Toward a Phenomenological Poetics: The Interplay of Philosophy and Poetry in William Butler Yeats’s “The Tower” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War”

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Abstract

This thesis examines the interplay of poetry and philosophy in the work of William Butler Yeats as it serves to ground a symbolic structure that challenges time. Yeats, like his contemporaries, was influenced by Walter Pater, who made it possible to articulate with passion a sense of being despite life’s tumult and upheaval, to instantiate and develop in a moment a complete, poetic soul. It is in this same spirit that, much later, Gaston Bachelard would approach poetic memory for its harmonizing value. The works of Pater and Bachelard thus ground a phenomenological reading of Yeats’s poetry, in particular “The Tower” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” that serve to better grasp the nature of Yeats’s endeavor to construct a symbolic system that is at once philosophical and actualizing. It is at this intersection of philosophy and poetry that the act of writing becomes an intervention against the notion of time and ultimately, the death of the poet.
TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGICAL POETICS:
THE INTERPLAY OF PHILOSOPHY AND
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“THE TOWER” AND
“MEDITATIONS IN TIME OF CIVIL WAR”

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Introduction: Toward a Philosophical Poetics

In *The Poetics of Reverie*, Gaston Bachelard exclaims, "We should so much like to be able to demonstrate that poetry is a synthesizing force for human existence!" (124). For Bachelard, the poetic imagination, in recalling childhood, returns from the place of memory having experienced something deeper. Under the surface of such memories, the poet experiences the possibility of a life structured by new beginnings not afforded by simply living in the concrete present. Read in this light, poetry becomes a means of channeling and persisting in life’s (as well, history’s) diverse moments. Time, abstracted as such from its generalized, linear form, becomes singular and concrete. Taken one step further, time becomes understood in spatial terms, wherein individual moments become unified and dynamically structured. The reverie of such a dynamic life signifies a means not only to create a world, but to come to love it. What is more, it philosophizes poetry. Poetry as a philosophical endeavor does not simply facilitate a conversation of ideas or concepts in the style of Pope’s “Essay on Man.” Rather, it contributes an aesthetic method by which to establish and harmonize a world that is expressly livable. This is especially true of the modernists and from among them, William Butler Yeats. Yeats, like his contemporaries, was influenced by Walter Pater, who made it possible to articulate with passion a sense of being despite life’s tumult and upheaval, to instantiate and develop in a moment a complete, poetic soul. It is in this same spirit that, much later, Bachelard would approach the structure of poetic memory for its harmonizing value. The works of Pater as they are philosophically elucidated by Bachelard thus ground a phenomenological reading of Yeats’s poetry, in particular “The Tower” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” that serve to better grasp the nature of Yeats’s endeavor to
construct a symbolic system that is at once philosophical and actualizing. It is at this intersection of philosophy and poetry that the act of writing becomes an intervention against the notion of time and ultimately, the death of the poet.

In the 1925 edition of *A Vision*, Yeats writes: “We all, so far as I can remember, differed from ordinary students of philosophy or religion through our belief that truth cannot be discovered but may be revealed, and that if a man do not lose faith, and he go through certain preparations, revelation will find him at the fitting moment” (liv). Yeats’s recollection of what it is to encounter truth, understood here in terms of a philosophically active and studious life, owes much to Pater who, in his conclusion to *The Renaissance*, develops a notion of “the moment” as an instant of arrest from sources within and without the body that occurs at the point of impact with beauty. Of the particular nature of individual experience, Pater writes:

Far out on every side of us those elements are broadcast, driven in many currents; and birth and gesture and death and the springing violets from the grave are but a few of ten thousand resultant combinations. That clear perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours, under which we group them – a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it. This at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways.

(R 150)

Implicit in this is the sense of something emergent. Pater offers as an epigram to his conclusion Heraclitus’ doctrine of flux, which he translates as “All things give way;
nothing remaineth.” Embedding Heraclitus within the text, Pater’s “perpetual outline” gives way to a perpetual motion along the threads which pass beyond the body. Moreover, if the impression of the moment is reduced to the impact between the individual and experience, the “splendour of experience” in all of “its awful brevity” can be tethered to a contingent continual pulsation. In short, what is left at the point of impact is but an impression of the totality of the moment, where experience passes through the individual and gives way to an artistic rendering.

If the moment is a philosophically revelatory event, Pater sets a precedent for Yeats, his encounter with truth, and his poetry when he writes: “Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world” (151). This dream, the moment as impressed upon the individual, is what is at stake for the artist. To the end that the artist is successful, the rendering of the moment – by extension the totality of one’s aesthetic vision – remains in a state of perpetual motion, one poetic revelation necessarily giving way to the next, all the while remaining part of a coherent body of work. In his lectures on Plato and Platonism, Pater elucidates this concept:

there had been another side to the doctrine of Heraclitus; an attempt on his part, after all, to reduce the world of chaotic mutation to cosmos, to the unity of a reasonable order, by the search of and for the notation, if there be such, of an antiphonal rhythm, or logic, which, proceeding uniformly from movement to movement, as in some intricate musical theme, might link together in one those contending, infinitely diverse impulses.
Despite the universality present in this Heraclitean reflection—one that approaches a Platonic notion of the soul—there is an anxiety underlying Pater’s working toward this in *The Renaissance*. In his chapter on Da Vinci, the tension of rendering rare and obscure moments, the testing the contours of varied impressions to glean an expression near beauty, is expressed in the collision of “reason and its ideas.” He writes, “This struggle between reason and its ideas...His problem was the transmutation of ideas into images” (72). And earlier in the section: “And in such studies [of “the smiling women and the motion of great waters”] some interfusion of the extremes of beauty and terror shaped themselves,” (67) In this, the weight of the moment of impression becomes a near-upheaving event. Furthermore, the idealism of any aesthetic rendering only thinly veils a violence underlying the act of an individual perpetually in flux, pulsing in experience, demanded “to be present always at the focus where the greatest number of forces unite in their purest energy” (152). This presence carries with it the tension of implied collision, if not its promise. Thus, in the moment, the body becomes the locus of trauma.

In “The Second Coming,” Yeats approaches an articulation of Pater’s tension:

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;
Sure the second coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: Somewhere in the sand 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.

(187)

Where the world and the artist intersect is de-centered and chaotic. Artistically, conviction and passion are at an impasse. In the same way the falcon turns away from the falconer, the artist is losing control of world that, articulated in terms of the apocalypse, is becoming increasingly impossible to cohere. Even more, in the face of the “Spiritus Mundi,” the world spirit, the poet envisions a chimera, “A shape with a lion body and the head of a man.” In the closing lines, Yeats captures in a single image the essence of the trauma of rendering the impulse of Pater’s moment into text and image – in the timeless foreboding of the catastrophic event that is the individual in collision with the sum total of sense experience. Pater only touches upon this in conceiving one’s giving form to the moment. Despite the subtle violence of the moment, Pater warns that “our one chance lies
in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (153). His examination therefore speaks to an insistence on activity, an engagement with and existence in a continual pulsation of revelatory moments.

Perhaps softening the blow of this prospect, Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1958) opens:

The house... is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space, provided... that we take it in both its unity and its complexity, and endeavor to integrate all the special values in one fundamental value. For the house furnishes us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time.

The house furnishes at once a cosmos of thoughts, memories, and dreams – namely, the past and the future – in what Bachelard calls “the instant.” It is where the interplay of past and future is experienced a-temporally. In a word, the instant is a tethering of opposites, an impulse occupying space rather than spanning duration.

The house, for Bachelard, becomes the locus of inquiry into the phenomenon of the instant. The intimate associations which comingle in and around the instant bring forth impulses of childhood reverie which inform the present and push toward the future. He expands upon this with a discussion of the flower writing, “There exists no more compact image of intimacy, none that is more sure of its center, than a flower’s dream of the future while it is still enclosed, tightly folded, inside its seed” (24). Housed in the image of the flower is the notion of vastness, that infinite space where moment past and
future interweave into the present, where time crosses itself at a solitary intersection. It is
the image that contains for the seed what Yeats refers to in “To the Rose upon the Rood
of Time” as that “Little space for the rose breath to fill” (31), the self-same enclosed
cosmos the house holds for the child, the word for the poet. Bachelard writes that
“Implicit in this rendering of the instant is a notion of arrest or suspension: Past and
future – like duration – correspond to impressions that are secondary and indirect…the
instant holds no duration at its core…it is whole and alone…once seized in solitary
meditation, consciousness becomes as motionless as the isolated instant,” (II 28).
Duration as a now spatial designation – each moment is now bounded in itself – creates
the necessary space for a symbolism to emerge. Formal causality is the result of poetic
correspondences, and not disparate binaries. Toward a phenomenological poetics, the
instant signals the necessary unification of person and poetry. As such, more than mere
expression, the instant emanates.

It is in the space this temporal stasis creates that the future inscribes itself upon
the present. Baudelaire accompanies this moment of inscription with a nervous shock,
stating in “The Painter of Modern Life” that “The child sees everything as a novelty”
(398). For the poet, everything must exist and be experienced in a state of newness.
Bachelard takes this a step further, coupling reason with the passion of the instant. He
thus establishes a dialectic to reverie, defining it as a harmony of antithesis, resulting in a
charged ambivalence – a poetic suspension – characteristic of the image of the instant.

Dialectically speaking, it is the coming of terms toward this ambivalence upon
which the poet builds. In this, as Edward K. Kaplan states in his essay “Imagination and
Ethics: Gaston Bachelard and Martin Buber”, “the self creates a veritable cosmos of
which he or she is the center and origin" (76). Or, to return to Pater and his discussion of Winckelmann, being rises so surely yet delicately that

This colourless, unclassified poetry of life, with its blending and interpretation of intellectual, spiritual and physical elements, still folded together, pregnant with the possibilities of a whole world closed within it, is the highest expression of the indifference which lies beyond all that is relative or partial.

(140)

This is nowhere more evident than in the poetry of Yeats, who declares in *A Vision* that “Thought is nothing without action” (lv). In building his poetic oeuvre as the tower, Yeats moves toward an ascendant poetry with which he might forge physical and symbolic space in order to render and experience the world. Whereupon, in his own words:

I pace upon the battlements and stare
On the foundation of a house, or where
Tree, like sooty finger, starts from the earth;
And send imagination forth
Under the day’s declining beam, and call
Images and memories
From ruin or from ancient trees,
For I would ask a question of them all.

(194-5)
Interrogating his vast world below, Yeats stands not upon a tower per se, but on what Bachelard refers to as "the threshold of our space" where "in analyzing images of immensity, we realize within ourselves the pure being of pure imagination" (PS 58, 84).

Yeats's autobiography begins "My first memories are fragmentary and isolated and contemporaneous, as though one remembered some first moments of the seven days. It seems as if time had not yet been created, for all thoughts connected with emotion and place are without sequence" (1). From the outset, imagination is established as a-temporal. As well, he preempts Bachelard, who would forty years later write that the instant is without time and must be measured in a way that structures reciprocally an experience of past and future. Time, therefore, must be rendered into a feeling. The poet becomes in the instant the architect of his or her chronology. Past and future collide with the present and are rendered into an image through language. Bachelard writes that "language dreams," and it is in such dreams that a world emerges (PS 146).

For Yeats, the word rises and is manifested in the tower. Indeed, the whole of Yeats's poetry can and should be read as a constructive interrogation of Pater's moment as it corresponds to and is expanded by Bachelard's instant. Working in terms of an applied poetics derived from Pater and anticipating Bachelard, Yeats's tower is illustrative of a symbolism dependent upon a manipulation of time and space which is concretized through an insistent interplay of philosophy and poetry. Further revealed is the latter's inherent power to reveal, enact, and even anticipate the former. The phenomenological value of the tower as a symbolic structure is that it serves not only as a locus of experience, but as a discursive and dialogic means by which to parse time and experience and thus give it meaning. This engagement furthermore pushes the poet as
well as the reader toward a mode of living philosophically, or, more audaciously, of forging a poetic soul. To this end, it exemplifies the building of a monument to the un-ageing intellect, “Housed everywhere but nowhere shut in” (64).
Chapter I: “The Tower” and the Edification of a Poetic Soul

The two poems that bring to a close Michael Robartes and the Dancer, “A Meditation in Time of War” and “To be carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee,” serve as keystone pieces in the event of Yeats’s poetic world rising and becoming manifest in the tower. While an evolutionary reading of Yeats’s poetry can and should be taken for granted, these comparatively short pieces succinctly illustrate the breadth and scope of his poetic image for all of its philosophically actualizing potential and present the foundations of the argument through which he structures his poetry as a means to challenge the wearing of time.

In The Poetics of Reverie, Bachelard writes, “When the human world leaves him in peace, the child feels like the son of the cosmos” (99). For the poet, solitary meditation liberates in that it announces a being in life. It is experience free of material distraction, a child-like entrance into a dream of the world as it is reconstituted inside of the poet. In “A Meditation in Time of War,” Yeats offers a treatment of one such profoundly brief revelatory moment:

For one throb of the artery,
While on that old grey stone I sat
Under that old wind-broken tree,
I know that One is animate,
Mankind inanimate phantasy.

(190)

Formally, the poem is outwardly martial. A regimented, eight-syllable line marches to the pulse felt in the first line. The rhyme is a simple abab and the number of lines matches
exactly the meter of the verse. Despite this, beyond structure, the instance of the word in
the title is the only indication that this is, in fact, a war poem.

Rather, it is a poem in opposition. The rhyme scheme separates on the one hand
levels of being (human, nature, spirit), and on the other, levels of vitality (passive,
active). This results in a poem that speaks to a notion of hierarchical division and
classification. Sitting at the top of this hierarchy is the spirit, the One, while at the bottom
is the stone, “mankind” is somewhere between the two. Each level of being is more
perfect to the degree to which it has vitality, or it connection with the spirit of the One.
This sense of order follows the marching of the meter, but the emphasized monosyllables
and the hard consonant rhymes fall short as they culminate and stumble into “phantasy”
which disrupts the superficial uniformity of the work.

The formal nuances of the poem lead to its content. The pang of the instant is felt
in “one throb of the artery.” The language is pulled directly from Blake, who writes in
Book I of his “Milton”:

Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery
Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years.
For in this Period the Poets Work is Done: and all the
Great
Events of Time start forth & are conciev'd in such a
Period
Within a moment: a Pulsation of the Artery.
Yeats cites Blake’s poem in the 1925 edition of *A Vision* in a brief section discussing time. He credits it for its symbolic resonance, but relies on it for his own purposes as something spatial, “comparable to the cubes in the drawings of Wyndham Lewis and the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi. They have helped [him] hold in a single thought reality and justice” (25). The reference to Brancusi, whose representational works insist on a movement upward, betrays a developing, nuanced definition of time that favors ascension. In recalling his repose, Yeats surrounds himself with “that old grey stone” and “the old wind-broken tree,” objects representative throughout his work of the looming finality of old age. Of the image of the tree, Bachelard believes the tree to be an “integrating object.” Terrestrially, it encompasses just about every aspect and element of the natural world. Just as it incorporates into its being earth, sky, water and air, it functions philosophically, as “The imagined tree becomes imperceptibly the cosmological tree, the tree which epitomizes a universe,” (PIR 85). For Bachelard, the tree does not age as much as it expands. Appropriately, amidst the mise-en-scene of decline, there is realized in a moment (for the duration of the poem’s reality is the single beat of his pulse) the “One,” the Spiritus Mundi, and its relation to the material world. In this impulse, the soul is revealed as something not only perpetually expanding, but also constituent. Yeats already had an understanding of this. In the essay “A Voice,” in *The Celtic Twilight*, he recalls a similar moment:

I felt, all of a sudden, and only for a second, an emotion which I said to myself was the root of Christian mysticism. There has swept over me a sense of weakness, of dependence on a great personal Being somewhere far off yet near at hand...That night I awoke lying upon my back and hearing a voice speaking
above me and saying, ‘No human soul is like any other human soul, and therefore the love of God for any human soul is infinite, for no other soul can satisfy the need in God.’

(M 68)

As well, he writes in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, following Henry More, “The soul by changes of ‘vital congruity,’...draws to it a certain thought, and this thought draws by its association the sequence of many thoughts, endowing them with a life in the vehicle meted out according to the intensity of the first perception” (353). Toward a poetic cosmology, the poem as epiphany serves as a rendering of a moment Yeats had been approaching, if not preparing for, for some time.

Philosophically, the One is generally recognized as that which infuses beauty (and by extension lasting value) to mankind, thereby giving spirit to the body. In “The Tower,” Yeats twice invokes Plotinus, whose work on beauty shares something of the philosophy embedded in “A Meditation in Time of War.” The Tractate on beauty in Ennead 1 asks: “Is there some one principle from which all take their grace, or is there a beauty particular to the embodied and another for the bodiless?” Working toward an answer, Plotinus differentiates between the Absolute Ugly and the Ideal-Form. The Absolute Ugly is defined as a thing lacking pattern or reason – a diverse, fragmented body. In contrast, the Ideal-Form has by some virtue managed to cohere its component parts into something unified and harmonious. The singularity of pattern, its reason, is what renders an object to be perceived as beautiful. To understand beauty in this regard is to understand the essence of the soul. Plotinus writes: “Beauty enthrones itself to the
parts as to the sum: when it lights on some natural unity, a thing of like parts, then it
gives itself to the whole...This, then, is how the material thing becomes beautiful – by
communicating in the thought (reason, logos) that flows from the divine,” (Saunders, ed.
222). Plotinus employs the image of the architect to illustrate the divine spirit. The beauty
beheld in the finished house is the expression of the “inner ideal” inscribed upon the
exterior. Applied in this way to Yeats, “mankind” becomes the house of the One. To take
this one step further, the architectural metaphor informs precisely what is at work in the
act of reading “A Meditation in Time of War” into “To be carved on a Stone at Thoor
Ballylee.” The former is necessarily inscribed onto the latter, infusing a poetic ideal into
the process of building the tower.

For Yeats, the vitality of the ideal image is communicated through the insistence
of its object. Following Gaston Bachelard, in Yeats’s dream of a world, the image
radiates:

Suddenly an image situates itself in the center of our imagining being. It retains
us, it engages us. It infuses us with being. The cogito is conquered through an
object of the world, an object which, all by itself, represents the world. The
imagined detail is a sharp point which penetrates the dreamer; it excites in him a
concrete meditation. Its being is at
the same time being of the image and being of adherence to the image which is
astonishing.

(PR 153)
This bears a striking similarity to what Yeats writes in “Anima Mundi” in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*:

> When all sequence comes to an end, time comes to an end, and the soul puts on the rhythmic or spiritual body or luminous body and contemplates all the events of its memory and every possible impulse in an eternal possession of itself in one single moment. That condition alone is animate, all the rest is fantasy, and from thence come all the passions and, some have held, the very heat of the body.

(M 357)

For the poet in repose, the image articulates itself. Bachelard’s poetic phenomenology calls upon the past (memory), immediate sensory experience, and dreams of the future in order to call to life an image that defines in its very being an enduring poetic totality. It is the elusive singularity of word and being, or, more profoundly, a being in the spirit of the word which signals for Yeats the flame-like illumination of a unified being.

The incorporation of Thoor Ballylee with “To be carved...” reveals Yeats’s concern for such an endurance in the poem’s final two lines:

> And may these characters remain

> When all is ruin once again.

(190)

When all in fact comes to an end, the success of the tower is its permanence of spirit. Furthermore, the couplet’s tense, along with the poem’s title, signifies a looking toward the future. It is the embodiment of Yeats’s symbolic design, standing as an image of the
instant, in an instant, occupying physical as well as poetic space yet absented from the wearing of measured time.

The virtue of an ascendant poetry exemplified by the Tower is that it signals a divorce from the prosaic mode of the terrestrial. Furthermore, upon writing upward, images of vertical reverie succeed in rising beyond their representative physical structures. Bachelard writes that “all upright objects point to a zenith...Many a dream of flight is born in the emulation of verticality” (PIR 106). He explains that such verticality allows for the liberation of a natural instinct to transcend the limitation of the body. Rising above the horizontal axis of terrestrial experience (or lack thereof), the creative imagination becomes self-actualizing. For Bachelard, this is exemplary of living in and of the image, the oneiric singularity of the body and the word.

Operating quite literally above the tower, birds hold a specific symbolic significance. Yeats’s meditation on the birds’ flight in “Coole Park, 1929” illustrates the function of the avian in his bringing to terms his physical and poetic bodies.

I meditate upon a swallow’s flight,
Upon an aged woman and her house,
A sycamore and lime tree lost in night
Although that western cloud is luminous,
Great works constructed there in nature’s spite
For scholars and for poets after us,
Thoughts long knitted into a single thought,
A dance-like glory that those walls forgot.

(242-3)
In regard to form, the poem is an attempt to establish a waning control. Each stanza is a single, complete sentence composed in ottava rima. The stanza form is central to Yeats’s reflections on old age, as Helen Vendler notes, also adding that, for the poet, its ideological “stateliness” is coupled with a structural value, “its expansive sixtaine and conclusive couplet enable a geometrically exact “placing” of internal element” (263). Eschewed is the past use of discordant meter to indicate the clamoring toward the end of life, in its place a clear, structured sense of control and unity. The migratory flight of the swallow at the beginning of the poem brings Yeats to the memory of Coole Park. Retaining an avian point of view, lines 2-4 present an imagining of the scene, maneuvering through a description that glides into view of the house and banks toward “that western cloud.” Despite the almost erratic pairing of images, the sixtaine conforms to Vendler’s reading in terms of geometric placement in that, tracing memory’s flight backwards, Yeats is expressly challenging the linearity of time.

What is at stake in the first stanza is a rendering of art that persists in spite of the dispassionate, degenerative passing of time. The swallow’s flight announces a reversal, the success of art to operate and ultimately stand against nature. As such, “Thoughts long knitted into a single thought” becomes more than an idealized culmination of work to simply influence coming generations of poets and scholars. Definitive of its historic moment, it becomes definitive of the phenomenological event, the knitting of the past and the future, of ideas and identities into a vibrant, actualizing, yet temporally static present.

The image of the swallow and its relation to the artist carries with it a sense of transience, the seasonal migration of the poet to Coole. The old woman is Lady Gregory, toward whom Yeats and his cohort are fixed artistically. She and her house at Coole are
paralleled to the sycamore and lime trees. Time has distanced Yeats from his Coole summers, his memory dimmed “in night,” but Gregory and the house endure with the inert, strengthened, generational presence the trees evoke. Artistic potential is not lost in the dim, unfocused light of the western cloud. The dream-like milieu of the cloud, the edging image of contoured, unreflective light in juxtaposition to the air of the swallow captures and holds in a moment a vibrant expression cutting “through time and across it withershins.” The implication in “withershins” is particularly revealing in that the work created at Coole – and likewise in this very poem – operates in a manner contrary to the linear movement of time, as if it defiantly exists in moments that stand outside of the very time it likewise spans:

They came like swallows and like swallows went,
And yet a woman’s powerful character
Could keep a swallow to its first intent;
And half a dozen in formation there,
That seemed to whirl upon a compass-point,
That found certainly upon the dreaming air,
The intellectual sweetness of those lines
That cut through time or cross it withershins.

(243)

It is the function of the poet to interrupt the flow of time with moments of reverie, and hence unlock “intellectual sweetness.” Bachelard teaches that the experiential nature of poetry renews and empowers a self-realizing consciousness (cogito), illuminating in but an instant the poetic image. If only for an instant, illumination necessarily carries with it a
sense of extension. Furthermore, it informs. Thus, for Bachelard, the image has a genesis. In this way, the circling flight of the swallows signals a beginning, an extending of life, and lends nuance to Harold Bloom’s identification of this moment as counterpart to the apocalyptic vision the same image sets in motion in the first lines of “The Second Coming.” The image supplies for the poet as well as the reader a tangible, experiential symbol that satisfies (as well as signifies) the intellect’s demand for completeness and centrality.

“The Tower” thus announces the means by which Yeats builds the totality of his poetic image. It is to be a monument to un-aging intellect. Mired in the terrestrial, Yeats is writing against time and its erosion of the body. This is taken up immediately in the first section of the poem:

What shall I do with this absurdity –

O heart, O troubled heart – this caricature,

Decrepit age that has been tied to me

As to a dog’s tail?

(194)

On the heels of the bold assertion made in the first section of “Sailing to Byzantium,” that “Once out of nature I shall never take/My bodily form from any natural thing,” never the more stuck in nature, Yeats’s lament reveals the fundamental anxiety that sets the psychological and emotional tenor of the poem. Appealing to his heart, Yeats is at a loss how to come to terms with the absurdity of a body insistent on aging at a time when his imagination has never seemed so thriving. The visual break between the fourth and fifth lines makes clear this rupture. Within the text, the juxtaposition of the mono and the
polysyllabic in the first four lines has a comparable double effect. First, it subtly imbues the opening lines with a certain tension, an anxiety in articulating his predicament. Secondly and more stylistically, it pits a sophistication of poetry against the singular, earthly mode of the body. In this way, “The Tower” is, as a proxy for the body, a working through or writing exactly that which resists articulation.

Harold Bloom, in his book on Yeats, dedicates a chapter to Pater’s influence on not only the poet, but his generation. This leads him to a discussion of Wallace Stevens, whose poem “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” achieves

not a deliberate solipsism, but a triumph in which exuberant self-recognition overcomes the dread of solipsism, and proclaims a self so expanded and confident that all external regions are merely filled with “the escapades of death,” as the climactic phrase of a similar epiphany was to call the universe of death in Stevens’s later masterpiece.

(37)

This is not yet the Yeats of “The Tower.” Rather, Yeats is still laboring to be beautiful, writing toward an eminent, poetic embodiment that might match the exuberance of Stevens’s epiphanies. In short, Yeats is at the nascent moment of asserting the power of the imagination over the body, and furthermore, over action. The world must be a work of art, and it is this reality that must have its locus inside of the poet. The “stitching and unstitching” (80) of “Thoughts long knitted into a single thought” (243) becomes the laborious necessity of poetry. If successful, the immediate concentration of experience will, following Pater, “[expand] that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible
into a given time” (153). Bloom, in emphasizing an autonomy in Stevens, links this directly to Pater, who “knew too well that we always lived in a place not our own, and much more not ourselves, that we have only an interval, and then our place knows us no more” (32). For Yeats, this is the foundation of an approach toward a phenomenal self-actualization that, like Stevens, edges past solipsism.

Line 11 of “The Tower” signals a turning away from the body proper. Asserting his faith in the power of imagination, he “must bid the Muse go pack.” The muse is not immediate. It is something outside of the self, at best representative of poetic expectation. Bachelard writes “The notion of muse, a notion which should help us give body to inspiration and which should make us believe that there is a transcendent subject for the verb to inspire, cannot enter naturally into the vocabulary of the phenomenologist” (PR 7). Likewise, for the student of Pater, it has no place in the lexicon of the poet. Instead, Yeats contents himself in this first section with a reliance on philosophers (if not a general sense of antiquity) until the self is so established as to converse immediately, in and of itself, with the abstract. Practically, what Yeats is after here is rooted in his desire toward a method of poetic suspension. In A Vision (1925) he writes, “I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose and yet make all it created, or could create, part of one history, and that the soul’s. The Greeks certainly had such a system, and Dante…and I think no man since” (liv-1v). This philosophical training becomes a method for the poet’s integration into the animate condition realized in “A Meditation.”

The appeal to Plato and Plotinus serves “to rouse, to startle [the human spirit] to a life of constant and eager observation” (Pater, R 152). Yeats’s heightened imaginative
faculties despite his old age, which sharpen his imagination, ear and eye (conduits all of experience), is repeated with a touch of staid realism:

Until Imagination, ear and eye,
Can be content in argument and deal
In abstract things; or be derided by
A sort of battered kettle at the heel.

Despite the excitement of his senses, he has yet to truly achieve an integration of mind and sense into one subsistent faculty. In the Section II of “Anima Mundi,” Yeats espouses the suspension of the critical faculty so as to become fully absorbed in the image at hand. He writes: “Those who follow the old rule keep their bodies still and their minds awake and clear, dreading especially any confusion between images of the mind and objects of the sense; they seek to become, as it were, polished mirrors.” It is by this rule that one will learn and “begin to move in the midst of what seems a powerful light” (344).

Problematic to this is that the body exists in a state of perpetual motion - it ceaselessly declines. Therefore, the stillness of the body becomes relative to the vitality of the mind. To approach an experiential, existential permanence, philosophy is by no means an end. Furthermore, too deep an investment into theory only serves to dull the impact of experience. Following Pater, in becoming polished mirrors, “we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch” (152). As such, philosophy awakens receptive faculties, poetry crystallizes it. Existentially, it follows that the poetic rendering of experience – of the experiential body - is an intuitive act. It is the singular, self-actualized insisting of a life in the face of the death revealed in the moment in flux.

Bachelard writes that “Intellectual courage consists in actively and vitally preserving this
instant of nascent knowledge, of making it the unceasing fountain of our intuition, and of
designing, with the subjective history of our errors and faults, the model of a better, more
illumined life” (II 4). The visual break between the mind and the body in lines 4-5
creates a caesura, that nascent space from which Yeats’s dream of a world can spurt forth
vibrantly, if not exuberantly, immediate and embodied.

Section I of “The Tower” ends with a Yeats caught between dealing with
abstractions such as the nature of death, or suffering derision in nature’s cruelest of jokes,
death itself. Philosophy has assisted him in mitigating, for a time, the absurdity of this
terrestrial snag. In 1919, seven years prior to the publication of “The Tower,” he wrote of
this very problem: “The soul cannot have much knowledge until it has shaken off the
habit of time and place, but till that hour it must fix its attention upon what is near,
thinking of objects one after the other as we run the eye or the finger over them. Its
intellectual power cannot but increase and alter as its perceptions become simultaneous,”
(M 358). To counteract time, the poet must intuit experience as occurring simultaneously.
The past and future must, therefore, overlay the present. The poem’s second section
begins:

I pace upon the battlements and stare
On the foundations of a house, or where
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth;
And sends imagination forth
Under the day’s declining beam, and call
Images and memories
From ruin or from ancient trees,
For I would ask a question of them all.

(195)

Heeding his own advice, Yeats is tracing objects—a house and tree—fixing his attention on what is nearest at hand. The section also signals a move from overtly internalized concerns of philosophical individuation to, in “Images and memories,” the consultation of (local) history, nature, and his own work. In short, he is conversing with the past so as to expand time and therefore expand life.

Of the local figures and their history, Yeats would write:

The persons mentioned are associated by legend, story and tradition with the neighbourhood of Thoor Ballylee or Ballylee Castle, where the poem was written...These poor countrymen and countrywomen in their beliefs, and in their emotions, are many years nearer to that old Greek world, that set beauty beside the fountain of things, than are our men of learning.

(Jeffares 217, 218-19)

The invocation of Hanrahan, something of a Homeric personality for Yeats, in turn serves to bring together this body of memory with his body of work. This allows the poet to at once share in as well as embody (in other words, write) history. As the varied personages are in fact called forth from Yeats’s imagination, it is implicitly demanded that Yeats poeticize it. M.L. Rosenthal further observes in this that “if he ‘triumphs,’ the poet...will ‘make men mad’ with dreams of pure yet palpable beauty and of the triumph of human will over life’s otherwise inexorable destructiveness.” In tracing history with a poetry transcending the dull, ordinary facts of a narrative, Yeats locates and channels in “the
Great Memory” a repository of archetypal knowledge. Likewise, this offers him the opportunity, as Rosenthal reads, to “bridge the realms of the living and the dead” (229).

Furthermore, in the condensing of historical moments into the Great Memory, the notion of time and its supposed succession is reimagined in terms of spontaneity. Bachelard teaches that

Understanding life is more than just living it; it is indeed propelling it forward. Life does not flow along a slope on the axis of objective time that would serve as its channel…life always finds its primary reality in an instant. Hence, if we delve into the heart of psychological evidence, to the point where sensation is no more than the complex reflection or response of a simple act of volition – when intense attention concentrates life’s focus upon a single isolated element – then we will become aware of the truly specific character of time. The more deeply penetrating our meditation on time, the more minute it becomes.

(II 12)

Bachelard expands upon this, explaining that the linear measurement of time is akin to a symphony in that succession is revealed in the synchronic nature of instants. As such, time – and by extension history - is to be measured in cadences. Aligned with Pater, reduced to its antecedent singularity within the individual, impressions cycle and condense “to such a tremendous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression…It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations…that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (151-2). In A Vision (1935), Yeats includes a note
expressing time as a spatial construct in his symbolism. The act of measuring time - in all of its shape and magnitude – in the impression of successive instants, emotions and memories is understood in terms of a pure, subjective interiority.

Yeats has not shrugged off the burden of the body, upon which time is most drastically and outwardly “measured.” The psychological turmoil of the first section is realized in the subtle dissonance in the octave stanzas that comprise the second. In each stanza, the first quatrain contains an easy aabb rhyme scheme, but this is subverted in the second with an abba scheme. By virtue of itself, this introduces a persistent interruption, if not rupture, throughout the middle section of the poem. Structurally, the fragmented rhyme scheme perpetuates the anxiety that forced a visible rupture in the beginning of the poem. Despite tapping into a rendering of history that allows him to bridge life and death through an interrogation the past, Yeats remains formally bound to the prosaic, terrestrial problem of body. Articulating this problem with an examination of desire, the section’s final stanza reads:

Does the imagination dwell the most
Upon a woman won or woman lost?
If on the lost, admit you turned aside
From a great labyrinth out of pride,
Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought
Or anything called conscious once;
And that if memory recur, the sun’s
Under eclipse and the day blotted out.

(197)
Rosenthal reads the invocation of love as "a dream of gratified desire" which is juxtaposed against the image of the labyrinth. He writes: "Truly, one would have to join the inhuman world of the shades to escape the conflicts of desire, confusion, and remorse in love" (225). Love, as a manifestation of desire, is but one of the ways in which desire effects its demands upon the body.

In his essay "The Autumn of the Body" (1903), Yeats writes that poetry will henceforth be a poetry of essences, separated one from another in little and intense poems. I think there will be much poetry of this kind, because of an ever more arduous search for an almost disembodied ecstasy, but I think we will not cease to write long poems, but rather that we will write them more and more as our new belief makes the world plastic under our hands again.

(E&I 193-4)

The shift from a declamatory, observational poetry toward a more incisive, disembodied poetic mode sought by Yeats's Pre-Raphaelite and decadent forebears, a mode in which there is a sense of a spiritual communion contingent in the creation of a world, resonates in the movement from the second to the third section of "The Tower." Section III begins with the assertion: "It is time that I wrote my will;" (198). In this statement, the act of writing is twofold. Foreseeing his death, Yeats is in fact drafting a literal last will and testament (a gesture that shares its fundamental act with "To be carved"), believing his heirs to be those of a Celtic passion for nature, characterized by fly-fishermen who share the same connection with nature as Yeats had as a youth. But in so doing, he is also
asserting a will in the Nietzschean sense, as art supplies a means of living in and from death:

...being dead, we rise,

Dream and so create

Translunar Paradise.

[...]

All those things whereof

Man makes a superhuman

Mirror-resembling dream.

(198-9)

This persistent (if not insistent) will toward creative detachment is read by Rosenthal as “characterized by a Berkeleyan assertion...that human imagination alone is the sole begetter of everything we think of as reality” (225). Edging on the solipsistic, Berkeley’s idealism posits that there is nothing material outside of one’s perceptions, and, as there are no material objects, to be, therefore, is to be perceived. Taken for its poetic value, this becomes a means by which Yeats can draft his “will” and insulate himself from the despair that so categorized the body at the end of the previous section.

It is important to note that Yeats is only foreseeing his death. He is determining what to do with his body, and by extension, the world of perception. His meditative approach toward death, as a result, is markedly Socratic. He writes:

Or that of the hour

When the swan must fix his eye

Upon a fading gleam,
Float out upon a long
Last reach of glittering stream
And there sing his last song.

(198)

Yeats’s note to the poem remarks that this is an unconscious pilfering of Sturge Moore’s “The Dying Swan.” The original is a poetic illustration of the swan’s unconditional grace even in death, teaching love even to those who cause pain. This graceful wisdom of love in death is exhorted by Socrates in *Phaedo* and taught through “the swans in prophecy”: “They sing before too, but when they realize that they must die they sing most and most beautifully, as they rejoice that they are about to depart to join the god whose servants they are...As I believe myself to be a fellow servant with the swans and dedicated to the same god...I am no more despondent than they on leaving life,” (123). Yeats’s declaration of faith in line 145 of “The Tower” becomes, then, a decision to render a poetic soul of his own in the mode of his masters, standing in allegiance with and not in rebellion against Plato and Plotinus. The phenomenal philosophy of Berkeley, taken to account under the auspices of Plotinus’s and Plato’s understandings of a soul as that which allows for an intuited unification of the world as received through the senses, supplies for Yeats a strived-for singular, graceful wisdom that functions as a model for a true poetic soul.

In preparing for death, Yeats arrives at an inevitable moment in the poem:

Now I shall make my soul,
Compelling it to study
In a learned school
Till wreck of the body,
Slow decay of blood,
Testy delirium
Or dull decrepitude,
Or what worse evil come –
The death of friends, or death
Of every brilliant eye
That made a catch in the breath –
Seem but the clouds of the sky
When the horizon fades;
Or a bird’s sleeping cry
Among the deepening shades.

(199)

Helen Vendler writes: “As Yeats contemplates what he may have to face in the future, he
composes an unforgettable passage, hierarchically ordered, that compiles a rising list of
end-life disasters that begins...with ‘the wreck of the body’ (200). The final quatrains of
the poem signal the arrival of a transcendence achieved by looking inward, toward the
soul, all the while accepting that the body will strip away, or, if there is indeed
acceptance in this moment of the poem, that he will have to ultimately, willingly drop
aside the body.

Following Socrates and Seneca, poetry provides for Yeats the means to “practice
philosophy in the proper manner...to practice for dying and death” (Phaedo 101). In
short, Yeats is learning how to die. The escaping the corporeal evils that tether the soul to
the body, that humanize the soul, culminates in the anticipation of the death of friends, most painfully, Maude Gonne’s. Intellectual, philosophical courage is proven in the face of the death, especially of those one loves and admires. Socrates states that courage belongs to men and women of a philosophical disposition. As well, Phaedo’s account of the death of Socrates is of “an astonishing experience.” He declares, “Although I was witnessing the death of one who was my friend, I had no feeling of pity, for the man appeared happy in both manner and words as he died nobly and without fear” (95). Later in the dialogue, Socrates teaches:

The soul of the philosopher achieves a calm from such emotions; it follows reason and ever stays with it contemplating the true, the divine, which is not the object of opinion. Nurtured by this, it believes that one should live in this manner as long as one is alive and, after death, arrive at what is akin and of the same kind, and escape from human evils.

(122)

This is at heart an antiquated expression of what will later become for Bachelard a measure of adherence to the poetic image. Yeats’s growing understanding of a unified, poetic soul against his corporeal shortcomings, most explicitly in his inevitable death, as well as of those closest to him, will allow for a rendering of the soul as something vast and permanent. In communion with such a poetic soul, he writes himself, ultimately, as Pico della Mirandola’s pure contemplator, “one unaware of the body and confined to the inner reaches of the mind” as “he is neither an earthly nor a heavenly being; he is a more reverend divinity with human flesh,” (226). Yet against death, in philosophical poetic
meditation - in repose – one is not simply taught to die, literally or metaphorically. One, as Seneca teaches, learns to prolong life. As the poem reaches its end, the “bird’s sleepy cry” trails off. The final quatrain is cut short, its last line the understood elliptical fading of Yeats’s voice. The psychological shock of the troubled heart has been replaced by a sense of repose. Perhaps most profoundly, it is a signal of a sentimental turning over. Pater’s Heraclitean reading understands in the midst of individual turning over, chaos becomes rendered into cosmos: “The principle of disintegration, the incoherency of fire or flood... are inherent in the primary elements alike of matter and of the soul... Man, the individual, at this particular vanishing-point of time and place, becomes ‘the measure of all things,’” (Pater, PP 15-16). In facilitating a living in and through death, philosophy functions in “The Tower” to bring order to the chaos of the body, and in providing an understanding of the soul, a symbolic poetry is structured. This structure in turn allows for a vision of the cosmos as it emanates from the poet atop his tower in “Meditations in Time of Civil War.”
Chapter 2: From “Fantastic Commentary” to “Felt Text”

For all of the “peace” that Yeats might have found by the end of “The Tower,” there remains perhaps an even more profound world outside of it. Against the backdrop of Ireland’s independence and subsequent civil war from 1922-23, Yeats’s personal life was affected by marriage, fatherhood, a foray into politics, and his father’s death. As Daniel Ross explains, “Remarkably, these personal events parallel the tumult of the world around the poet: during the same period, WWI ended; the Russian Revolution came to pass; an influenza pandemic struck Europe” (36). And all of this is punctuated by the civil war very literally arriving on Yeats’s doorstep at Thoor Ballylee. Yeats’s note on the poems reads: “Before they were finished the Republicans blew up our ‘ancient bridge’ one midnight. They forebade us to leave the house” (CP 460). Read in its historical context, Yeats’s tower poetry invokes a sentiment similar to that applied to Michael Robartes and Owne Aherne in A Vision (1935). It exists “as always, where life is at tension” (53). In particular, the seven poem sequence “Meditations in Time of Civil War” operates precisely where inside and outside, the poet and the world, exist in a state of tension.

This is a world enmeshed, appropriately, in civil war. The focus of “The Tower” is entirely intra-personal. History and myth are based entirely in poetic memory and creation. Yet, “From cloud to tumbling cloud,/ minute by minute” the world changes (CP 181). Acutely in touch with this, the seven poem sequence “Meditations in Time of Civil War” positions the poet as looking outward, fully engaged in the world and attempting to mitigate the insistence of flux, to the end that he might take hold of it symbolically.
Connected more directly to A Vision through its allusion to and recalling of the poem “The Phases of the Moon,” “Meditations” stands as a symbolic passing into a more vastly spiritual mode. Increasingly compelled by Nietzsche’s work, according to letters dating back to 1902, Yeats is cultivating a poetic nobility in league with the philosopher that “should not look backward but ahead” and so expansively that it will reflect a most comprehensive soul, which can run and stray and roam farthest within itself; the most necessary soul, which out of sheer joy plunges itself into chance; the soul which having being, but wants to want and will; the soul which flees itself and catches up with itself in the widest circle; the wisest soul, which folly exhorts most sweetly; the soul which loves itself most, in which all things have their sweep and countersweep and ebb and flood.

(Nietzsche 208-9)

In casting his soul upon the world - in writing the world - this passage exemplifies for Yeats the writing toward a poetry wherein “creature and creator are united” (Nietzsche, BGE 225). The implicit tension, that of the tightrope between man and overman in “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” is the poem operating as a bridge between the world and the poet’s image of it. In The Trembling of the Veil, Yeats describes Pater’s influence in similar language, writing that the aesthete “taught us to walk upon a rope, tightly stretched through serene air, and we were left to keep our feet upon a swaying rope in a storm” (A 201).

The sense of balance amidst tumult speaks to a striving to establish and order space. Edward Engelberg writes in The Vast Design that Pater’s vision of an aesthetic
movement was wholly European, especially in that it was “a last philosophical defense of
beauty and order against grotesque chaos, of individuality against multiplicity” (181-2).
As a poetics, this realization lends valuable insight into the poet’s composition of a world
through language and can be read in the same light as Baudelaire’s poem
“Correspondences”:

Like distant, long-drawn calls that seem to be
Obscurely, deeply blended into one –
Vast as the dark of night and the day’s bright sun –
Sound, perfumes, hues echo in harmony.

[…]
Infinite in expanse – like benzoin gum,
Incense and amber, musk and benjamin –
Sing flesh’s bliss, and soul’s delight therein.

(13)
The intimate associations which comingle in and around the experience of the poetic
instant harken impulses of reverie which inform the present and push toward the future.
For Baudelaire, and later in Yeats’s tower poetry, this is presented in the ascending
images and echoes that rise with the soul’s expanding. Of this the former writes in his
critique of Wagner: “I felt freed from the constraint of weight, and recaptured the
memory of the rare joy that dwells in high places…Then, involuntarily, I evoked the
deleterious state of a man possessed by a profound reverie in total solitude, but a solitude
with vast horizons and bathed in a diffuse light; immensity without other décor than
itself,” (331). Baudelaire’s Wagnerian reverie, its profound solitude and “diffuse light,”
prefigures the emotional and cultural accent of “Diaphaneità,” a subject Pater would introduce three years later. Pater’s essay, published posthumously, describes an individual of a certain “transparent” character who is exempted from the clutter of the world (or, culture-at-large). Pater invokes a sense of “stillness” where Baudelaire (as well as Nietzsche) prefers heights, yet both emphasize a solitude, an occupying of space in-between life’s currents. Pater’s ideal character, in capturing the “gem-like flame” with a “fine edge of light” is as expressive of a true spirit as it is innocently receptive to the steadily changing stream of nature. Pater writes: “It is just this sort of entire transparency of nature that lets through unconsciously all that is really life giving in the established order of things; it detects without difficulty all sorts of affinities between its own elements, and the noble elements in that order,” (R 156). “Innocence” in this regard refers to an extra-cultural, idealized sense of fitness not unlike that which Nietzsche saw in “the conception of culture as a new and improved physis” (UM II 123). For Pater, it is a privileged stasis wherein there is an absolute comingling of interior and exterior, distanced from revolutions of nature and history insofar as they concern any moral imperatives. In fact, Pater’s diaphaneità bears a fundamental resemblance to Nietzsche’s overman in its divorce from any scientific or traditional sense of progress. Rather, both exist simultaneous to the progressive flux of nature and history. Walter Kaufmann explains of the overman: “What he [Nietzsche] has in mind is the ‘lucky accidents’ – Socrates or Caesar, Leonardo or Goethe: men whose ‘power’ gives them no advantage in any ‘struggle for existence’…Nietzsche’s dual vision of overman and recurrence glorifies the moment – ‘all simultaneously’ – and not progress,” (284). This lack of concern with natural progress resembles the “sexless” and “impotent” morality of Pater’s ideal. Instead
of engaging with and existing in the moral confines of culture, it is indicative of a more intellectual, aesthetic culture of the self that seeks to project a finished interiority with which to lay claim to a world. In this mode, the diaphaneité – a sort of sublime artist – lends significance to historical and cultural revolution in applying to it a self-reflected signification. This is precisely the point where Yeats is in the “Meditations” most symbolically and sentimentally aligned with Pater. Denis Donoghue differentiates three types of character in Pater’s essay, the third of which “is as elemental as light, and is indistinguishable from its supreme property” (112). In this is the need to differentiate and to distinguish a specific character, and moreover to do so in terms of vitality.

At the outset, Yeats is approaching a clear, poetic sense of timelessness in the first poem of the “Meditations,” “Ancestral Houses.” In it he presents the origin of a house as he imagines it. The image of the home at the forefront, space and time are immediately established as structural, symbolic intuitions that will resonate and evolve throughout the entire sequence.

Written in ottava rima, and consistent with Yeats’s nuanced use of the form, “Ancestral Houses” describes a tamed, beautified landscape betraying the power of its inhabitants. On such properties “Life overflows” and is free to “choose whatever shape it wills” (CP 200). The second stanza presents a temporal shift, leaping from a Homeric idealization of the times of the Irish aristocracy to “now.” This facilitates Yeats’s nostalgic lament for the seeming loss of those “Bitter and violent men” who read as empowered to create as if by impulse, and whose labored creations stand presently for “but a mouse.” The wearing of time upon artistic creation and the anxiety of permanence is a theme that recurs throughout all of Yeats’s poetry. A passage in A Vision (1935)
holds a similar, albeit more optimistic, resonance: “She thought a man who planted trees, knowing that no descendant nearer than his great-grandson could stand under their shade, had a noble and generous confidence. She thought there was something terrible about it, for it was terrible standing under great trees to say ‘Am I worthy of such confidence?’” (46). The poem’s final two stanzas effectively repeat that very question:

O what if gardens where the peacock strays
With delicate feet upon old terraces,
Or else Juno from an urn displays
Before the indifferent garden deities;
O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways
Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease
And Childhood a delight for every sense,
But take our greatness with our violence?

What if the glory of escutcheoned doors,
And buildings that a haughtier age designed,
The pacing two and fro on polished floors
Amid great chambers and long galleries, lined
With famous portraits of our ancestors;
What if those things the greatest of mankind
Consider most to magnify, or to bless,
But take our greatness with our bitterness?

(CP 201)
Harold Bloom is quick to dismiss any reliable, prescient value in these last two stanzas stating, “There is a shock-value in employing bitterness and violence as eulogistic words, but there is also a mindlessness involved that is very different from the high intelligence always manifested by Blake and Nietzsche in their persuasive definitions and transvaluations” (353). While lacking in the philosophical sophistication of his influences, what Nietzschean transvaluation can and should be read here in the contrasting of the terms “violence” and “bitterness” with “greatness” calls into question what is genuinely life-affirming in the act of construction, and if this is, in fact, a viable legacy.

Where “Ancestral Houses” succeeds, especially as it stands before and against “My House,” is in the insistence of a juxtaposition between past and present. This juxtaposition furthermore serves to up the ante in the otherwise “mindless” contrasts Bloom insists on reading. In the empty space left by the aristocracy, Yeats presents his own home, a simple, rough place where beauty and inspiration can be found. As well, the Tower represents the convergence of past and present as two men, “A man-at-arms” and Yeats, create yet another juxtaposition, this time in the soldier and the artist. This play at dialectics creates for “emblems of adversity” which can be read as violence and creativity, or, if there is anything left to be said of those “Bitter and violent men,” a fundamental revalued notion of creation through violence.

Bachelard writes that “Something unreal seeps into the reality of the recollections that are on the borderline between our own personal history and an indefinite pre-history…thus, on the threshold of our space, we hover between the awareness of being and loss of being” (PS 58). Concurrent with the move from a past to his present, Yeats is
establishing in “My House” a poetic space. The poem’s first two stanzas are respective
treatments of the creative natures of outside and inside spaces:

An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,
A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,
An acre of stony ground,
Where the symbolic rose can break in flower,

[..]

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,
A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,
A candle and written page.

_Il Penseroso_’s Platonist toiled on
In some like chamber, shadowing forth
How the daemonic rage
Imagined everything.

(CP 201-2)

Outside, “the symbolic rose” signifies the creative force of nature, its persistence toward
beauty in the face of inert stone, as well as evokes the phenomenological potential of the
image realized in “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time.” Like the aged bridge and tower
standing against time, the winding stair challenges time and space with its illusion of an
endless interiority\(^1\). The phenomenon of the tower, for Bachelard, keeps “watch over the
past in the same way it dominates space” (PS 24). It is situated in the past, yet it
simultaneously ascends and assumes the space between the terrestrial and the cosmic.

\(^1\) The image _par excellence_ of infinite interiority can be found in Hamlet 2.2: “I could be bounded in a
nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space.”
Inside the tower, Yeats is writing. The reference to Milton who in *Il Penseroso* attempts to "unsphere/ The spirit of Plato," to call him down from the celestial sphere is the creative assertion of "The immortal mind that hath forsook/ Her mansion in this fleshy nook." It is the structuring of a continuous self, one whose subjectivity occupies through worldly things a connection with the cosmic (Milton, CSP 148).

The question of occupancy is brought up in the final stanza as "Two men have founded here." Before Yeats, a "man-at-arms" had lived in and established himself in the tower, establishing a sense of embattlement in the past, as well as a reminder of the violence invoked by "Ancestral Houses." Along with the interplay of past and present, in "this tumultuous spot" creativity, masculinity, violence, and creation are all linked. The issue of leaving behind a legacy forged in violence, if a legacy may be left at all, is taken up in the poem's closing lines:

> And I, that after me
> My bodily heirs may find,
> To exalt a lonely mind,
> Befitting emblems of adversity.

Ensuring his place in the space of memory, Yeats is concerned with his legacy. Perhaps less than selfish, it stands that this is an expressly individual act. His "befitting emblems" are not his "bodily heirs," but his work, his symbols. Without such a legacy, the Tower, Yeats's space would be empty, valueless. Finding continuity in this way, in meditating on the fusion of history and pre-history, present and past may be understood in terms of the relationship between real and unreal laid out by Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*: "The image is created through the co-operation between real and unreal, with the help of the
functions of the real and the unreal...All values must remain vulnerable, and those that do not are dead,” (59).

Yeats’s concern for his legacy finds a tangible analogue in the sequence’s third poem, “My Table.” In it, Yeats is searching for inspiration by way of the examination of a sword gifted to him by Junzo Sato. He goes so far as to compare the sword to his pen:

Two heavy trestles, and a board
Where Sato’s gift, a changeless sword,
By pen and paper lies,
That it may moralise
My days out of their aimlessness.

An heirloom, the sword has endured generations and “Chaucer had not drawn breath when it was forged” (202). For Yeats, through his pen, the tower and his poetry become that which he might hand down, something of value that can likewise persist along a patriarchal line. In this one can hear the echo of Pater’s Winckelmann who said: “It will be my highest reward, if posterity acknowledges that I have written worthily” (R 121). Rosenthal writes that the sword’s “‘moon-luminous’ beauty reminds [Yeats] that his labors and his ideals are justified despite all discouragement...our only salvation lies in refusing to betray the soul’s love of beauty whatever the circumstances” (235).

The question of legacy continues into “My Descendants,” with Yeats now weighing the “vigorous mind” he inherited from his “old fathers” and will ideally pass along to his children against the “unchanging” sword. The second stanza voices his growing fear:

And what if my descendants lose the flower
Through natural declension of the soul,
Through too much business with the passing hour,
Through too much play, or marriage with a fool?
May this laborious stair and this stark tower
Become a roofless ruin that the owl
May build in the cracked masonry and cry
Her desolation to the sky.

Yeats’s concern lies with the symbolic fate of the tower. “Too much play” or an ill-advised marriage betrays a presumption that intellectual labor, namely poetry, is needed in order to maintain such a mind as he will pass along. Without such upkeep, the poetic soul will decline and the tower will fall to disrepair, the owl becoming sole inheritor of simply another “Ancestral House.” Yet Yeats reserves hope in that whatever remains of the tower is, in fact, not meant for his children but:

And I, that count myself most prosperous,
Seeing that love and friendship are enough,
For an old neighbour’s friendship chose the house
And decked and altered it for a girl’s love,
And know whatever flourish and decline
These stones remain their monument and mine.

(204)

The aesthetic and architectural labor that is represented in Thoor Ballylee stands in honor of Lady Gregory and Yeats’s wife, George. As with everything in nature, the soul, despite its vastness, ultimately decays. What sentimentality can be read in the closing
lines of the poem essentially denies the children. To what extent greatness might persist against the wearing of time and the eminence of whatever legacy there is to maintain is reserved for Yeats and the arbiters of his symbolic system. In other words, those whom he trusts value beauty.

"The Road at my Door" and "The Stare's Nest by My Window" represent the converging of the poet and the world. In "The Road at My Door," images of war are rendered into the language of the theatre. It is a vision of Ireland that Yeats can articulate through poetry. This is followed by a sense of declension or flux in "The Stare's Nest." The tower has become a place where "we are closed in," and "There is no clear fact to be discerned" (205). The insulated place of meditative creation has gone to ruin, inviting the world to build in the cracks and crevices of a weakened foundation. What's more, the poet, like the house, is empty:

We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare;
More substance in our enmities
Than in our love; O honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

(205)

The brutality felt in this stanza is not the laborious violence that marks creation generally read in Yeats's poetry. The world dispassionately endures, yet it is up to the poet to endure against it in his own way, to render creative worldly upheaval.

Helen Vendler writes that the sequence "reflects on the internecine conflict that had broken out in Ireland" (232). Yeats and his family were not alienated from the civil
war. “The Road at My Door” describes encounters with both IRA and Free State soldiers on his property. Jokes and talk of the weather veil the reality of the conflict, both outwardly in the violence of the fighting and inwardly for Yeats, who prefers the solitary confines of the tower to the noise of politics. This insulation carries from “The Road at My Door” into “The Stare’s Nest.” The former ends with Yeats turning back into the tower, “In the cold snows of a dream.” This sense of isolation is picked up in the second stanza of the latter:

We are closed in, and the key is turned

On our uncertainty; somewhere

A man is killed, or a house burned,

Yet no clear fact to be discerned:

Come build in the empty house of the stare.

(205)

Of his distant encounters with the war, Yeats wrote:

For the first week there were no newspapers, no reliable news, we did not know who had won nor who had lost, and even after newspapers came, one never knew what was happening on the other side of the hill or of the line of trees. Ford cars passed the house from time to time with coffins standing upon end between the seats, and sometimes at night we heard an explosion, and once by day saw the smoke made by the burning of a great neighbouring house. Men must have lived so through many tumultuous centuries. One felt an over-mastering desire not to grow unhappy or embittered, not to lose all sense of the beauty of nature.

(Jeffares 228)
In the milieu of civil war, Yeats, just as he will write of Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne in *A Vision*, finds himself “where life is at tension.” Nationalism, politics, and the outbreak of civil war have “embittered” Ireland and in turn, the heart. Despite the grotesque imagery Yeats uses to describe the procession of the war, his desire to eschew bitterness at the end of the passage imbues the report with a philosophical subtext. “To not lose all sense of the beauty of nature” turns the focus away from the outward brutality of the moment and turns to what internecine conflict exists within the poet.

Yeats is at an impasse forced between his need for creative freedom and a world that seems determined to stagnate in violence. The latter does not naturally precede the former, and in no way does it permit it. This is a serious metaphysical broad stroke. In effect, Yeats, through Robartes, reworks Kant’s third antimony, writing: “Every action of man declares the soul’s ultimate, particular freedom, and the soul’s disappearance in God; declares that reality is a congeries of beings and a single being; nor is this antimony an appearance imposed upon us by the form of thought but life itself which turns, now here, now there, a whirling and a bitterness” (52). Yeats is standing at the chasm that Kant’s philosophy leaves between theoretical and practical reason. According to Kant, theoretically, nature is a closed system of empirical laws and is determinate. Free will, therefore, is nothing more than an illusion. Yet, Kant writes in *Critique of Pure Reason*: “reason creates the idea of a spontaneity, which could start to act from itself, without needing to be preceded by another cause that in turn determines it to action according to the law of causal connection” (A533/B561). For Kant, the immediacy with which the faculty of the understanding unifies a diversity of representations thrust at the individual is a spontaneous synthesis of intuitions that belong to the subject. This spontaneous
activity is, in other words, freedom. This challenges empirical notions of cause and effect to which a subject is bound because it posits a possible determination within the individual. Poetry thus becomes a speculative exercise regarding the possibility a certain freedom for a thing or individual to be a cause unto itself, and in the case of Yeats, this poses a necessary challenge to the nature of successive time. An ideal poetry for Yeats, like Kant’s freedom, operates outside of time. As such, the poetic phenomenon spontaneously intersects (if not intervenes) with experience. Yeats is struggling to find a means to assert a symbolic spontaneity against what he perceives as a determined, recurring cycle of birth and death.

Informing Yeats’s predicament, Pater writes of Zeno’s influence on Plato and of “the difficulties with which he played so nicely being really connected with those ‘antimonies’…of our thoughts” that had not been properly picked back up until Kant, who noted them as inherent to the mind and furthermore a “weakness in dealing by way of cold blooded reflexion with the direct presentations of experience” (P&P 28). At work in both Yeats’s and Pater’s observations is the approach toward an enlightened singularity, or, in other words, a metaphysical, practical spontaneity. Pater moves along to mark the function of antimony in terms of the Platonic “many and the One,” a doctrine which likewise informs Yeats’s notion of reality in its aggregate form. The final move, for both Pater and Yeats, is a connection with the One in the infinitive stillness of “to be.” In other words, being prior to declension, the ambivalence of poetic repose, the

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2 This is not unlike the intersection of God as “the one true and eternal substance” and experiential time and space described by Augustine, whose work on the subject may be considered to have been expanded if not elucidated by Kant. Cf. Soliloquies I, 2-6, On the Trinity, 1.2, 5.11, 6.11, The True Religion 7.13-8.14 (The Essential Augustine, ed. Vernon J. Bourke. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974).

3 Cf. “My Descendants” (CP 203). Declension as grammatical, natural (bodily), and spiritual.
“disinterestedness” of the diaphaneité, unaffected by the intersecting currents of nature and culture. It is in this, what Yeats would later describe as a “joy to be nothing” (AV B 180), that one might mitigate the inward shock of outward conflict and maintain a free, poetic connection with, and reverie in, the beauty of nature.

The meditations culminate in the expansive, apocalyptic vision “I See Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart’s Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness.” Presented in a moment of pure, aesthetic impression, Yeats is corresponding with, if not wholly synthesizing into poetry, an immense cosmic vision of a world in upheaval. It is a world viewed in, by, and for Yeats:

I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone,
A mist that is like blown snow is sweeping over all,
Valley, river, and elms, under the light of a moon
That seems unlike itself, that seems unchangeable,
A glittering sword out of the east. A puff of wind
And those white glimmering fragments of the mist sweep by.
Frenzies bewilder, reveries perturb the mind;
Monstrous familiar images swim to the mind’s eye.

(CP 205)

Yeats is occupying a space similar to where he is situated at the beginning of Section II of “The Tower,” albeit with a change in perspective. In “The Tower,” Yeats is looking outward in order to gaze backward in an attempt to recapitulate his youth. In “I See Phantoms...” he is gazing downward. From above, in the cold, silent wind, and under moonlight as “unchangeable” as Sato’s sword, Yeats can weigh the world. At this height,
his vision assumes a distinctly Nietzschean air. Two particular passages from Zarathustra resonate in the first stanza and serve to cohere its disparate and chimeric imagery. The first is from the section “On the Three Evils,” while the second is taken from “Of Old and New Law Tables”: 

In a dream, in the last dream of morning, I stood in the foothills today – beyond the world, held scales, and weighed the world.

(186-87)

“At bottom everything stands still” – that is truly a winter doctrine, a good thing for sterile times, a fine comfort for homebodies and hearth-squatters.

“At bottom everything stands still” – against this the thawing wind preaches.

(201)

In his tower, Yeats has created a space, a poetic self that in its absolute sense is “a veritable cosmos of which he…is the center and origin” (Kaplan 76). Yet, looking upon a finite, discordant world, he is by no means a Zarathustra. This returns to the question of solipsism. For Bachelard, the dreamer and his world interpenetrate. Atop the tower, Yeats is not simply projecting his vision, he is gazing into and against what M.L. Rosenthal terms “intractable reality” (237). Outwardly, the civil war has shattered space:

The rage-driven, rage-tormented, and rage-hungry troop,

Trooper belabouring trooper, biting at arm or at face,

Plunges toward nothing, arms and fingers spreading wide

For the embrace of nothing; and I, my wits astray

Because of all that senseless tumult, all but cried
For vengeance on the murders of Jacques Molay.

(205-6)

The nothing toward which Yeats’s vision plummets is not merely the rejection of established values in preference for a singular, solitary, poetic mode of living. It is, for all of its macabre implications, a meaningless descent toward death. The invocation of Jacques Molay, founder of the Knights Templar who was burned at the stake, seemed to Yeats “a fit symbol for those who labour from hatred, and so for sterility in various kinds” (CP 461). For all of Yeats’s apparent isolation, his vision, imperfect as it may be, is by no means sterile. Yeats, rather than forcing a world of his own, is bringing to terms his vision and the world. Moving the imagination away from the solipsistic to the ethical, Kaplan writes, “imagination draws upon concrete perceptions and memories that it enriches with emotional valences” (78). The notion of valences unifies the actual world with the vision of the dreamer. Furthermore, it supposes not merely the projection of a world, but an interaction with the world as it exists outside of the individual. Bachelard writes: “If the being of man must be linked to the being of the world, the cogito will be expressed in the following manner: I dream the world, therefore, the world exists as I dream it… causing consolidations of imagined worlds, developing the audacity of constructive reverie…opening all the prisons of the being so that the human possesses all becomings,” (PR 158). Memory as valence, measured by its ability to combine and compound experience, serves, therefore, to reconcile the manifold realities of a dreamer and the world through the consolidation of past, present, and future. Thus, the “audacity of constructed reverie” becomes so in that it is a world built upon and informed by past
realities, memories that have been inscribed upon the dreamer’s cogito and projected as such.

To distance himself from the traffic of the war and therefore to maintain a connection to the beautiful, Yeats has throughout the meditations progressed inward. This is punctuated by his ultimate turning away from the world. Prior to this, images of women atop unicorns give way a descending cast of mechanical hawks that “have put out the moon.” Harold Bloom observes “Yeats’s ladies on horseback find their self-regarding bliss perpetually ‘between two moments,’...but give way to the actual inhabitants of a time of troubles,” (355). The women, undaunted representatives of Pater’s decadent ideal, are set against the grip of the hawks’s claw, of mechanical, logical despair. In his notes, Yeats writes: “I suppose that I must have put hawks into the fourth stanza because I have a ring with a hawk and a butterfly upon it, to symbolize the straight road of logic, and so of mechanism, and the crooked road of intuition: ‘For wisdom is a butterfly and not a gloomy bird of prey’” (461). “Turning away” Yeats is to differentiate himself from the “indifferent multitude,” and in so doing to turn his inward vision upon the world.

Nietzsche writes in *Daybreak*, “Waking life does not have this same freedom of interpretation possessed by the life of dreams...but do I have to add that...all our so-called consciousness is a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable but felt text?” (119). This interpretation, so to speak, will later evolve in Nietzsche’s philosophy to become the function and drive of the will to power. The tower as a poetic structure is Yeats’s “fantastic commentary,” but it is in the “Meditations” that he truly interacts with the world as “felt text.” In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche sees in the artist the ability to view oneself simplified as from a distance, to be situated in the world
as foreground and background, and as a result to establish a sense of wholeness. This facilitates an aesthetic commentary on life by which one can make the weight of existence bearable. He writes:

As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable for us, and art furnishes us with eyes and ears and hands and above all the good conscience to be able to turn ourselves into such a phenomenon... we need all exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish, and blissful art lest we lose the freedom above things that our ideal demands of us... We should be able also to stand above morality – and not only to stand with the anxious stiffness of a man who is afraid of slipping and falling at any moment, but also to float above it and play.

(107)

Art signifies a will to truth, and by extension a will to power. Yeats’s ring is emblazoned with the hawk and the butterfly, illustrating at once grave mechanism and the “freedom above things.”

Art serves to apply a new set of values to life, and therefore to an expressed, outward extension of the self. Bachelard writes: “For the material imagination, flight is not a mechanism to be invented, it is a matter to be transmuted, it is the fundamental basis for a transmutation of all values. Our being must lose its earthliness and become aerial. Then it will make earth light. Our own earth, within us, will be ‘the light one.’” (PIR 52).

Keeping in mind the notion of valences, Bachelard’s “material imagination” implies a connection between imagination and memory. The final stanza reads:

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

(CP 206)

Rosenthal reads this as a moment of retreat. Similar to the opening lines of the “The Tower,” the heart is again used as an apostrophe. Surely, Yeats is questioning himself, yet the same heart that was once so troubled is now recognized for its ambition. In fact, it is by virtue of the poetic imagination that one might experience a moment of constructed reverie for all of its audacity, and to experience all the more not a retreat, but an interior stillness – a structurally timeless moment - that brings together the man and the boy.

The poetic moment is abstracted from time. Of the Daimon, Yeats writes: “His descending power is neither the winding nor the straight line but zigzag, illuminating the passive and active properties, the tree’s two sorts of fruit: it is the sudden lightning, for all his acts of power are instantaneous. We perceive in a pulsation of the artery, and after slowly decline,” (M 361). From the Daimon, the hawk and the butterfly, logic and wisdom, achieve new meaning. Nietzsche, in The Antichrist, writes that the formula to happiness is “a Yes, a No, a straight line, a goal” (1). Thus, despite the cold, directed, mechanical logic of the hawk, in order to not blot out the moon, Yeats must keep dreaming. Aerial reverie is not simply the assuming of an elevation, it is a dance. The
Daimon facilitates by way of "mediatorial shades" the freedom of the dream in its coupling of the act of poetry to an oneiric valence. Turning away from his vision, Yeats is not so much retreating as he is facing his poetic choice as the condition for life. To renounce "the half-read" wisdom would be to deny "the abstract joy" of the poetic spirit. As regards Yeats's spirit, here the modifier "philosophical" can easily replace "poetic." While the two are by no means synonymous, they are in this instance operating toward an identical goal. Like Zarathustra, Yeats has written from his abyss. Moreover, he has done so from above, for it is from atop the tower — as a structure and a symbolic system — that Yeats "should be able also to stand above morality — and not only to stand with the anxious stiffness of a man who is afraid of slipping and falling at any moment, but also to float above it and play," (GS 107). Yeats's aesthetic choice, the "selection, correction, redoubling and affirmation" (Deleuze, NP 103) of his poetic vision, is the dance of the butterfly, the joyful analogue of the profound flight of the hawk.

"Meditations in Time of Civil War," is an act of poetic intervention. In asserting his vision from atop the tower, Yeats is able to eschew prosaic notions of time and space and alleviate the pain of civil war in both its physical and metaphorical constructs. Nature, like the body, is determined toward death. Poetry serves to construct, if not wholly justify, a dream of a world where death is staved off and life is, but for a moment, reaffirmed in the promise of an eternal, permanent reward.
Conclusion: An Order Too Rare for Life

Working toward a writing that reveals truth and renders “the highest kind of justice to the visible universe,” Joseph Conrad writes in his preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’” confronted by the same enigmatical spectacle, the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal” (145). In the face of the spectacle of the world, Yeats’s poems “The Tower” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War” stand out as attempts to bring to terms the internal and external “warlike conditions of existence” and manifest a vision of the world that exists as he dreams it, as entirely self-intuited and determined outside of the confines of space and time.

The philosophies of Walter Pater and Gaston Bachelard facilitate a reading of Yeats’s tower poetry that interrogates his symbolism as a phenomenology and by extension leads to a greater understanding of the spiritual demands of the permanence he strived for. To the extent that this is successful, the poet captures the impulses of a world in perpetual flux and does so in such a way that the work not only organizes the external world into the tower, but immediately asserts the vast, interior nature of the poet. In the case of Yeats, the world is rendered through a will-driven symbolic design, structuring a poetry that challenges the intuitions of time and space and implicitly channels and challenges existing philosophical and poetic structures, thus exemplifying the efficacy of living philosophically.

In *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, Yeats writes, “Consciousness...does not merely spread out its surface but has, in vision and in contemplation, another motion that can change in height and depth” (A 61). Following Pater through Bachelard, it becomes
evident that the poet’s vision of a world is not simply a layering of the image atop reality, but that it also implies a movement on a vertical axis. In “The Tower” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” Yeats rises with his poetic construct envisioning from a Nietzschean height the vast depth of the self. In regarding and reflecting the “intellectual, moral, and spiritual elements” of the interior and exterior worlds, Yeats’s poetry exposes that these elements are often at tension. Thus, the moment of impression, internalized and expanded upon the world becomes indicative of internecine conflict. At its most extreme, it traumatizes the poet’s attempts at “rearranging the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit” (Pater, R 148). Yeats effectively testifies to this reading of Pater when he writes, “all great things in life seem to me to have come from battle, and the battle of poetry is the battle of man within himself” (FY 76). Spiritual satisfaction then, is the poet’s wrought freedom to give reflexive form to the world, to “[develop] exuberantly the values of inwardness” (Bachelard, PIR 91).

Yeats’s notes for his 1910 lecture “Friends of My Youth” illustrate alongside the influence of Pater on the Tragic Generation the passion required of a sincere interrogation of the self so that an individual and beautifully rendered world might emanate. At the outset, the notes defer to Montaigne, and although no quote is supplied, the poet perhaps had in mind Montaigne’s statement from “On the Three Types of Relationships,” that “Life is an unequal, irregular, and multiform movement.” If one were to continue reading, he or she would encounter in the next paragraph: “Meditation is a rich and powerful method of study for anyone who knows how to examine his mind, and to employ it vigorously. I would rather shape my soul than furnish it” (E 251). This shares more than a sentimental similarity with the final stanza of “The Tower.” Piercingly
writing through the failures of his own body, and toward death as a means of living completely, Yeats affirms "Now shall I make my soul." Following Montaigne, Yeats aspires inward toward a sense of order too rare for life, and from this order a like wisdom that is one and the same with the ideal Socratic mode of accepting death.

Through dialogic mediations, Yeats's poetry assumes a sense of permanence through the assertion of eternal recurrence. "The Tower" and "I See Phantoms..." present an older Yeats as separated – if not wholly divorced - from his youth in distinct images and impressions of the man and the boy. It is in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" that the elder's mournful looking back to the younger becomes very truly the possibility of a living again, in which all moments of life arrange toward a sense of poetic actualization. Moreover, the boy and the man are simply "unfinished" and "finished" renderings of a singular entity. Quite possibly, the self will never be finished, and following Nietzsche, Yeats anticipates reliving, however painful, the events of his life until "Everything [he looks] upon is blest."

"Why should we honor those that die on the field of battle," Yeats questions, "a man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself" (FY 81). Yeats's Nietzschean "yes," his forging of the spirit into a timeless, ascendant symbolic construct, demands a fearless living through death as a way to accept life. Bachelard teaches that active philosophical, poetic repose manifests in an instant the inner space of the poet upon the exterior world. This emergent, revelatory moment, developed by Pater and enlivened by Bachelard, allows for the poet to bring to terms an enduring, informed self in the face of the traffic and tension of a world that progresses by way of upheaval. Against civil war, death, and his anxiety over a failing body, Yeats follows Montaigne,
who writes, “Collect yourself and you will find within you nature’s true arguments against death, which are the fittest to serve you in your need; it is they that make a peasant, and entire nations, die with the same constancy of a philosopher” (E 314). Yeats’s mediations on the tower serve to place him in a timeless moment that is centered within himself and winds ever outward, following over the world the paths of birds.
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