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YEATS: ROMANTIC, MODERNIST, BOTH, NONE?
AN ANALYSIS OF ROMANTIC AND MODERNIST CHARACTERISTICS IN HIS POETRY

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¿Dónde estará la rosa que en tu mano
prodiga, sin saberlo, íntimos dones?

(Jorge Luis Borges, *La Cifra*)

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Resumo

O escritor irlandês William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), conhecido principalmente por sua poesia e suas peças de teatro, esteve ativo durante períodos da história literária como o simbolismo e o modernismo. Enquanto suas primeiras obras possuem uma estética romântica, poemas e peças do fim de sua carreira adquiriram um estilo mais próximo ao modernismo. Apesar disso, Yeats tornou-se conhecido apenas como modernista no Brasil, por ser associado primeiramente a Ezra Pound e T. S. Eliot. Esse ensaio questiona essa classificação, identificando aspectos das duas tradições (romantismo e modernismo) em seis poemas seus. Dois poemas foram escolhidos para cada uma das três fases de sua carreira, para que pudessem ser representadas as mudanças que fez ao longo dela. Apesar de o corpus ser reduzido, as análises sugerem que os poemas de Yeats são influenciados pelo romantismo em todas as fases de sua carreira, e que sua classificação usual como unicamente modernista pode ser enganosa para leitores e estudantes brasileiros.

Palavras-chave: W. B. Yeats; Poesia; Romantismo; Modernismo.

Abstract

The Irish writer William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), who became primarily known for his poetry and drama, was active in periods of the literary history such as Symbolism and Modernism. While his first works possessed an aesthetic closer to Romanticism, later poems and plays acquired a style that tended to Modernism. However, Yeats came to be known mainly as a modernist in our Brazilian context, because he is primarily associated with Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. This paper questions this usual classification, identifying aspects of these two traditions—Romanticism and Modernism—in six of his poems. Two poems were chosen for each of the three phases of his career, in order to represent the changes in his poetic output throughout his oeuvre. Even though the corpus is reduced, a tentative conclusion is made, suggesting that Yeats's poems are touched by Romanticism in all phases of his career, and that the usual classification as only modernist can be misleading for Brazilian readers and students.

Key-words: W. B. Yeats; Poetry; Romanticism; Modernism.

1. Introduction

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), a prominent member of Ireland pantheon of writers, became notorious for his poetry and drama, even though his body of work comprises an array of genres, including essays and short stories. He was also an influential figure in Modernism, collaborating and being cited by major modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. This is one of the reasons that made his associations with Modernism so strong, to the point that he is usually classified as a modernist writer by some scholar and professors. An example of this can be found in Langdon Hammer's course on modern poetry, where Yeats is included among other modernist poets: <<http://oyc.yale.edu/english/engl-310>>. Something similar happens in our curriculum at UFSC (and in other Brazilian universities), since Yeats is taught in the course on twentieth century British literature.

Although Yeats's poetic output certainly presents modernist characteristics, it is too simplistic to classify him only as a modernist. His connection to Romanticism is evident, and can be noticed throughout his career.

The main objective of this study is to identify aspects of these two traditions, Romanticism and Modernism, in Yeats's poetry, in order to problematize his usual classification as he is perceived in our Brazilian context, and to acknowledge the complexity of influences and peculiarities that are an integral part of his works.

Questioning the simplification of this classification can improve our understanding of Yeats's poetry, while at the same time improving our knowledge of both Romanticism and Modernism, freeing them from the restraints of time—the periods that manuals usually tell us they took place—to focus on the shared properties of the works which fall under each (or both) classifications.

We will first take a look at Romanticism and Modernism, identifying characteristics of these movements and briefly discussing some of the exponents of each in dialogue with Yeats. Since a lot of Yeats's poems are usually read through his biography, and since his

career spanned several decades, touching periods such as Symbolism and Modernism, we believe that looking at his biography is an apt way of introducing ourselves to the different facets of his work. After the sections on the movements, we will take a brief look at his biography in what it can highlight the themes and aspects we uncovered in the *corpus*.

Then we will proceed to the analysis of six poems: “When You are Old,” “The Sorrow of Love,” “Adam’s Curse,” “No Second Troy,” “The Second Coming,” and “Leda and the Swan.” As we will see, they try to represent the three phases that critics usually attribute to Yeats’s career. Finally, we will try to make a conclusion, based on the analysis, regarding Yeats’s relationship with both Modernism and Romanticism.

2. Romanticism

Romanticism is a broad label used to describe a set of characteristics and beliefs across the arts—such as painting, architecture, and music. While some of these characteristics are shared to a greater or smaller extent by different forms of art in different nations, common features appear in specific situations. We will here focus on British Romanticism, specifically the poetry these writers have produced, which was groundbreaking for its time, and important influences for most poetry produced ever since.

It is generally agreed by scholars, such as Jeffrey N. Cox, that what is called the romantic period in Britain started in 1789, the beginning of the French Revolution, and ended in 1832, with the passing of the First Reform Act in the Parliament (11). As we’ll see, although these are not aesthetic points of reference, they are very important to Romanticism. Until then, poetry had a stronger influence from the classical period, and for this reason received the moniker of neoclassical. These earlier poets attached greater importance to the wit and clarity of their poems.

According to C. M. Bowra, “if we wish to distinguish a single characteristic which differentiates the English romantics from the poets of the eighteenth century, is to be found in

the importance which they attached to the imagination and in the special view which they held of it” (1).¹ In his book *The Romantic Imagination*, Bowra explains how each of the main British romantic poets—and also some later poets, British and otherwise, strongly influenced by them, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Algernon Charles Swinburne—were strongly concerned with the role of the imagination in their poetic creations.

They believed that reason was not enough to explain our experiences and feelings:

[They] agreed that their task was to find through the imagination some transcendental order which explains the world of appearances and accounts not merely for the existence of visible things but for the effect which they have on us, for the sudden, unpredictable beating of the heart in the presence of beauty, for the conviction that what then moves us cannot be a cheat or an illusion, but must derive its authority from the power which moves the universe. (Bowra 22)

If we consider the dichotomy reason/emotion, British romantic poets were on the emotional side, departing from the neoclassicist attachment to reason.

Their devotion to imagination led them to perceive nature in a different way: “one of the advantages which they gained by their deliverance from abstractions and general truths was a freedom to use their senses and to look on nature without conventional prepossessions” (Bowra 12). In this sense, nature and the sensible world was in most cases their initial inspiration, and their poetry would not be the same without it.

* * *

Even if the dates circumscribe a certain generation of authors, it is important to understand that Romanticism as a movement is not just a period. In fact, as James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane remind us, it does not just denote a period, “but a style, a

¹ Bowra is talking here only about the British context. It is arguable that romantics from other countries were also intensely attached to imagination.

movement, a way of thinking (an 'ideology,' some have said), even a way of being in the world" (3). This "way of thinking and way of being" can be linked to what preeminent romantic scholar Frank Kermode calls the romantic isolation, as it is linked with alienation and nostalgia. For the romantic poets, theirs is the age that hates art. Only in an earlier age the poet was loved without being corrupted. They were also outcasts: "they had to pay for their joy and their vision" (Kermode 10). Their emphasis on imagination, "strengthened by considerations which are both religious and metaphysical" (Bowra 2), separated them from the rest of society.

The romantic poets were not, however, detached from their time, being attuned to many of the social and economic reforms and revolutions and, in some cases, even part of the political discussion. The claim for equality made by partisans of the French Revolution permeates their beliefs. The emphasis on belief and individualism, a concept which was widespread by the time, fits well with their cult of imagination and the concept of genius—a concept strongly connected to our understanding of Romanticism, putting the artist above others in his creative power, almost as if he was inspired by supernatural forces.

All of the British romantic poets, in a way or another, were committed to national independence—not only to actual problems of their times which, such as the earlier American independence, but the concept in itself. They differentiate themselves from fellow romantics of other nations in Europe in this commitment: they did not display the conservative tendencies perceptible in their French counterparts, for instance (Bowra 60). A good example is Lord Byron's death in the Greek War of Independence, fighting for a country that was not his own—i.e. fighting for a cause.

Another difference that we can perceive from romantic poets of other national origins, the Germans in this case, is that the worlds of fiction that the British poets made were convincing: "they succeeded in persuading others that these were not absurd or merely fanciful" (Bowra 4). The Germans, on the other hand, appeared more distant from the

common reality, populating their tales with elves, fairies, and other supernatural creatures—Ludwing Tieck's play *Puss-in-Boots* (1797) is a good example. In fact, if the British romantics used these kinds of characters and setting, English readers would criticize them for their Germanism—as happened with some readers of Coleridge's "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner." Most English readers were not moved by such characteristics; this occurs possibly because of the reception of the stigmatized Gothic novels, which were common at the time.

The divergences within British Romanticism are worth noticing. P. M. S. Dawson points to the customary distinction of the two generations:

An older generation of writers born in the early 1770s, including Wordsworth (born 1770), Coleridge (1772), and Southey (1774), who were initially fervent supporters but later resolute opponents of the French Revolution and what it represented; and a second generation, born around 1790, including Byron (1788), Shelley (1792), and Keats (1795), who were consistently liberal in their politics and can be seen as supporters of the revolution, if with qualifications. (Dawson 50)²

The older generation went from a left-wing way of thinking to a conservative one as time passed, both politically and religiously. It is noticeable how this earlier generation changed its attachment to national independence as it grew older—Blake, along with the second generation, never changed in this aspect.

To account for some of these differences on an individual level, we'll briefly focus now on some of the main British romantic poets, in order to understand some of their characteristics.

² William Blake, as in many other cases, is an anomaly here, since he was born in 1757.

William Blake (1757-1827)

William Blake was the oldest poet from England to be included in the romantic canon. It took some time, however, for Blake to be considered a romantic—or, sometimes, proto-romantic. Not only was his works by his peers and by the public of his time, he is also usually thought to be too unique to be classified as a romantic. Blake's impact, then, was only felt by a later generation, and his recognition came after his death.

Bowra analyzes a collection of poems which Blake published in 1794 called *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*—a part of this collection, *Songs of Innocence*, had already been published in 1789. This book—in which the words of the poems and illustrations were fused in plates designed by Blake himself—follows a structural pattern reflecting the dichotomy of the title: one part of the collection (“Songs of Innocence”) is in a brighter, happier mood, reflecting innocence—examples of poems are “The Lamb” and “Infant Joy;” the other section (“Songs of Experience”) is crueler and darker—as is perceptible in the famous poems “London” and “The Tyger,” which are part of this section. The vocabulary is kept relatively simple in these poems, uncommonly so for its time. The rhyme schemes and meters, moreover, were unsophisticated. This simplicity however, through the use of Blake's inventiveness, brought a complexity which was not to be understood until later.

According to Bowra, “of all the romantics, Blake is the most rigorous in his conception of the imagination ... for him imagination creates reality, and this reality is the divine activity of the self in its unimpeded energy” (14). In fact, imagination became so crucial to his thinking that he turned more and more into unorthodox theological and prophetic writings. He “was a visionary who believed that ordinary things are unsubstantial in themselves and yet rich as symbols of greater realities” (Bowra 15). The symbolism which Blake embodied came to be extremely complex and hermetic, filled with a mythology he had developed, influencing later writers such as Shelley, Swinburne, and, most important to our

aims, Yeats. If we take Yeats's book *A Vision* (1937), its symbolism and mythological way of thinking comes close to Blake's later books.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

William Wordsworth, an upper-middle class poet who went to France in his youth as an admirer of the French Revolution, became one of the most influential poets of his time, becoming the poet laureate in 1843. His *Lyrical Ballads*—in fact, a book made in collaboration with Coleridge and firstly published in 1798—became a point of inflection for British poetry—some scholars place it as the beginning of modern poetry.

The title is telling of its contents: the lyrical aspect explains the high level of subjectivity and individuality of the poems, whereas the term “ballad” brings the aspect of popular poetry, somewhat old-fashioned, and with a narrative impulse. The title was almost an oxymoron for its time, and the poetry in it dealt with themes which were then uncommon *topoi* in poetry.

Wordsworth claimed that poetry should use simple language, a “language of conversation” (Wordsworth 7). His preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) became a sort of manifesto for the poetry that he wanted to create, as well as an important text in the history of literary criticism. His claim that poetry was “emotion recollected in tranquility” (Wordsworth 251) became famous and accepted by his followers, who tried to echo his principles.

The fact that Wordsworth himself followed his own preface is disputable. Coleridge, in the second volume of his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), claimed that Wordsworth did not abide to his own preface in his poems, since his diction is much more elevated than he pretended—Coleridge goes on to say that, in the few cases that Wordsworth followed the principles of his preface, his poetry somehow failed.

The claim for a simpler language in the *Lyrical Ballads* is an attempt to access an ideal of the peasantry and their connection to the earth and the natural world. Nature is a pervasive element in Wordsworth's poems, often represented as specific places or a sight for meditation and for the musing on beauty. We can say, then, that he fused an elevated diction with themes that were not being treated using this approach. Something similar was done by Yeats in some of his poems.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was not only one of the leading poets of the British romantic movement: he was also one of its main theoreticians and critics—a characteristic he shared with German romantic Friedrich Schlegel, to whom Coleridge owes some of his thoughts. His writings about William Shakespeare became decisive to establish the bard's reputation, and his views on romantic poetry, including Wordsworth's and his own, as part of his multi-volume *Biographia Literaria*, remain relevant, and are nowadays more highly regarded than Wordsworth's.

Although his poetic output encompasses a few decades, it was between 1797 and 1798 that he wrote his most well-known poems, specially three of them: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel." These poems deal, in different ways, with supernatural themes, something which was seen as outdated and foolish. According to Bowra, however, the supernatural "appealed to him with a special power and was responsible for his finest work" (52). These poems share not only the supernatural, but also a dream-like quality which Coleridge would later discuss in his critical writings.

Because of different circumstances in his life, such as his unrequited love for Wordsworth's sister-in-law and his addiction to opium, Coleridge's poetry became scunter. In this sense, the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges claims that Coleridge—and not Lord Byron—was the true romantic: he "represents an archetype ... of the romantic man ... There

is something in Coleridge that seems to fill the imagination to overflowing” (122). Borges, as well as other critics, associates the romantic man not only with the imagination, but with failures and disappointments in different aspects of his life, so that imagination turns into escapism.

John Keats (1795-1821)

John Keats had a short life, dying of tuberculosis at 25. However, he had a great impact on the history of lyric poetry, writing some of the finest romantic poems—specially his odes and the ballad “La Belle Dame sans Merci”—as we can see, Keats had a high esteem for the use of well established forms, as did Yeats. He was also immortalized by Shelley in the elegy *Adonais* (1821) which, with the deathbed drawings of Joseph Severn transformed Keats in an ideal of the romantic poet.

Keats is usually perceived as a man who lived for sensuous impressions. Bowra, however, claiming that, although he “had a more passionate love than Blake for the visible world,” he was still certain that, like Blake, “reality is to be found only in the imagination” (15). In his poems he would use imaginative settings, such as in “La Belle Dame sans Merci.” In this ballad, echoing medieval verse—like Coleridge did in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”—, a knight is seduced by a supernatural lady which overwhelms his senses. This theme of the supernatural lover is important to Romanticism, and would be utilized by poets afterwards, including Yeats.

We can perceive in Keats’s odes, such as “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the importance of art to him. In this poem, Keats describes an urn engraved with different scenes. In the poem he says that “Beauty is truth, true beauty:” although Bowra warns that this sentence should only be true to the artist, and should not be read as a theory of art, he claims that for the artist it is “all that he knows for certain and all that he needs to know for the proper pursuit of his

special task” (148). Even though this kind of view would be questioned later by the modernists, beauty was still to take a central place for a myriad of poets.

4. Modernism

Modernism in literature is a term coined to describe a set of artists and texts, sharing common features. They are innovative and experimental, stretching the boundaries of the literature of their time. They break with both the romantic and the realist traditions by, among other traits, being skeptical about the power of language. This is something they share with those who came after them, the post-modernists. Language, as we’ll see, is a very important aspect of modernist thought.

As a period, Modernism “is often primarily located in the years 1890-1930, with a wider acknowledgment that it develops from the mid-nineteenth century and begins to lose its influence in the mid-twentieth century” (Childs 18). Baudelaire, with his book *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863), is usually regarded as the starting point of Modernism. In fact, this poet, along with French peers Rimbaud and Mallarmé, were decisive in shaping Modernism. Baudelaire’s appraisal of cosmopolitanism were accepted by modernists, and the concept was important to how modernist writers operated.

Norman Cantor defines Modernism in the following terms:

Modernism favored anti-historicism because truth is not evolutionary and progressive but something requiring analysis. It focused on the micro rather than the macrocosm, and hence the individual more than the social. It was concerned with self-referentiality, producing art that was about itself and texts that were self-contained rather than representational. It leaned towards the disjointed, disintegrating and discordant in opposition to Victorian harmony.
(qtd. in Childs 18)

Cantor, instead of focusing on the period reflects about the characteristics of these writings. This is because not all art which was produced in the period could be classified as modernist.

The periodization, according to Childs, is misleading, since “most literature written in the period [1890-1930] was not modernist” (18). Modernists were a minority even in its period of most prominence and prided themselves as being part of avant-garde movements confined to a group of critics and readers. In this sense, the “little magazines” are an important aspect of Modernism, since they were a common vehicle for modernist literature that restricted their readership to a select few—the initiated.

Childs briefly explains the roles of these magazines: “The little magazines aimed to create a readership for experimental work, to foster the circulation of new ideas, and to be a vehicle for the promotion of important, but less commercial, literature” (50). Some important ones include *The Dial* (1916) and *The Criterion* (1922), created by T.S. Eliot. They also displayed different manifestos, which were common among most the avant-garde art of the period. Declarations include “The revolution of the English language is an accomplished fact” and “The plain reader be damned.” According to Childs, “Modernism’s reputation for difficulty cannot be separated from these kinds of sentiments” (51-2). It is perceptible, then, that the search for complexity is intrinsic to Modernism.

This complexity aimed by the modernists occurred for several reasons, including the intellectual milieu in which it flourished and their reactions to the literature that preceded it. One of the reasons is the increasing doubt towards the integrity of the self, the precision of language, the truth of history. Some major thinkers were decisive in shaping this outlook, with Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, and Friedrich Nietzsche being the most notable. Their theories were influential in Modernist writing, even if at some times they were derided by some artists. If we consider this intellectual background, it is easier to understand James Longenbach’s statement: “Modern poetry grew from a sense (already highly developed by the Victorians) that the great claims made for poetry by the Romantics were no

longer viable” (102-103). The integrity of the Romantic self, for instance, was shattered by Freud’s theories.

It is important to notice some characteristics that Modernism shared with the Aestheticism branch of Symbolism—an artistic movement of the late nineteenth century, supported by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, which emphasized the aesthetic quality of the work of art. David Ayers, while discussing Aestheticism, considers the “interior space.” It is “bourgeois” and “also the alienated production of capitalism.” He discusses that the alienation can be either adaptive or confrontational, and shows the consequences of it, felt not only by the aesthetes, but also by modernist writers, specially poets: “a consequence of this for poetry is the emphasis on persona or mask, found in an early and already highly developed stage in the poetry of Tennyson and Browning, and a recurrent feature of modernist irony” (21). While the use of persona is shared by both movements, the irony created by the increasing disbelief in both scientific and metaphysical knowledge is mostly modernist.

A French Symbolism was another precursor to Modernism, especially because of symbolists’ awareness of language’s incapacity to communicate. Discussing Mallarmé, Peter Nicholls points out that “the idea of ceding authority to ‘the words themselves,’ which would then meet not in purposeful sequence but in some kind of unexpected ‘collision,’ would constitute one of the deepest unifying strands of modernist poetics” (55). The change of authority to the words, the text in itself, instead of the poets and the expression of their feelings, is a constant not only in Modernism, but also in the works of theoreticians thinking about literature in the first half of the twentieth century, such as the Russian formalists and the New Critics—we again perceive literature and criticism influencing one another.

The focus on the text, in a sense, brings the focus to form, hence to formal experimentation. Experiments with language were usual among modernist poets. In fact, as

Michael Hamburger stresses, there “was a constant concern with the possibilities and limits of language, including the contradiction inherent in it as the material of poetry” (Hamburger 33-34). Free verse, for instance, which became widely spread in the period, was a way of challenging the limits of poetry, and exploring new possibilities of language.

With the improvement of modes of communication and transport, the expansion of commerce via the British empire, different languages and cultures became accessible to more and more people. This led some poets to use “the hybridity of the modern idiom and its mobility between different vocabularies and registers” (Nicholls 56). What happens in their poems is a cacophony, a tumult of different voices, utilizing different languages and registers. Examples can be found specially in Eliot and Pound—Yeats also utilized this in his versions of the Japanese Noh Theater.

The period of Modernism (1890-1930) was a time of drastic changes brought by technological improvement, changing society and culture:

Much of the complexity of Modernism thus stems from its location at a crossroads between old and new science, and between orthodox religious belief and something which began to take its place, a primarily aesthetic “religion” in which imagination and sensibility silently usurped dogma and belief. (Nicholls 52)

All this complexity, as we have seen, is imbued in the production of the Modernism. Oddly enough, Nicholls’s last sentence about “imagination and sensibility sounds very romantic.

We’ll take a brief look at two of the most important Modernist poets in Britain (who were in fact Anglo-American, having emigrated to England to further their careers). Both were vital in establishing Modernist poetry in the Anglophone world, and became highly influential in the whole literary scene of their time. They were also acquainted with Yeats personally.

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

Ezra Pound was not only a poet: he was in a sense the ombudsman of Modernist poetry. Pound became friends with several important writers and publishers of his time, including Yeats, Eliot, and Ford Madox Ford.. His polemic ways of acting, and incisive writing, put him at the center of many controversies and gave him exposure unparalleled in his time.

Pound was arguably one of the persons to push the world into Modernism. His claim to “make it new” was heard by readers and writers, even though it was not necessarily followed. He was also one of the founders of Imagism, a small poetic movement with some strict rules, such as the brevity and economy of the poem, and freedom from traditional rhythm. Nicholls claims that “the imagist poems may be limited achievements in themselves, constrained by a too refined and fragile decorum, but their partial disembodiment and their resistance to conceptualization are features which would govern modernist poetics henceforth” (57-58). Later on, Pound would move away from Imagism, but its importance to Modernism is indisputable, with achievements such as “In a Station of the Metro” (1919).

We can notice that Pound, being a founder of Imagism and also of Vorticism, was usually committed to theories he created in order to write his poems. C.K. Stead’s argument is revealing: “Pound’s way to modernism was a slow process, involving a great deal of conscious theorizing and many programmatic declarations” (39). Stead also points to Pound’s relation with Eliot: “once the two men came together they fostered one another’s consciousness. For a brief period they were as useful to one another and to the development of literary history as Wordsworth and Coleridge had been over a century before” (39). As we can see, both Pound and Eliot worked together to foster modernist poetry. One instance of this relationship were the cuts that Pound made to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.

Pound’s *magnum opus*, however, is *The Cantos*, a long poem divided in cantos (like Dante’s *Divine Comedy*) Pound developed, without ever finishing, throughout his career.

Childs reminds us that “Pound’s epic is, for many critics, the most ambitious poem in twentieth-century literature” (119). It is filled with allusions to canonical literature, some of which he and Eliot helped revive, such as Homer’s *Odyssey* and Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, and is written using the already discussed merging of different idioms and registers to an extreme.³

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)

If Pound was the ombudsman, T. S. Eliot was, in a sense, behind him, giving critical and theoretical credibility to Pound’s statements. Eliot is widely acknowledged as a tastemaker of the twentieth-century, influencing not only writers, but also critics and scholars. This was achieved by the power of his poetic output and his criticism.

The essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) became influential in the formation of a new kind of critical understanding,⁴ which of course also influenced new writers. It is anti-romantic, overtly contradicting, for instance, Wordsworth’s famous definition of poetry, as Eliot states: “we must believe that ‘emotion recollected in tranquility’ is an inexact formula” (119). The essay also puts a lot of weight in tradition: according to Eliot, a poet “must develop or procure the consciousness of the past” (116), i.e. acquire the tradition by reading and studying it.

Another main point, perhaps the most important, is how Eliot perceives the role of personality in literature. According to him, “the emotion of art is impersonal” (119), and “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (117). This is so because “the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality” (118). This kind of thinking, radically different from how his contemporaries conceived of the poet-figure, was not unprecedented,

3 Pound’s relation with Yeats will be explored further in the next chapter.

4 i.e. New Criticism.

since it descends from Mallarmé. But the assertiveness and the reputation of the then young poet brought the thesis into currency among readers. In a later essay on Yeats, Eliot would qualify this impersonality and define it more clearly, utilizing two different types of impersonality (299).

Eliot's other essays on different poets or on themes regarding poetry established him as an important critic. His reputation was so high that he managed to reinstate some poets in the canon, such as the metaphysical poets. In an essay on them, Eliot proposed another famous guideline for poetry: "it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex result" (126). This is, of course, a modernist way of approaching poetry, which he advocated, after putting it into practice.

Differently from Pound, Eliot did not need to theorize before modernizing his poetry: he "seems to have stumbled on his own version of [modernism] almost by the accident of imitating Laforgue and breathing Bergsonian air of intellectual Paris in 1910" (Stead 39). His use of hybrid idioms came, as Stead implies, by accident, and could already be seen in the first book of poetry he published, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917).

In 1922, Eliot published *The Waste Land*, which became one of the most important achievements of modernist literature. This year was to be called the *annus mirabilis* of modernism, since great works were published then, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*. *The Waste Land* is certainly one of them. In his usual hybrid and difficult style, Eliot merges different voices and allusions to create a long poem which deals with different aspects of modernity.

4. A brief biography of William Butler Yeats

William Butler Yeats was born on 13 June 1865 in Dublin. The young William lived a life divided mainly between places: first, in his childhood, between Dublin, where he lived

with his family, and Sligo, a city in the west of Ireland, home to his mother's parents— in later life between the Irish capital and metropolitan London. His stated preference was always Sligo, a place where he could wander without many constraints. It was in Sligo that he became acquainted with folk tales, which he would later on utilize in his productions.

Although Yeats refuted many of his father's beliefs, John B. Yeats was a very important figure in the development of his artistic career, as well as of his political views. Yeats's father was not pro-Union—differently from most Irish Protestants—, a view shared by his son. JBY would bring Yeats to meetings with Irish nationalists, many of which were artists, painters and writers. One of the leaders of this group of Irish nationalists was John O'Leary, who in a sense acted as a mentor for Yeats. Holdeman explains that “O'Leary urged his protégé to foster a coherent national culture by emulating Thomas Davis and other poets associated with the Young Ireland movement” (5). His early poetic output, overtly romantic, is influenced by the ideals of the Young Irelanders—specially in their use of the ballad form—as well as imbibed in the kind of political views O'Leary had.

Yeats also had a passionate interest in occultism and magic, which extended throughout his life. Differently from his father, a committed atheist, Yeats was a critic of the scientific materialism that dominated his milieu. He could not, nevertheless, adopt more mainstream religions such as Catholicism and Protestantism. Therefore, he embraced the study of different mystical theories, such as Theosophy, and joined or created a number of hermetic societies.

This mystical attitude towards life at some point preoccupied his family, but he was inflexible: “The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write” (Yeats 303). It would, indeed, become the source of many of his ideas, and a prominent theme in different works.

In 1889, “the troubling of [his] life began” (Yeats 40). He met Maud Gonne, a young, radical Irish nationalist, though British, woman. Her beauty and pose, along with her

commitment to the nationalist cause, promptly fascinated him—a fascination that he could hardly cope with throughout most of his life. Gonne would be an important subject in a myriad of poems he wrote.

In love with Gonne, Yeats's politics grew increasingly radical. He co-wrote a play with his longtime friend Lady Gregory, entitled *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1903), which was a sort of call to arms for nationalists. He had not, however, abandoned his other interests, editing *The Works of William Blake* (1893) and becoming an active member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, conciliating radical politics with deep mysticism.

In 1896 Yeats met another important woman in his life, the aforementioned Isabella Augusta Gregory. Lady Gregory, as she is known, was interested in folklore, and both of them cultivated a long-lasting relationship that was personal, creative, and professional. Her home at Coole Park was a place where he could write and alleviate his anxieties. Their collaboration produced a number of plays and books, and together they championed the creation of a national theater that led to the institution of the Abbey Theatre, to this day one of the centerpieces of Anglophone theatrical life.

In 1902 Yeats met the young James Joyce, who would become one of the most important modernist prose writers in the world. By then, Yeats was already an important person in the cultural life of Ireland, not only as poet and playwright, but also because of his role in defense of Irish culture. Joyce had written an essay attacking the Irish Literary Theatre; he was, nevertheless, an admirer of some of Yeats's poems and knew them by heart.

This tension between respect and denial was formative of their early encounters. Yeats's account of one of their first meetings is revealing:

He asked me "Why did I make speeches? Why did I concern myself with politics? Why had I given certain of my stories and poems a historical setting?" ... all these things were a sign that the iron was getting cold [...]
Presently he got up to go, and, as he was going out, he said, "I am twenty.

How old are you? I told him, but I am afraid I said I was a year younger than I am. He said with a sigh, "I thought as much. I have met you too late. You are too old." (Foster 276)

Joyce's last sentence is symptomatic, as it reinforces the generational gap between Yeats and most of the central modernist writers. At this point, Joyce did not believe Yeats could catch up with his generation. Although their beliefs were never to be reconciled, it seems that Joyce's critique "rang like a knell" (Foster 277) in Yeats's ears, being possibly one of the causes of the change of direction that his poetry was about to undergo.

Another important factor in this change was Yeats's experience with theater. As he got involved not only with writing, but also in practical issues regarding the Irish Literary Theater, Yeats developed a dramatic sensibility that became part of his poetic output. Thus, many critics—Holdeman among them—tend to mark this shift by categorizing his works prior to *In the Seven Woods* (1903) as belonging to his Early phase.

This Early phase is perceived as mainly influenced by the spirit of Romanticism, including the nationalistic ethos of John O'Leary, and dominated by themes and characters from Irish mythology. It is also imbued with the occultism which he diligently studied. Being himself an editor of William Blake, the latter's works were of great importance in this phase, along with other English romantics.

In contrast, in his Middle phase, which Holdeman extends until 1916, when he published *Responsibilities and Other Poems*, Yeats changed the tenor of his poetry. There is a shift here, from the mythologies of the earlier poetry to an importance of the factual, with poems usually depicting real persons and events, in which he uses the dramatic tension acquired from theater to make the personae and voices interact in the poems.

In 1917, Yeats was a man filled with frustrations. He had proposed to Maud Gonne three times, only to receive her gentle but inflexible refusal. He even attempted to marry her daughter Iseult, again unsuccessfully. Unhappy about being childless at 51, he proposed to

25-year-old Georgina Hyde-Lees and finally got married. In their honeymoon, Yeats was still depressed, agonizing over his choices; in an attempt to cheer him up and engage him, George (a nickname that stuck after Pound started using it) experimented with automatic writing. Her output filled Yeats with wonder, who saw in her writings a source of poetic inspiration and a complex symbolism to be used in his poems. Later in the same year, Yeats bought Thoor Ballylee, a Norman tower in County Galway. This new residence was a place of reflection, and became an important part of his life, turning into a recurrent theme in his later poetic output—one of his most important volume of poems, *The Tower* (1928), was named after it.

He was still to write several books, and remained productive until his death. He also became a senator in the Irish Free State in a direct involvement with politics he would later regret. He wrote many plays, some of which like *At the Hawk's Well*, heavily influenced by Japanese Noh drama, and began a translation of the *Upanishads* with Shri Puhorit Swami.

In this Late phase, which Holdeman defines as covering the period from 1917 until his death, his poetry directly touched on political matters such as the Easter Rising, the Great War, and the Irish Civil War. In some poems he applied the cosmic system he had developed in *A Vision* (1925 and 1937), which was based on the experiences with automatic writing he had with his wife.

This phase is also considered prominently modern if not modernist, as his verse became distant from the Symbolism of his earlier poetry in favor of experimentation (Holdeman 80). Virginia Woolf, an important modernist writer herself, pointed that “Yeats had never written more exactly and more passionately” (qtd. in Holdeman 92), asserting the objectivity which was also characteristic of his late poetry—a claim that Pound would also make.

At the end of his life his political views grew increasingly conservative—as stated in his works, including his poems. He was an enthusiast of the fascist Blueshirt movement for a

brief period, praised Mussolini in several occasions, and became interested in eugenics, attesting the superiority and necessity of an aristocracy.

Yeats died on 18 January 1939 in Menton, France. He was only reburied in Ireland, in Drumcliff, Co. Sligo as per his wishes, in 1948. Already recognized in his time, receiving the Nobel Prize in 1923, Yeats became more important as his influence was perceived in other writers. The modernist generation was of great importance to increase his reputation. He left a rich body of work, filled with tensions and anxieties that permeated his life. One of these tensions, between Romanticism and Modernism, is analyzed in the next section.

5. Analysis of the poems

The poems are the following: “When You are Old,” “The Sorrow of Love,” “Adam’s Curse,” “No Second Troy,” “The Second Coming,” and “Leda and the Swan.” The selection of these poems is an attempt to have represented all three phases of Yeats’s career, with two poems for each phase, according to the accepted definition laid down by Holdeman. Although these poems were chosen in order to allow some thoughts about our subject to emerge, such a small corpus, appropriate to the dimension of this work, cannot be conclusive—neither the theoretical apparatus implemented can deal with every nuance of our subject. We hope, anyway, to find enough doubts to at least question Yeats’s classification.

The poems were chosen because they are highly anthologized, so that we can question Yeats’s relation with Romanticism and Modernism in his most popular poems. These poems are also the ones—among others—usually taught in literature classes, and are taken to be representative of Yeats’s poetry. A certain amount of personal preference also played a role.

Poems from the early phase

For this phase we have “When You are Old” and “The Sorrow of Love.” Both were first published in *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1892) and share

similarities of theme and structure. The poems are transcribed in the way they were first published, and then we will analyze the changes Yeats made afterwards, with the versions found in his *Collected Poems* (1933).⁵ For this phase in particular this analysis will be useful for us to perceive how Yeats “modernized” his poems in terms of word choice and syntax.

“When You are Old” (1892)

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
 And nodding by the fire, take down this book
 And slowly read and dream of the soft look
 Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep.

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
 And loved your beauty with love false or true,
 But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
 And loved the sorrows of your changing face.

And bending down beside the glowing bars
 Murmur, a little sad, ‘From us fled Love.
 He paced upon the mountains far above,
 And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.’ (Yeats 120-1)

“When You are Old” is a translation of a poem by French poet Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585). The original, a sonnet, was transformed into a poem with three stanzas of four verses each. Regardless, the poem still reads as a sonnet: the last stanza, though a quatrain,

⁵ Yeats revised his poems, and the order they entered his *Collected Poems*, until his death. This includes small revisions in punctuation and wording, but also greater changes in the structure and syntax of the poems.

seems to be the closing of the poem in the same way that the sestet of a sonnet does after the volta—the Italian sonnet being the form originally used by Ronsard.

The poem utilizes the *topos* of courtly love: the speaker of the poem is a poet who loves the woman⁶ he is addressing. She, as per usual in this kind of poem, seems to neglect him. He urges her to read his book when she is old, and to remember how this man—the speaker—was the one who really ever loved her. She will be melancholic by then, the speaker supposes: she will be “full of sleep,” being old and lonely, and will “murmur ... sadly.” He is implying that, since she did not love him back, not only he, but also she remained unfulfilled at the end of her life. There is love, of course, but there is also some resentment.

Moreover, the speaker knows that she will never notice him, as he is not predicting a happy future with her: in fact, he is excluded from her future, and she will only remember him when reading his book. Misery goes both ways: he is unhappy now, because of his unrequited love, and she will be unhappy in the future. We can link the speaker’s attitude with a sentence Yeats later coined: “We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy” (Yeats 163). The speaker lives this by being certain that his love will be never be fulfilled.

As we can see by now, the poem seems to be well suited to fit into the romantic category: courtly love is a theme which is usual between romantic poets—examples include Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode,” Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” and several poems by Lord Byron. The simple structure of the poem, the use of unsophisticated vocabulary, the rhyme scheme, brings to mind Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (e.g. in the

⁶ There is no grammatical evidence in the poem that the addressee is a woman, but as the poem adheres to most courtly love conventions, we can assume that the speaker is a knight-figure entreating his lady-love. We are also following the usual biographical interpretation and assuming that the addressee is a Maud Gonne-figure just as the speaker is “the poet”. The same will be done in “The Sorrow of Love.”

poems “The Chimney Sweeper” and “On Another’s Sorrow,” in this last case also utilizing similar themes).

A point of contact with Modernism is linked with the context of this poem, and not with its text. The issue of translation was important to modernist writers, specially for Pound, who made extensive use of it in *The Cantos*. Also, Ronsard was a poet championed by the modernist poets, and became more relevant in the period of Modernism—Yeats possibly influenced Pound’s and modernist poets’ interest in Ronsard.

We will compare now the last stanza of both the early and the later version, looking for changes that might point to a change of direction. Because the last stanza was the most revised one—there are only punctuation changes in the first two—I will not quote the other stanzas.

Early version (1892)	Late version (1933)
And bending down beside the glowing bars	And bending down beside the glowing bars
Murmur, a little sad, ‘From us fled Love.	Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
He paced upon the mountains far above,	And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.’	And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

As we can see, the direct speech of the earlier version became indirect speech, giving a fluidity to the stanza. Another “and” was added, so that in this late version every stanza has two of them, increasing the regularity of the poem. The subject of the last two verses also become clear: in the early version the “he” can be erroneously interpreted as the speaker of the poem. We can perceive, then, a change towards clarity and precision, as Yeats’s poetic skill increased—even his grammar, with the use of the adverb “sadly,” which modifies “murmur,” and not the woman.

“The Sorrow of Love” (1892)

The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves,
The full round moon and the star-laden sky,
And the loud song of the ever-singing leaves
Had hid away earth’s old and weary cry.

And then you came with those red mournful lips,
And with you came the whole of the world’s tears,
And all the sorrows of her labouring ships,
And all the burden of her myriad years.

And now the sparrows warring in the eaves,
The crumbling moon, the white stars in the sky,
And the loud chanting of the unquiet leaves,
Are shaken with earth’s old and weary cry. (Yeats 119-20)

“The Sorrow of Love” (1933)

The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,
The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,
And all that famous harmony of leaves,
Had blotted out man’s image and his cry.

A girl arose that had red mournful lips
And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,
Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships
And proud as Priam murdered with his peers;

Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,
 A climbing moon upon an empty sky,
 And all that lamentation of the leaves,
 Could but compose man's image and his cry. (Yeats 119-20)

“The Sorrow of Love” is a poem that underwent much more significant changes from its early to his last version than “When You are Old.” We will first analyze the earlier version, and then contrast it with the later one.

This poem has a structure which is very similar to “When You are Old:” three stanzas of four verses each, with the rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD ABAB. It is, again, almost a sonnet. In the first stanza, natural imagery strikes the speaker. With all the beauty he perceives, the “earth's old and weary cry” is hidden. That is to say, nature in this stanza can overcome the cruelties and difficulties of the world.

In the second stanza, however, a woman arrives, bringing sadness. There is an allusion to the *Iliad*, with the woman who arrives being compared to Helen of Troy. The allusion, however, is somehow obscure—only the reader in the know will be able to perceive it.⁷

In the third stanza the focus is again shifted to the same elements of the first stanza—hence the echoing of the rhyme scheme. However, they are now troubled. The sparrows are fighting, the leaves are unpleasantly noisy. The arrival of the woman changed them, and sadness cannot be countered by nature anymore. It seems that what changed is in fact the speaker's perception of nature. The woman changed his spirit and made him incorrigibly unhappy.

⁷ Readers well-versed in Yeats's personal mythology will probably remember his frequent allusion to Helen of Troy.

Again we are dealing with love for a woman, as in “When You are Old.” But we cannot know exactly what happened, since there are not many evidences to assert or deny that his love was requited or not. What we can perceive is that her appearance, and it could be just for a moment, destroyed the speaker’s joy.

This is connected to the romantic tradition of unhappy lovers, which we have cited earlier. The connection with nature, which frames the poem, since it appears in the first and last stanzas, is also a part the romantic tradition, specially what happens in the first stanza, as nature becomes a sort of escapism from the speaker’s troubles—even though later on it cannot fulfill this role anymore, such impact the woman had in his life.

What can be linked to Modernism is the obscure allusion to Greek themes. Although Keats famously used Greek themes in his poetry, he did it in an explicit way, differently from modernist poets—and from Yeats in this case—who used obscure allusions that only people versed in Greek literature could grasp.

The situation changes, however, in the last version of the poem. Although it still deals with the same subject, and its structure is unaltered, we can perceive a change of direction. The poem becomes more impersonal, changing from “you” to “girl.” With this impersonality—which, as we have seen, was favored by the modernists—some changes slightly alter the poem.

The tears in the second stanza seemed to be, in the early version, of the speaker. Because of her appearance, he started to cry. In the last version, however, is the girl who cries. The man, not the world, is the one who is the subject in the last verses of the first and last stanzas. This man was, we can conclude, the speaker of the early poem.

The poem becomes much more precise in the last version. There is a sense of action as the girl arises (“A girl arose that had red mournful lips”) and, in the same instant, the elements of the third stanza transform themselves to the eye of the man (“Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves”), which does not occur in the much more vague early version.

The allusion to mythology, also, is now clear in the poem—since Odysseus and Priam, characters from the *Iliad*, are now cited in the poem, linking the woman in the poem with Helen of Troy is much easier. Ironically, Yeats is taking away a modernist characteristic of obscure allusion to classical literature by making the allusion clear to the reader.

The subject of the poem, as we can see, is still the same. As Longenbach asserts, the syntax of the last version is much more elaborated, the iambic pentameter becomes more regular, instead of “languorous, equivocal” (321). Was Yeats trying to consciously modernize his poetry, or he just became a better poet, believing then that his early poetry was not good enough and could be improved in terms of techniques? The same argument can be made for the changes in “When You Are Old.”

I tend to believe in the latter, but it is important to notice that poetry from the late eighteenth century was usually more imprecise and languorous—like the early version. Pound, among others, praised the “new” Yeats because of this preciseness. But does this mean that Yeats was turning into a modernist, or is just Pound repudiating an eighteenth century vogue? It seems that Pound was celebrating a Yeats that indeed had become a better versifier, utilizing a more elaborate syntax (not necessarily more complex), being more precise in his poems.

Poems from the middle phase

As representative of this phase we will analyze “Adam’s Curse,” which was first published in *In the Seven Woods* (1904), and “No Second Troy,” firstly published in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910). Differently from the early phase, we will not focus our attention in any difference in the versions published of these poems,⁸ but keep to the text of the *Collected Poems* (1933)—since this is the version that most readers nowadays approach these poems.

⁸ In my opinion the changes in these poems are not as relevant as the poems from the earlier phases.

“Adam’s Curse” (1933—first published in 1903)

We sat together at one summer’s end,
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
And you and I, and talked of poetry.
I said: ‘A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought,
Out stitching and unstitching has been naught.
Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world.’

And thereupon

That beautiful mild woman for whose sake
There’s many a one shall find out all heartache
On finding that her voice is sweet and low
Replied: ‘To be born woman is to know—
Although they do not talk of it at school—
That we must labour to be beautiful.’

I said: 'It's certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.
There have been lovers who thought love should be
So much compounded of high courtesy
That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
Precedents out of beautiful old books;
Yet now it seems an idle trade enough.'

We sat grown quiet at the name of love;
We saw the last embers of daylight die,
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.

I had a thought for no one's but your ears:
That you were beautiful, and that I strove
To love you in the old high way of love;
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon. (Yeats 204-6)

“Adam's Curse” is certainly different from what we have seen in the early poems. In it there is a preciseness of language which is said to be a characteristic of this phase, along

with the influence of his experience with theater. Indeed, here we have a scene: Yeats, Maud Gonne and her friend, talking.⁹

They are talking first about poetry. It is the poet, Yeats's persona, who starts to speak, talking about the search for perfection in the craft of poetry, and the general indifference with the arduous work that it demands. Yeats stresses the point that poetry needs to appear spontaneous: "Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught."

Maud Gonne's friend followed Yeats's lead. But instead of continuing in the subject of poetry, she pursued the theme of the search for perfection, which is also united with general indifference, but talking, in an assertive way, about women's beauty. Yeats replies agreeing with her, but then proceeding to comment on the courtesy of love, on how a man also needs to struggle in order to conquer the love of a woman. He seems to be talking about himself, and his relation with Maud Gonne.

They stop talking, possibly in an awkward silence because of what was being discussed. Then there is a properly lyrical passage, when the poem turns to the speaker's thoughts and impressions. He speaks about the moon, which is usually a symbol linked with love in literature, and how it looked old, weather-worn. This is linked to the last stanza: his love for Maud Gonne also appears to be old and worn. The fact that he makes this contrast with the moon can be interpreted regarding the moon's cycles: his love is always waning and coming back.

He loved her "in the old high way of love," and tried to gain her love, but was rejected by her. Anyway, he tries to imagine a love with her which seemed happy, but was not—not very different from what really happened in his life. It is interesting to notice, again, the theme of courtly love, "the old high way of love," and how Yeats treats it here. He is

⁹ I chose here to follow the biographical reading strategy of relating the speaker of the poem with Yeats, and the addressee with Maud Gonne. This is a usual strategy in many poems by Yeats, but in this one in special it feels accurate and satisfying.

certainly trying to distance himself from his early phase: he tries not to present Maud Gonne as his beloved, as if he was trying to forget his fascination or the changes that occurred in it. The last stanza is telling: he imagines a past with her, to conclude that it would not be happy, trying to convince himself that it would not work after all. The love is still there, it is obvious, but now it seems to him something from the past.

We can read the poem as Yeats's struggle to unleash himself from his romantic past. Yet, he cannot do so: the last two stanzas, the ones that actually convey the final mood of the poem, which will be most remembered by the reader, are still dealing with the same romantic themes of his youth. We perceive his recognition of earlier behaviors and feelings (we might say, also, earlier poems), and the willingness to change; but, ultimately he (still) cannot.

Lines four to six offer us a glimpse of Yeats's poetic practice:

I said: 'A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Out stitching and unstitching has been naught.

It is possible to read these verses as his pursuit, in his poems, of the spontaneity of the genius—a concept largely connected with Romanticism. Ironically, this spontaneity comes only with sweat and effort.

It is interesting to compare this with Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." In his poem, Wordsworth emphasizes, in the last stanza, the importance of recollection ("They flash upon that inward eye"). This is something that he states in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* too: "I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth 251). Wordsworth includes here the importance of tranquility. Yeats, on the other hand, does not talk about remembrance, but appearance: for him, the poem needs to appear spontaneous—he does not think about tranquility here.

This spontaneity, however, at least for himself, is confined to appearances: he needs to work hard in every verse to make them feel spontaneous—something which possibly every romantic genius also did. Still, the connection with romantic poetics is valid, since he tries to look spontaneous. What he tries to convey in his poetry, at least what we can suppose from these verses, is something close to an insight, a moment of genius. The meticulous hard work is supposed to be hidden behind the seemingly spontaneity of the verse.

“No Second Troy” (1933—first published in 1910)

Why should I blame her that she filled my days
 With misery, or that she would of late
 Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
 Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
 Had they but courage equal to desire?
 What could have made her peaceful with a mind
 That nobleness made simple as a fire,
 With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
 That is not natural in an age like this,
 Being high and solitary and most stern?
 Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
 Was there another Troy for her to burn? (Yeats 256-7)

“No Second Troy” is another poem that uses aspects of Yeats’s biography, in particular his relationship with Maud Gonne—as in fact, do all three poems we have analyzed so far. In it, Yeats asks some questions about Maud Gonne’s attitudes, expressing his fascination for her, and comparing her, again, to a mythological woman figure from classical literature, Helen of Troy—a comparison he also makes in other poems.

Only in the two first verses Yeats draws attention to his relationship with Maud Gonne. Repeating the kind of argument that we have used for “Adam’s Curse,” it seems that he is trying to distance himself from her. Instead of love—at least explicitly—we perceive an attitude of awe and bafflement for this figure that he idolizes. Maud Gonne is here a mythological character in the grandest possible sense of the term.

What he is saying, then, is that she should not be judged by our mundane standards, since she is different from other women—not necessarily in beauty, but also in personality. This is a way for him to stop blaming her for the failure—even better, the non-existence—of their relationship, something he implicitly did in the early poems that we analyzed, and that he was rethinking in “Adam’s Curse.” It is possibly also a way for him to accept his unrequited love: since she is so much higher, he will never be able to reach her.

Even though Yeats is conscious of Maud Gonne’s superiority (at least that is what he supposes), and the impossibility of their love, is not his obsession telling? He still cannot stop talking about her with amazement, and in this poem specially she is overtly aggrandized. Although his attitude certainly has changed, we are still suspicious, or perhaps certain, that his feelings for her have not changed that much: it is the way that he deals with these feelings that he is changing.

More than that, Yeats still wants us readers to know about her, more than ten years after they first met. This is relevant if we think about the importance Yeats gave to the creation of his literary persona, rewriting older poems, arranging collections of his works, so that the narrative of his life—his literary life, the life he created and wanted us to visualize—would be implied by the order and substance of his poems. If so many poems still deal with Maud Gonne, it is possibly because he wants us to understand him in a certain way. And, apparently, he still wants us to connect him with the unrequited lover, in the tradition of Coleridge, Byron, and Keats, as mentioned.

What we can point that is different from the poems of his early phase is, again, the use of precise nouns and similes, instead of lingering into a hazy vagueness as we have seen in the early version of “The Sorrow of Love” (especially in its second stanza). A good example of this here is the curious simile “beauty like a tightened bow:” the adjective gives a much more specific image, strengthening the simile. Yeats also deals with events related to Ireland’s situation when he touches on Maud Gonne’s radical politics.

The way Yeats depicts Maud Gonne brings her a timelessness which could be linked with Romanticism. Being anachronistic is something that romantics would cherish, because of their nostalgia for things of the past. The almost supernatural muse which Maud Gonne embodies here can also be linked with Keat’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” for instance.

Poems from the last phase

We will analyze here “The Second Coming,” a poem firstly published in *The Dial* in 1920, and “Leda and the Swan,” firstly published in *Tomorrow* magazine in 1924. As we can see, both of them were published in a modernist magazine before being published in a book, consistent with the modernist way of publishing.

“The Second Coming” (1920)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
 When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
 The darkness drops again; but now I know
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (Yeats 401-2)

“The Second Coming” is a poem from Yeats’s last phase that deals with very different themes from what we have seen up to now. However, as we have argued in the section on his biography, these themes were of great interest to him throughout his life, and were synthesized in the books of *A Vision* (1925 and 1937).

The poem is divided in two stanzas, each having clearly different aims. The first stanza contextualizes the reader: the world, it seems, is extremely violent and chaotic at the moment. Man lost contact with and mastery over nature (“The falcon cannot hear the falconer”). Innocence—possibly pointing to Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*—is tainted by all this violence (“The ceremony of innocence is drowned”). It seems that something is about to happen.

In the second stanza, the speaker of the poem affirms a belief that change is coming. In the first three verses he seems to be frightened by what is coming, a mixture of hope and fear. Then, he has a vision, a prophecy it seems, where a sphinx is awakened from its “stony sleep” and slowly moves. We slowly understand that “the Second Coming” is a form of Anti-Christ, specially in the last verse. The end is frightful, since the imagery and the rhetoric is effective—the verb “slouches” in particular is powerful because of the odd sense of impending doom that it conveys through the laziness in its meaning.

The mixing of different cultures in the poem is curious: the speaker brings together the Anti-Christ, a Christian figure, and the sphinx, from classical literature¹⁰—we perceive, also, that none of those are actually named in the poem, but only inferred through context. Yeats is in fact utilizing his personal mythology: the widening gyres, from the first verse of the poem, are an important aspect of his historical thinking, since their movement, in his mythology, marks different cycles in the history of the world.

We can link this mixing to Eliot’s modernist landmark *The Waste Land*, where it is done abundantly. *The Waste Land* is, in fact, an apt correlate to “The Second Coming:” its title could be a description of the latter’s first stanza. The attitude both poems share about the world, the incredulity, the bafflement, is similar.

We can also meditate about the prophesizing of the second stanza, and how it relates to romantic poets. This can be specially related to Blake, who wrote prophetic books, creating, like Yeats, an unorthodox mythology, and Shelley, who, like Yeats, was also involved in studies of occultism, and said that his poetry should be “the trumpet of a prophecy.” Blake and Shelley did not only study but also believed with fervor in their metaphysical concepts—like Yeats, we might say.

¹⁰ I am thinking here on Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*, which Yeats translated, although the description of the sphinx is in fact related to the Egyptian buildings.

“Leda and the Swan” (1924)

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
 And how can body, laid in that white rush,
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
 And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
 So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? (Yeats 441)

“Leda and the Swan” is the only true sonnet we are analyzing—the two poems from the early phase, however, read pretty much like limping sonnets. The Petrarchan form depicts a scene from Greek mythology, focusing on some aspects which most artists dealing with the myth—be it in painting, literature, or other forms of art—do not usually treat. The myth of Leda and the Swan is a story in which Leda, because of her beauty, is seduced by Zeus, becoming pregnant of Helen and Pollux. In the same evening, after having sex with her husband Tyndareus, king of Sparta, she became pregnant of Castor and Clytemnestra.

The scene of the consummation is described in the first quatrain in a vivid, ekphrastic way. We can perceive the power of the swan, contrasted with Leda's frailty. Zeus is moved by lust in an aggressive ("A sudden blow") but also sensuous way ("her thighs caressed / By the dark webs"). Leda, on the other hand, is helpless. In the second quatrain there are glimpses of her feelings. In it, Yeats tries to see through Leda's eyes. She is "terrified," unable to do anything about what is happening. We perceive that she is being raped.

In the sestet, the act is consumed, and with it the destiny of everything that is to come is sealed, i.e. Leda's child Helen and Troy's destruction. This event becomes, then, crucial to the whole of Greek history—Yeats in fact used it as a temporal mark in *A Vision*. At the end, Yeats asks if, while Leda was being raped, she was able to understand the future of her children (specially Helen and Clytemnestra) and of her civilization.

As we can see, the theme of prophecy appears once more here. Yeats's curiosity in the final question is odd, because this is not something one would meditate about after such an event. Another poet could perhaps meditate on Leda's or Zeus's mental state after the rape, or how this event changed classical mythology. Such an obsession with prophecy, with being able to see the future, however, is pretty much Yeatsian. In this sense, Yeats breaks the expectation of the reader—perhaps not of his most fervent readers—by bringing a subject readers would not usually connect with the Greek myth.

Another point of interest in the poem is the depiction of the consummation as a rape. Artists had usually depicted the scene by having Zeus first seduce Leda, implying her consent. This is not the case here: Leda is helpless and frightened. In the verses "How can those terrified vague fingers push / The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?"—which can be interpreted as a rhetorical question—we can perceive it would be useless for Leda to attempt to free herself—an attempt possibly only made in her mind, such was Zeus's power.

3. Conclusion

We would first like to emphasize the tentativeness of this conclusion. Having chosen this broad subject, encompassing all of Yeats's poetic career and discussing complex concepts such as Romanticism and Modernism, we cannot be conclusive. These concepts demand much attention, because of their imprecision, that a much larger study than this one would be needed to try to grasp some aspects of them. The difficulty of Yeats's poetry, as well as the great number of poems, are also an impediment to stating broader and more definitive conclusions.

What we would like to do here, then, is to at least put some doubt in Yeats's classification as modernist. We believe that this doubt can lead to a better understanding of Yeats's poetry, Romanticism, and Modernism. It is also important to emphasize our Brazilian context: here, we only have contact with Yeats in a pedagogical environment—if so—in an undergraduate course or later on. At this level of higher education, we suppose that such a simplifistic understanding of Yeats as a modernist is unfruitful, since students are already able to deal with more complexities than in high school—a context where possibly anglophone students have their first contact with Yeats. This is also an opportunity to link two important periods in the history of literature, both connecting and contrasting their premises.

Our analysis was more or less coincident with what we have seen in the biography section regarding Yeats's phases, but with some differences that are telling. In the early phase, the analysis of both "When You are Old" and "The Sorrow of Love" made us realize that these can indeed be labeled as romantic, since the influence of romantic poets, such as Blake is, is visible, and romantic themes are commonly used. From what we can perceive from these two poems, Bowra's romantic imagination predominates in this phase, being even explicitly alluded to in "When You are Old."

The modernized versions of these poems, however, make a turn to more impersonal and precise language, freeing themselves from the vagueness of their earlier incarnations, as is specially visible in the two versions of “The Sorrow of Love”’s second stanza. There is a subtle critique of Romanticism imbued in the later version of “When You are Old” too. Anyway, the romantic themes are still there, and it is arguable if this modernization is a way towards Modernism or just the poet tweaking his earlier, technically less interesting poems.

In the middle phase we still see romantic themes being used, even if with some differences. In “Adam’s Curse” the use of a scene and dialogue differs from the early poems, as well as its preciseness of vocabulary, something also appearing in “No Second Troy.” The syntax is more direct than in the early phase too. We can say that there is a movement towards Modernism which is mainly formal. Romanticism, even though Yeats seems to be trying to get rid of it, is still an important part of his poems.

In the last phase, however, is where we see the real shift towards the conception of Modernism we have studied. “The Second Coming” can be linked with Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in several aspects, such as the theme of chaos and incredulity. “Leda and the Swan” prefers what seems to be a more classicist approach, and can be linked to Eliot’s notion of impersonality.

Still, the fascination for the prophecy in both poems has its roots in romantic poets Blake and Shelley. Their vision of the world, with their occultism and prophetic writings, made great impression in Yeats, and did not abandon him even in his late phase. His commitment to what he put in *A Vision* is true.

From the poems that were analyzed, we can say that there is journey from romantic imagination towards Eliot’s impersonality. However, such a reduction does not cover the nuances: the fact is that we can still perceive Romanticism in all of these phases, and even some traces of Modernism if the early phase. Yeats was formed in a romantic tradition, and

could not leave it behind throughout his entire life. He was more than just a stereotypical romantic, however, even in the beginning.

Perhaps it is now a good point to question why Yeats came to be considered a modernist, even though, as we have seen, there are so many aspects of his poems that deny this. Although a thesis that should need much more study, a possible reason is the fact that Modernism's aftermath is still present in our literary studies. In the period of Modernism, through the influence of writers and critics, Romanticism came to be considered a lesser movement. To be modernist was to be good and new. Perhaps this is why at the time he was claimed to be a modernist: in order to put him in the canon of modernist criticism. And their influence is still so strong as to make such odd classifications current in our area of study.

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