if that completion is to be located in the “something new” that he discovered sometime between 24 December 1938 and 7 January 1939, it would represent an ironic twist to his long-conceived theory of poetry.

As a poem dealing with the life after death, “Cuchulain Comforted” has been rather meticulously traced to the postulates of both the 1925 and 1937 editions of *A Vision*. In the poem, as both Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom have argued, Cuchulain enters the *Shiftings*. According to the earlier version of his treatise, during that phase

the *Spirit* is freed from pleasure and pain, and is ready to enter the *Shiftings* where it is freed from Good and Evil, and in this state which is a state of intellect, it lives through a life which is said to be in all things opposite to that lived through in the world [...] All now is intellect and [the man] is all *Daimon*, and tragic and happy circumstance alike offer an intellectual ecstasy at the revelation of truth, and the most horrible tragedy in the end can but seem a figure in a dance. (Yeats 1978: 229–231)

In the 1937 edition Yeats pithily explains that “the Spirit lives [...] ‘The best possible life in the worst possible surroundings’ or the contrary of this; yet there is no suffering: ‘For in a state of equilibrium there is neither emotion nor sensation’” (Yeats 1969: 231–232). Bloom adds to his account of the poem’s background that its splendour stems from the fact that the Shrouds in the poem know that “the communal experience is as momentary in death as it is in life;” thus “what [they] only know / The rattle of the rattle of those arms makes us afraid” (Yeats 1996: 332), and what they dread is “the solitude of the soul’s rebirth” (Bloom 1970: 465). For Bloom, the poem is an example of a deeply-felt separateness of life from vision that plagues all belated creative individuals. His insight into the desirable nature of communal effort is taken up by Brown, who asserts that “the homely craft here is associated with that sweetness which in Yeats’s poetry had always been a glory of the womanly voice” (Brown 2001: 376). Thus “Cuchulain Comforted” is shown to represent a moment of equilibrium, a point beyond good and evil that finally grants the hero, and through him also the poet, peace.

Nonetheless, the enigma, as Bloom calls it, that surrounds the poem is all but dispelled. *A Vision* asserts that during the *Shiftings* the Spirit lives a life antithetical to that lived in the world. This could be taken to explain why Cuchulain, a daredevil in life, has come among cowards. However, in no way can it be said that in the poem the hero *lives*, neither can the term equilibrium be applied to him, for Cuchulain remains both passive and speechless as if language is taken away from him; he is placed outside the frame of the poem until “the Shroud that

seemed to have authority” comes and informs him that ””We thread the needles’ eyes, and all we do / All must together do.”” Back within the focus, Cuchulain without a moment’s hesitation obeys the rule: “That done, the man / Took up the nearest and began to sew.” Sean Pryor has suggested that this compliance may result from the fact that “the Shroud speaks words of divine power [...] the Word of God. What the Shroud speaks, Cuchulain does, powerless before the working of this otherworld” (Pryor 2011: 199). Cuchulain does act as though he were faced with a command of god-like authority but such power can hardly be ascribed to the Shroud that has admitted that it fears Cuchulain’s arms. Cuchulain is neither in awe nor in a sweet state of equilibrium, we in fact know nothing of his mind-frame. He only meekly follows not even a command but advice: “Your life can grow much sweeter if you will / ‘Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud;”” Cuchulain does not live “the best possible life in the worst possible surroundings” but rather, denuded of his will, he finds himself thrown into a certain state of being.

The act of sewing that Cuchulain so obeisantly takes up is a characteristically womanly occupation. Thus Cuchulain, as in life so in death, appears to submit to the command of the feminine element. However, unlike in his earlier appearances, in the poem he no longer seeks to fight and subjugate the woman figures but simply yields to their will. Moreover, sewing represents the art of composing poetry, the “stitching and unstitching” of “Adam’s Curse” (Yeats 1996: 80), although here the feminine voice is in no way as subversive as in the Crazy Jane poems and the sequence “Woman Young and Old.” The complaisant nature of the lyrical voice notwithstanding, the focus on the art of poetry summoned in the image of sewing lays the ground for the evocation of song. Recitation of verse in a manner of special chanting was among Yeats’s longest preoccupations, dating back to the 1890s. Though no singing in any traditional sense, Yeats defined chant as using a “subtle monotony of voice which runs through the nerves like fire” (2007: 15). It may be that such chanting is presupposed in the song at the end of “Cuchulain Comforted.” Therefore the ending lines of the penultimate stanza suggest that the communal recital of verse edifies the whole group, permitting them to reach a higher order of language.

They sang, but had nor human tunes nor words,
Though all was done in common as before;

They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds.

In the song, the Shrouds and Cuchulain seem to transcend their fallen condition and rise beyond human speech, their throats transformed into those of birds. Although bird-images feature in Yeats’s corpus very often, a transformation of the singer/poet into a bird, like the one in the closing line of “Cuchulain Comforted,” is much rarer. Most prominently, such a metamorphosis takes place in “Sailing to Byzantium.” In the poem, the speaker introduces a division between

bird as the “natural thing” and the bird-form “Of hammered gold and gold enamelling” (Yeats 1996: 194) into which in the last stanza he imagines himself to be transformed. The distinction between the natural and the perfect world is further explored⁶ in “Byzantium,” especially its middle stanza where the miraculous bird can “by the moon embittered, scorn aloud / Common bird or petal / And all complexities of mire or blood” (1996: 248). In the later poem, the “More miracle than bird or handiwork” is revealed to display emotions associated with the unimaginative and stale life, incongruous in the realm of perfection. However, Nicholas Greene observes that they are “the overspill of the human watcher attributed to the object that is perfect in its lack of any human emotions” (Greene 2008: 217). Thus in both Byzantium poems, the birds as artifices of eternity are implied to be essentially emotionless, for every emotion entails corruption that prevents the achievement of unity of being. Furthermore, in both cases, Yeats indicates the fixity of the bird by using passive voice to describe the birds’ position. Whereas in “Sailing” the bird is “set upon a golden bough to sing,” in “Byzantium” only when “Planted on the star-lit golden bough,” can the miraculous bird-image begin its scornful song. The condition of perfection is thus both stripped of emotion and completely passive. This is particularly visible in “Sailing,” with its stately meditative rhythm that inexorably pushes towards the last line that appears to melt into the eternity as it is at the same time withheld by the fact that the bird is still focused on the transient world. In “Byzantium” on the other hand, the last stanza exudes an air of impetuosity; throughout the poem as the stanzas progress, the lines become shorter as though suggesting that the process of “break[ing] bitter furies of complexity” is itself breathtakingly rapid. While “Sailing” is preoccupied with the imaginary city of perfection, “Byzantium” is incessantly focused on the transition of spirits into the otherworld. This violent rite of passage is completely lost in “Cuchulain Comforted” in which the hero, seen striding in the first stanza, is then immobilised and pensive for the rest of the lyric. There is no breaking or scorning here, no action except the sewing and, eventually, singing. Also, the ending of the poem is far from the implicit triumphalism of the last stanza of “Sailing.”

When Cuchulain’s throat seems to be changed into a bird’s along with the Shrouds’ as they erupt into song, it is suggested that he has achieved the final equipoise, a state not unlike that of the speaker in the last stanza of “Sailing.” In “Cuchulain Comforted,” however, this is a cruelly ironic conclusion to the hero’s lifetime of audacious exploits invoked in both poetry and drama because by joining in the song, Cuchulain sacrifices his individual selfhood. The contrast between his last words in *At the Hawk’s Well* and “Cuchulain Comforted” perfectly

⁶ In a letter to T. Sturge Moore, Yeats wrote that “Byzantium” originated from his criticism of the bird in “Sailing” that, according to Moore, “was just as natural as anything else. That showed me [Yeats] that the idea needed exposition” (Yeats and Moore 1953: 164).

capture the hero's depersonalisation. While in the play he defiantly goes to battle crying out his name and lineage, thereby asserting his individuality, in the poem Cuchulain's self is rendered anonymous as it is subsumed with the Shrouds under the pronoun "they." *A Vision* may be helpful in explicating Cuchulain's fate in the afterlife but the ambiguous implications of the poem can hardly be undone by recourse to the system. Cuchulain seems to achieve the perfect song of an "artifice of eternity" only when he is dissolved in the crowd of feminine Shrouds that sing no glory of a womanly voice. Shorn of his identity, Cuchulain becomes subservient to the feminine aspect, all his antithetical strength lost to the tradition of singing "in common as before."

Marjorie Howes observes that Yeats's vision of aristocratic culture that had been on his mind at least since 1913 (see Longenbach 1990) comprises a duality of "a primary, feminine principle of continuity and an antithetical, masculine principle of originality" (Howes 1998: 113). This distinction is redeployed in "Cuchulain Comforted" but the hero who once fully embodied the principle of antithetical originality is now bereft of it, dissolved in the passivity of the primary element. Still, he attains the transformation anticipated in "Sailing." Perfection, it seems, lies with the passive woman. However, what was the purpose of Cuchulain's violent life, his struggle with Aoife, the murder of his son, the final battle against Maeve, if he comes to dwell in the same place with cowards, who according to Dante, a stylistic precursor of the poem (see Vendler 2007), "never truly lived" (Alighieri 1984: 91)? Yeats fashioned the mask of Cuchulain, representing of all things not impossible the one most difficult, in order to create an antithetical personality that would help him "sing whatever is well made" "In mockery of a time / Half dead at the top." The mask was for Yeats a means whereby to deceive the popular opinion as to his character that he deemed too abstract and pliable. In "Cuchulain Comforted," however, the poet realises that he may have been self-deceived because "entering into the abyss of himself" (qtd. in Bloom 1970: 462), he beheld the mask lose all its strength and fade into an evocation of a traditional image of death as reducing all to the same level. Cuchulain, as the self-deceived, is thus drowned in the feminine objectivity like Prufrock whose vision of intimacy with the mermaids exposes him to the deadly intervention of the reality principle. Although Prufrock loses his life and Cuchulain is observed already in the otherworld, both come to represent an immersion in the feminine objectivity, exposing their individual selves to a realisation that poetic defiance only increases the pain of the eventual depersonalisation. This is particularly jarring in the case of Cuchulain who no more resembles the "something intended, complete" but dissolves in the feminised crowd that could easily be imagined to be clad in "motley." Nonetheless, he achieves the supernatural metamorphosis. The victory, the poem suggests, lies in giving up personality and passive acceptance of the inevitable.

This ironic defeatism of “Cuchulain Comforted” is uncharacteristic of the remaining work collected in *Last Poems*, in which Yeats repeatedly emphasises joy in the face of tragedy. None of his very last poems: “The Man and the Echo,” and certainly not “The Black Tower” and “Under Ben Bulben,” can compare in the level of surrender to that one lyric that centres on his otherwise most belligerent of personas. Looking back at a lifetime of poetry-making as the poem does, “Cuchulain Comforted” is all but comforting, for it proffers a momentary insight into the self-deception of the poet who clung to a belief that art must derive from perpetual conflict. Eliot first looked that horror in the eye early on, Yeats permitted himself only a glimpse towards the very end of his life; and sprang back from it into “The Black Tower” and its familiar, though no longer so convincing, mask of heroic ideal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALIGHIERI, D. (1984): *The Divine Comedy. Volume I: Inferno*, M. Musa (trans.), New York.
- BLOOM, H. (1970): *Yeats*, Oxford.
- BROWN, T. (2001): *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography*, London.
- BROWN, T. (2010): *The Literature of Ireland. Culture and Criticism*, Cambridge.
- ELIOT, T. S. (2002): *Collected Poems 1909–1962*, London.
- ELIOT, T. S. (1979): *On Poetry and Poets*, London.
- ELIOT, T. S. (1932): *Selected Essays*, London.
- ELIOT, T. S. (1988): *The Letters of T. S. Eliot. Volume I 1898–1922*, V. Eliot (ed.), London.
- ELIOT, T. S. (2009): *The Letters of T. S. Eliot. Volume II 1923–1925*, V. Eliot and H. Haughton (eds.), New Haven.
- ELIOT, T. S. (2008): *Ulysses, Order and Myth*, in: RAINEY L. (ed.): *Modernism: An Anthology*, Malden, 166–167.
- FOSTER, R. F. (2005): *W. B. Yeats: A Life, II: The Arch-Poet*, Oxford.
- GREAVES, R. (2002): *Transition, Reception and Modernism in W. B. Yeats*, Basingstoke.
- GRENE, N. (2008): *Yeats's Poetic Codes*, Oxford.
- HOWES, M. (1998): *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness*, Oxford.
- JEFFARES, A. N. (1968): *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, Stanford.
- LONGENBACH, J. (1990): *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism*, Oxford.
- MILLER, M. A. (2006): *Masterpieces of British Modernism*, Westport.
- MOODY, A. D. (1994): *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet*, Cambridge.
- PRYOR, S. (2011): *W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and the Poetry of Paradise*, Farnham.
- SCHUCHARD, R. (2008): *The Last Minstrels. Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts*, Oxford.
- SIGG, E. (1989): *The American T. S. Eliot: A Study of the Early Writings*, Cambridge.
- VENDLER, H. (2007): *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form*, Cambridge MASS.
- WHITWORTH, M. (2010): *Reading Modernist Poetry*, Chichester.
- YEATS, W. B. (1978): *A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision (1925)*, G. M. Harper and W. K. Hood (eds.), London.
- YEATS, W. B. (1969): *A Vision (1937)*, USA.
- YEATS, W. B. (1964): *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*, Oxford.
- YEATS, W. B. (1973): *Memoirs: Autobiography—First Draft: Journal*, D. Donoghue (ed.), London.

- YEATS, W. B. (1972): *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats*, London.
- YEATS, W. B. (1996): *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, R. J. Finneran (ed.), New York.
- YEATS, W. B. (1999): *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume III, Autobiographies*, W. H. O'Donnell and D. N. Archibald (eds.), New York.
- YEATS, W. B. (2007): *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume IV, Early Essays*, R. J. Finneran and G. Bornstein (eds.), New York.
- YEATS, W. B. (1994): *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume V, Later Essays*, W. H. O'Donnell (ed.), New York.
- YEATS, W. B. (1954): *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, Allan Wade (ed.), London.
- YEATS, W. B. and George Yeats. (2011): *The Letters*, A. Saddlemyer (ed.), Oxford.
- YEATS, W. B. and T. S. Moore. (1953): *W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence 1901–1937*, London.