

The Turbulent Lives of Yeats's Painted Horses

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HAD THINGS GONE the way he hoped, Yeats would have been in Japan by 1921, combing the museums and mountains for ancient paintings and statuary, or perhaps wandering through 'some forgotten city, where the streets are full of grass' and 'where there is no sound but that of some temple bell'.¹ Instead, on 27 June he was still in Oxford writing wistfully to his friend Yone Noguchi, the poet who had visited him and Ezra Pound at Stone Cottage in 1913, spent time with him in New York in 1919, and returned to Keio University in Japan to arrange an invitation for him to lecture there for two years: 'I wish I had found my way to your country a year or so ago', Yeats admits regretfully, 'and were still there'.² He had received the invitation two years before, on 9 July 1919, had written about it with growing excitement in the following months, but in November his eminently frugal 'Instructors' (with no little assistance from his wife) firmly directed him to decline the offer.³ By the time he wrote to Noguchi in 1921, he had reluctantly resigned himself to poring over books of paintings by Japanese artists, to settling for an ancient Japan of the imagination, composed mainly of 'the lives E...1 of these painters'. '[T]heir talks, their loves, their religion, their friends', he implores Noguchi, 'I would like to know these things minutely'.⁴ Perhaps it was this sense of disappointment and the subsequent renewal of interest in Japanese painting that provoked a boyhood memory only a few months before, when he was preparing *Four Years: 1887-1891* for its upcoming serial publication in the *London Mercury* and the *Dial*.⁵ Without warning and in the midst of a discussion of psychic symbols, Yeats turns his imagination once again toward those Japanese painters whose lives and legends he longed to discover for himself:

I had found when a boy in Dublin on a table in the Royal Irish Academy a pamphlet on Japanese art and read there of an animal painter so remarkable that horses he had painted upon a temple wall had slipped down after dark and trampled the neighbours' fields of rice. Somebody had come into the temple in the early morning, had been startled by a shower of water-drops, had looked up and seen painted horses still wet from the dew-covered fields, but now 'trembling into stillness'. (*Au* 186)

Something about the seemingly digressive account of the painted horses obviously remained important to him; despite the hundreds of revisions that he inflicted upon the two manuscripts and various published versions of *Four Years*, this passage remained almost entirely untouched from the first.⁶ Yeats mentions the Japanese fable

¹ W. B. Yeats to John Quinn, 31 December [1919], *CL InteLex* 3696.

² Shotaro Oshima, *Yeats and Japan* (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1965), 5 n. 2 and 21.

³ Yeats informed his wife of the offer in a letter written on 10 July [1919], *CL InteLex* 3629. In a session on 17 November 1919, George's new 'Instructor', Ameritus, was remarkably unambiguous in his advice: 'Tower this year—I said before no Japan next year' (*MYV2* 359).

⁴ Oshima, *Yeats and Japan*, 21.

⁵ Yeats added the legend of the Japanese painter to his memoirs only after he had received and declined the offer to lecture in Tokyo. It is absent from the early version, 'First Draft' (wr. circa 1915-16), even though the other material he includes in section IV of that manuscript corresponds roughly to the contents of section XX of 'Four Years' (in the 1922 edition), where the fable eventually appears. For the dating of 'First Draft' and the structural correspondences between it and 'Four Years', see Curtis B. Bradford, *Yeats at Work* (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 348-351.

⁶ Though Yeats shifts its position in the early publications of *Four Years*, the account of the painted horses remains largely unaltered from 1921 to 1955, aside from minor punctuation changes and the (most likely accidental) omission of a word ('dark') in the Cuala edition. The only significant change occurs in the edition of *The Trembling of the Veil* published privately by T. Werner Laurie in December 1922, wherein Yeats substitutes 'slipped down after dark' (1922 and after) for the earlier 'stepped down after dark' (1921). The painted horses appear in sections XVIII and XXII of 'Four Years' in the *London Mercury* (August 1921), 371, 376; in XVII and XXI of the Cuala

again in the same section, in connection with one of his fanciful psychic testimonies, but he only arrives at its deeper significance several pages later, when he returns briefly to the painted horses to reveal the privileged place they hold in his imagination (*Au* 187). Hoping to inspire and unite Ireland under the ancient, mythic images of poetry and drama, he wonders:

Perhaps even these images, once created and associated with river and mountain, might move of themselves and with some powerful, even turbulent life, like those painted horses that trampled the rice-fields of Japan. (*Au* 194)

In the years between his discovery in the Royal Irish Academy and December 1920 (when he finished *Four Years*), the tale of the painted horses had accrued significance for Yeats as an allegory of art itself, as a symbol for the function of symbols in general.⁷ Instead of a mere artefact, imprinted and inflected by history and culture, poetry might possess the power to influence and affect life, to trample the religious, political, and artistic rice fields of logic and convention. As Yeats knew all too well, the meaning of any poem is inevitably transformed with each generation, 'modified in the guts of the living', and put to purposes the author could not have imagined.⁸ However, he also knew that in order to trample figuratively the neighbours' rice fields, poetry must do more than merely communicate an idea. It must assume 'some powerful, even turbulent life' of its own, an affective and semantic momentum that surpasses the poet's limited control and intentions. This brief essay brings to light the hitherto unidentified source for the painted horses and tracks their persistence through Yeats's work as emotionally ambivalent figures for the turbulent and unpredictable 'afterlife' of poetry once it is out of the poet's hands.

The painted horses had apparently been on Yeats's mind for some time before *Four Years*; versions of them appear repeatedly throughout his *Two Plays for Dancers* (1919). The 'Stranger' in *The Dreaming of the Bones* spots one of them straying far from the temple wall—'An old horse gone astray. I He has been wandering on the road all night'—and they return with threatening urgency in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, transfused with the mythical steeds of the sea god, Manannan mac Lir: 'Hear how the horses trample on the shore', Cuchulain's double exclaims, 'Hear how they trample!' (*VP*/765, 561). Even when Yeats revisited the much earlier-composed 'Easter 1916' to include it in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), he would have found yet another menacing 'horse that comes from the road': 'A horse-hoof slides on the brim, f And a horse plashes within it' (*VP* 393). Around the same time, he prophesies about the danger of the increasing prevalence of logic and science in intellectual quarters: 'Logic is loose again, as once in Calvin and Knox', he urgently warns readers of 'If I were Four-and-Twenty' (1919), and 'the wild beast cannot but destroy mysterious life' (*Ex* 277). In the painted horses, Yeats finds and recruits an opponent worthy of challenging this wild beast of logic, one that will always battle under the banner of the 'mysterious life' of art and imagination.

It seems doubtful that he could have begun to fathom the symbolic significance that the painted horses would eventually accumulate for him when, sometime between 1887 and 1891, he stumbled upon the pamphlet containing Ernest Hart's lectures to the 'Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce' entitled *Lectures on Japanese Art Work* (1887) in the Royal Irish Academy. The Dean of St. Mary's Hospital in London and a prominent ophthalmic surgeon, Ernest Abraham Hart was also one of the foremost collectors of Japanese Art in Europe, and in the printed version of a lecture delivered to the Society on 18 May 1886, he recounts an apocryphal story of the ninth-century Japanese painter Kanaoka and his masterfully painted horse:

Among the stories of Kanaoka's skill, which are most popular, is one which relates that the peasants of the province of Omis, much disturbed at night by the nocturnal ravages of some creature which trod down their gardens, destroyed their flowers, and ate the herbs, laid wait for him one night, and gave chase to the intruder who proved to be a wild horse. They chased him till he disappeared into the temple. Entering the temple he was not to be found, but as they stood wondering in the hall, drops of moisture fell upon their heads,

edition (December 1921), 78-9, 90; and in XX and XXIII of *The Trembling of the Veil* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1922), 72, 79; *Autobiographies: Reveries Over Childhood and Youth and The Trembling of the Veil* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 230-31, 240; and *Au* 186, 194.

⁷ See Yeats's letters to Ezra Pound (8 December 1920) and Lady Gregory (12 December 1920) containing reports of the progress and completion of *Four Years* (*Life* 2, 177 and 771 n.33).

⁸ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1991), 247.

and looking up they found that they were falling from one of the horses in a picture by Kanaoka; so life-like was he that he had escaped from the canvas and had only just resumed his place, and was still sweating.⁹

Yeats may have aesthetically preferred to remember a troupe of dew-drenched steeds instead of a single, sweating horse, and rice fields instead of flowers or herbs, but his account of the tale over twenty years later in *Four Years* is otherwise impressively accurate. We search the *Lectures* in vain for a horse 'trembling into stillness'; the phrase is Yeats's own subtle addition, a quotation not from Hart but from his own earlier essay, 'The Tragic Theatre' (1910).¹⁰ Hart suggests that similar fables appear frequently in Asian traditions, and the versions of the legend of Kanaoka that appear in Siegfried Bing's monthly journal *Artistic Japan* (June 1889) and Henri L. Joly's *Legend in Japanese Art* (1908) offer even greater detail, including the whereabouts of the temple itself and one monk's attempt to obstruct the roving horse by adding a tether and peg to the painting.¹¹ Yeats no doubt found similar accounts in Laurence Binyon's *Painting in the Far East* (1908) and *The Flight of the Dragon* (1911), and throughout the works of Lafcadio Hearn, as both writers played prominent roles in the early twentieth-century dissemination of popularized accounts of Eastern art, architecture, and legend.¹²

Through the similar fables by Binyon and Hearn, Yeats would have eventually learned of the Eastern belief that the truly inspired artist endows the figures in his paintings with souls of their own, so that (like the woman painted on a screen in one of Hearn's tales) 'they bec[o]me, by their own will, really alive'.¹³ As early as 1902, he intuitively adapts the Eastern belief to the ancient narratives of Irish mythology, claiming that no teller of such enduring tales, 'even when he had added some new trait, or some new incident, thought of claiming for himself what so obviously lived its own merry or mournful life' (*Ex* 6). Yeats's first reference to Kanaoka's painted horses bears the same mythical trappings. Although he had only recently encountered Hart's *Lectures* when he began work on *Dhoya*' (1891) sometime late in 1887, the painted horses were already a part of his supernatural landscape.¹⁴ The tale of the heroic *Dhoya* takes place in an age of myth and mystery, the narrator relates, '[I]ong ago, before the earliest stone of the Pyramids was laid, before the Bo tree of Buddha unrolled its first leaf, before a Japanese had painted on a temple wall the horse that every evening descended and trampled the rice-fields' (JS&D 81). Yeats almost immediately stitched Kanaoka's horses onto the surface of his mythic

⁹ Ernest Hart (1835-1898), *Lectures on Japanese Art Work, Delivered before the Society, May 4, 11, and 18, 1886, with a catalogue of the objects exhibited, and an index of Japanese artists* (London: W. Tronnce, 1887), 27-8.

¹⁰ In the 'The Tragic Theatre', he describes 'that beauty which seems unearthly because the individual woman is lost amid the labyrinth of its lines as though life were trembling into stillness and silence' (E&1243-44). The phrase appears again in 'The Phases of the Moon' (1919): 'Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon, I The soul begins to tremble into stillness' (VP 374).

¹¹ 'KOSE NO KANAOKA, who lived in the ninth century, is said to have painted a horse for the temple of Ninnaji, near Kyoto, which left its canvas to browse in the neighbouring fields, until one of the monks added a tether and a peg to the picture'. Henri L. Joly, *Legend in Japanese Art* (London: John Lane, 1908; rpt. Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1967), 299. Binyon had recommended Joly's book to Yeats, who wrote on 29 January 1924 of his intention to borrow it from the London Library; see *CL InteLex* 4465. See also Siegfried Bing's essay 'The Origin of Painting Gathered from History' in *Artistic Japan: Illustrations and Essays*, Vol. 3, ed. S. Bing (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1889). In Bing's version, 'the animal disappears through a temple door, his hunters follow him, they search everywhere around and cannot find him, until on the wall in a celebrated picture which hangs in its accustomed place, they see the fiery beast, who has just re-entered his frame, entirely covered with foam, and still panting from his frantic race' (176). Though Bing's account includes the trampled rice fields that Yeats mentions in *Four Years* and is chronologically viable as a source, it makes no mention of the 'drops of moisture' in Hart's account (28) that so distinctly resemble Yeats's 'shower of water-drops' (*Au* 186).

¹² In *The Flight of the Dragon: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Art in China and Japan, Based on Original Sources* (London: John Murray, 1911), Laurence Binyon relates a similar, albeit less detailed, fable about 'horses so charged with life that they galloped out of the picture' (20). For Yeats's familiarity with Binyon's works on Eastern painting, see his remarks in 'The Bounty of Sweden' (*Au* 547) and his letter to Binyon written on 11 September [1919], *CL InteLex* 3651. In 'The Story of Kwashin Koji', Lafcadio Hearn suggests that '[t]here are many stories to prove that really great pictures have souls. It is well known that a horse, painted upon a certain kakemono, used to go out at night to eat grass'. *Shadowings and A Japanese Miscellany, The Writings of Lafcadio I-learn* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), X, 218. See also Hearn's 'The Boy Who Drew Cats', *Japanese Fairy Tales* (Mount Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper, 1936), 37-45. For Yeats's familiarity with Hearn's work and the brief, ungainly correspondence that the two shared in the summer of 1901, see *CL3* 101-102. Joe Earl discusses the history of the late nineteenth-century popularization of Japanese art in 'The Taxonomic Obsession: British Collectors and Japanese Objects, 1852-1986', *Burlington Magazine* 128 (December 1986), 864-73.

¹³ Hearn quotes this phrase in a passage that he attributes to the collection of tales in the *Otogi-Hyaku-Monogatari* by 'the old Japanese author, Hakubai-En Rosui'. 'The Screen-Maiden', *Shadowings and A Japanese Miscellany*, 13.

¹⁴ For Yeats's reports on the completion of *Dhoya*, see his letters to H. H. Sparling (10 September [1887]) and Katherine Tynan ([18 November 1887]), *CLI* 36 n. 5, 42.

tapestry, and it was not long before they submerged to a deeper, more permanent place in his phantasmagoria, as figures for the wild unpredictability of art and imagination. In 'The Crucifixion of the Outcast' (1894-1932), Cumhal as protagonist embodies the connexion between the horses and an unpredictable visionary frenzy, exclaiming: "'my soul is indeed like the wind, and it blows me to and fro, and up and down, and puts many things into my mind and out of my mind, and therefore am I called the Swift Wild Horse'" (VSR 12-13). However, unlike the clever escape of the painted horse back onto the temple wall, Cumhal's gruesome death (he is crucified, with wolves gnawing at his feet and birds circling overhead) hints at Yeats's growing awareness of the fable's more ominous implications. Even though Cumhal cannot control the unpredictable movements of the visionary imagination—'they are', as Yeats says of his own waking dreams, 'ever beyond the power of my will to alter in any way'—he is nonetheless held tragically accountable for the havoc and upheaval that results from them (M2005 66; *Myth* 100). If art must always transcend the conscious intentions of its maker, what assurance has the artist that it will not function contrary to his desires? What if, he seems to ask, the painted horses trample the wrong rice fields?

The possibility that his own poetry may not follow his intentions presents Yeats with a genuine risk, and though it might seem fanciful to claim that it haunts his sleep, he later relates a dream in which he himself enacts this very possibility: 'I dreamed very lately that I was writing a story, and at the same time I dreamed that I was one of the characters in that story and seeking to touch the heart of some girl in defiance of the author's intention' (LE 26). As he acutely discerns, both the unruly movements of the imagination and the unpredictable meanings of poetry are forces that extend beyond the author's control, forces that may always rise up 'in defiance' of his intentions.

For Yeats, this possibility poses not merely an abstract theoretical dilemma but a concrete moral and ethical one as well. It may have eventually earned him Paul Muldoon's parodic censure in '7, Middagh Street' ('If Yeats had saved his pencil-lead', Muldoon asks in reply to 'The Man and the Echo', 'would certain men have stayed in bed?'), but his acute sense of the artist's accountability for the consequences of his work was no joking matter amid contemporary Ireland's political violence and turmoil.¹⁵ Later in his career, looking back upon the unforeseen and unintended consequences of his work, Yeats would attempt to clear his conscience, to 'Im]easure the lot; forgive myself the lot', but in 'The Stirring of the Bones' (1922), he seems far from this ideal of acceptance: 'I count the links in the chain of responsibility, run them across my fingers, and wonder if any link there is from my workshop' (VP 479; *Au* 368). Returning to the 'chain of responsibility' again in June 1923, he publicly recalls the suicides apparently 'inspired' by Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) (SS 52). Yeats's explicit preoccupations with the risks and consequences of art are one and the same with the keen sense of personal and artistic accountability that lends the painted horses their emotional valence. They may be figures for poetry's turbulent 'afterlife', but they also carry the weight of his own deep-seated ambivalence about the poet's vocation, that precarious tight-rope walk between the idealism of art's social and political efficacy and the awareness of its potential dangers and destructiveness.

Of course, as figures themselves, the emotionally charged painted horses must function according to the same artistic principle that they embody. Instead of associating them 'with river and mountain', as he imagines in *Four Years*, Yeats connects the painted horses with the unwieldy terrain of his own emotional landscape, and they soon assume the power and unpredictability characteristic of his other symbols (*Au* 194). They appear in various forms, as horses of the sea god, mythological unicorns, or platonic steeds of the soul, but the painted horses nonetheless always retain the emotional connotations of turbulence, fear and anxiety with which Yeats first encountered them. Almost ten years after he came upon Hart's pamphlet, he introduces this more ambivalent version of them to the pages of the *Savoy* (January 1896) in 'The Shadowy Horses':

I hear the Shadowy Horses, their long manes a-shake,
Their hoofs heavy with tumult, their eyes glimmering
white;

¹⁵ Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 178.

The Horses of Disaster plunge in the heavy clay: Beloved, let your eyes half close, and your heart beat Over my heart, and your hair fall over my breast, Drowning love's lonely hour in deep twilight of rest, And hiding their tossing manes and their tumultuous feet. (PP 154)

The later note to this poem would divert our attention to certain horse-shaped 'Fomorian divinities' and 'the horses of Mannannan', both symbols 'of the drifting indefinite bitterness of life' (VP 808). But undoubtedly the painted horses are there alongside them, plunging into the same symbolic clay, as figures for the unpredictable 'drifting' of the symbols themselves and the 'indefinite bitterness' of the poet's own troubled conscience. Several months after 'The Shadowy Horses', Yeats confronts the burden of the poet's vocation more explicitly, though this time with an optimism more suitable for the iconoclast who once declared himself the herald of 'the revolt of the soul against the intellect' (CL/ 303). In 'William Blake and His Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*', he suggests that the artist always aspires to become, not unlike the masterful animal painter of Japan, 'an enchanter calling, with a persuasive or compelling ritual', beautiful and horrendous creatures 'that he never imagined, out of the bottomless deeps of imaginations he never foresaw' (E&I 141). By the time of the Blake essay, the phenomenon represented by the painted horses no longer pertains merely to the exceptional case of an ancient fable but to a fundamental criterion for the success of any art unwilling to submit to narrow mimetic constraints or to what Yeats calls elsewhere 'the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement' (E&I 87). If the poet is willing to risk the burden and uncertainty of daemonic struggle, Yeats believes, his work cannot help but assume a life of its own. '[W]hatever we build in the imagination', he claims confidently in February 1901, 'will accomplish itself in the circumstance of our lives' (CL3 40).

Almost two decades before *Four Years*, he discerns the connection between Kanaoka's horses and his own artistic ideal well enough to employ the legend's unmistakable details as shorthand for the success of the 1902 production of George Russell's *Deirdre*: 'The actors moved about very little', Yeats writes in a letter to the *United Irishman* on 12 April 1902, 'and there were moments when it seemed as if some painting upon a wall, some rhythmic procession along the walls of a temple had begun to move before me with a dim, magical life' (CL3 171). He senses the 'dim, magical' life of the painted horses in Dante as well, and he eventually appraises George Russell's verse in terms of the same criterion: 'It had, as it were, organized itself and grown as nervous and living as if it had, as Dante said of his own work, paled his cheek' (Au 241). It would seem that the artistic principles embodied in the legend of Kanaoka's horses even cross the threshold of the spirit world: 'So too when you write a play', Yeats's Leo Africanus affirms, 'the characters seem to move ex live of themselves' (Y/A1 29). So confident does Yeats become in the effectual power of art and the imagination that by the time of his American lecture tour, he can detach the painted horses from their literary and legendary origins and incorporate a nuanced version of them into the nationalistic context in which they would eventually appear in *Four Years*. 'It may be that it depends upon us', Yeats tells his audience in 1904, 'to call up into life the phantom armies of the future. If we keep that thought always before us, if we never allow ourselves to forget those armies, we need have no fear for the future of Ireland' (YA8 115). The 'phantom armies' of Ireland are none other than the painted horses writ large, and the poet who will call them 'up into life' is one and the same with the 'enchanter calling' to his aid the beautiful, monstrous, and utterly unpredictable creatures of the imagination.

Despite the idealism of his political rhetoric and a growing confidence in his own artistic mastery—one of his speakers boldly declares: "I have come into my strength, I And words obey my call" (VP 256)—Yeats remains ever-mindful of the painted horses' more dangerous implications, those which trouble his dreams and prompt Michael Robartes' desperate plea to his beloved in 'The Shadowy Horses'. The horses eventually come to symbolize both the supreme fulfillment and the inevitable frustration of Yeats's artistic ideal, both the unfallen Eden in which art lives a 'merry or mournful life' of its own, a living testament to its author's skill and noble intent, and the ruinous, post-lapsarian garden where the creatures of the imagination have displaced and inculcated their makers with havoc and destruction (Ex 6). Nowhere does their simultaneous beauty and terror achieve a more compelling embodiment than in *The Unicorn from the Stars* (1908), when the protagonist Martin Hearne relates his fantastic vision:

There were horses—white horses rushing by, with white shining riders— there was a horse without a rider, and some one caught me up and put me upon him and we rode away, with the wind, like the wind— (VP1 659)

At first, the vision seems to embrace the best of both worlds: Hearne bridles the rushing horses and, like his predecessor Cumhal had hoped, seems destined to ride the wild imagination "where it listeth" into the freedom of the visionary wind (*E&I* 197). But the painted horse is always a two sided figure for Yeats, and Martin Hearne soon finds his idyllic Eden no less vulnerable to its violence than 'the rice fields of Japan':

We came to a sweet-smelling garden with a gate to it, and there were wheatfields in full ear around, and there were vineyards like I saw in France, and the grapes in bunches. I thought it to be one of the townlands of Heaven. Then I saw the horses we were on had changed to unicorns, and they began trampling the grapes and breaking them. I tried to stop them, but I could not. [...] They tore down the wheat and trampled it on stones, and then they tore down what were left of the grapes and crushed and bruised and trampled them. I smelt the wine, it was flowing on every side — (*VP1* 659-60)

Hearne's apocalyptic vision of the horses-turned-unicorns encapsulates the tension between hope and frustration that abides at the heart of this increasingly complex trope. No longer do the escaped horses play a merely destructive role, trampling the neighbors' rice fields or, in Hart's version, treading their gardens and destroying the flowers. By the time he writes *The Unicorn from the Stars*, Yeats has learned—with the help of his early master Keats, who knew well the paradox that only a 'strenuous tongue 1 Can burst Joy's grape'—that Eden and The Fall are one, that art cannot yield its vintage without risk and sacrifice.¹⁶ Or, as Yeats himself would later put it: The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment' (*LE* 12). The conclusion of Hearne's vision is also chillingly familiar. Alone in the ruined garden, he finds that [e]verything seemed to tremble around me', just as years later, in Yeats's reconstruction of the Japanese fable, the pursuer of the errant horse enters the temple to find the dew-soaked painting 'trembling into stillness' (*Au* 186).

If we have any doubts about the persistent place the painted horses hold in Yeats's imagination, we need only glance briefly at the later volumes, in which he continues to experiment with them as Janus-faced figures for both artistic mastery and violence. In 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', the sound of 'Violence upon the roads: violence of horses' triggers the release of a Byzantium-like flood of poetic vision, and the symbol slides across a strong caesura into that which it symbolizes: 'Thunder of feet, tumult of images' (*VP* 432- 33). Transfused once more with the steeds of the sea god, the painted horses menace the narrator of 'High Talk'—'Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn'—and perhaps even trample invisibly through the mountain pass in the refrain to 'Three Marching Songs': 'That is an airy spot, I And no man knows what treads the grass' (*VP* 623, 614). Even when they do not appear explicitly, the painted horses are conceptually present each time Yeats envisions a work of art that seethes with an unruly and imaginative life of its own, that seems to transform and transcend itself and its creator. They stir unmentioned behind the artistry of the stone carving in 'Lapis Lazuli', intruding into the peaceful scene with 'a water-course or an avalanche' awakened by the restless imagination (*VP* 567). And they rush equally unobserved alongside the whirling 'Gyres' in 'Under Ben Bulbin', threatening the serenity of the Quattrocento paintings in which elaborately detailed backgrounds initially tempt the speaker to return to Michael Hearne's as-yet-undisturbed Eden, with its transient and unattainable 'Gardens where a soul's at ease' (*VP* 639). These moments of threatened tranquility stand in contrast to Yeats's earlier, idealized vision of Byzantium, which so starkly opposed the serene, static perfection of art to the turmoil of human experience and change figured by the 'dolphin-torn' sea (*VP* 498). What he realizes in these poems—what the painted horses have finally taught him—is that his art offers neither an escape nor an asylum 'where a soul's at ease'; rather, it plunges the imagination into yet another cauldron of change and conflict, one with risks and consequences just as real as the life of everyday experience.

In the final tally, perhaps it is best that Yeats chose not to accept the professorship he was offered in 1919, that a young daughter and a reliably practical wife (along with the ever-persuasive 'Instructors') dissuaded him from sailing to Japan in search of the painted horses. Even if they never existed outside of legend (in any case, Kanaoka's temple painting was no longer extant when Hart delivered his lectures in 1888), they were surely not far from his mind when he wrote to Laurence Binyon in September 1919 of his desire to go to Japan 'largely to

¹⁶ John Keats, 'Ode on Melancholy', *John Keats: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 290.

see pictures which I have learned of through your books'.¹⁷ Nor had he forgotten them by 1924 when he recalled nostalgically 'the descendants of Kanoka [*sic*]' and the 'artistic genius of old Japan' (*Au* 547).¹⁸ Years later he received another invitation to visit Japan and, writing to Olivia Shakespear on 31 July 1929 about the tempting prospect, he allowed his mind to turn once again to painting and legend, envisioning himself a restless European 'wandering about Japanese temples among the hills—all the best Chinese art is in Japan' (*CL IntelLex* 5266; *L* 765-66).¹⁹ Despite another disappointment—he suspected that his wife would 'make up my mind for me in five minutes', and apparently George did just that—Yeats continued to pursue the imaginary painted horses in both his life and his art with an impressive persistence (*CL IntelLex* 5266; *L* 766). He eventually came to realize that they offered him no more sanctuary from turmoil and tumult than did the daily struggles and frustrations of his own life in Ireland. Unable to free his mind from those 'shadowy horses' and their alluring ideal, he must have concluded that the only way to abandon his lifelong pursuit of them was to contrive a scenario in which the painted horses would desert *him*. It should come as no surprise that his farewell poem to the horses and the other creatures of his phantasmagoria invokes a fabulous procession of 'circus animals' rather than his well-worn motley coat or the Emperor's drunken soldiery (*VP* 629). It was, after all, the tale of a remarkable animal painter that first set him on their trail.

¹⁷ W. B. Yeats to Laurence Binyon, 11 September [1919], *CL IntelLex* 3651. In his *Lectures on Japanese Art Work*, Hart relates that '[t]he very few pictures which remain known to us as the authentic works of Kanaoka are entirely Buddhistic portraiture of deities, and although there are extant traditions deeply implanted in Japanese literature of his surpassing skill in the portraiture of animals E...] there are no existing examples' (27). By the time Binyon was writing *Painting in the Far East* (London: Edward Arnold, 1908; rpt. 1923), art historians had disputed the authenticity of even the few that remained: 'Kanaoka, one of the greatest names in all the art of Japan, if we are to accept the unvarying voice of tradition, but alas! a name only. E...] Not a single picture now existing is allowed to be by his brush' (104-106).

¹⁸ Even if he did not remember Kanaoka's name when he was writing *Four Years*, Yeats had encountered it not only in Hart's *Lectures* but in Binyon's *Painting in the Far East* as well: 'With the ninth century, too, we come to the first pre-eminent name in Japanese painting—Kanaoka. [...] He painted figures, landscapes, animals, birds, and flowers. He was noted, like Han Kan, for his horses' (104). See Yeats's 'Estrangement': 'I have been talking of the literary element in painting with Miss E— G— and turning over the leaves of Binyon's book on Eastern Painting' (*Au* 489).

¹⁹ Around the same time, Yeats also wrote to a professor at the Taihoku Imperial University, Formosa, 'expressing a great temptation to visit Japan' and assuring him that the 'best things that he wanted to see with his own eyes were all in Japan.' Oshima, *Yeats and Japan*, 23.