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FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF SILESIA IN KATOWICE

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**LITERARY EPIPHANY IN THE POETRY OF W. B. YEATS**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the University of Silesia

Supervisor: Prof. zw. dr hab. Wojciech Kalaga

Katowice, 2015

WYDZIAŁ FILOLOGICZNY UNIWERSYTETU ŚLĄSKIEGO  
W KATOWICACH

Eliene Mąka-Poulain

**EPIFANIA LITERACKA W POEZJI WILLIAMA BUTLERA YEATSA**

Praca doktorska

Promotor: Prof. zw. dr hab. Wojciech Kalaga

Katowice, 2015

How habitable is perfected form?  
And how inhabited the windy light?

Seamus Heaney, "Lightenings," xxii

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## INTRODUCTION

Epiphanies – or the “moments of awakening,” as Wallace Stevens once called them – are often described as the brief, fleeting instants when the human mind, responding to everyday, familiar situations, suddenly discovers its ability to feel and experience far beyond its usual capacity. The exceptional ability to shock, to astound and to transform often ascribed to this sudden flash of recognition has not surprisingly made epiphany a valuable and important tool of writers and poets. In his introduction to the 1996 anthology of poems by different authors, *A Book of Luminous Things*, Czesław Miłosz looks at the Greek origins of the word *epiphany* and makes a connection between the origin of the word and the modern, literary counterpart of the “divine manifestation.” Miłosz’s words vividly illustrate the unusual appeal epiphany holds for countless writers and readers:

What in Greek was called *epiphaneia* meant the appearance, the arrival, of a divinity among mortals or its recognition under a familiar shape of man or woman. Epiphany thus interrupts the everyday flow of time and enters as one privileged moment when we intuitively grasp a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things or persons. A poem-epiphany tells about one moment-event and this imposes a certain form.<sup>1</sup>

In *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* Morris Beja suggests that the Modernists – among them James Joyce, who is probably one of the most celebrated practitioners of

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<sup>1</sup> Czesław Miłosz, “Epiphany,” in: *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Czesław Miłosz (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1996), p. 3.

the Moment – often “relied on epiphany as an essential technique”<sup>2</sup> and used it as a “structural device,”<sup>3</sup> while Ashton Nichols in his study *The Poetics of Epiphany*,<sup>4</sup> using interchangeably the terms *literary moment* and *literary epiphany*, traces its earlier, Romantic origins. Nichols notes the impact of William Wordsworth’s decision to arrange his longer poems by including passages known as *spots of time* and then discusses the development of similar practices in the poetry of other English Romantics.<sup>5</sup> Epiphany in literature, unlike, for example, vision, whose depiction is less bound by literary convention, is then not merely a presentation of a certain type of human experience – as such it typically portrays short-lived but intense flashes of insight, moments of heightened self-awareness and those of keen, vivid perception – but also a literary mode which usually aims at intensifying the reader’s engagement with the text. Writing about such privileged moments of insight gradually evolved into a variety of literary practices and techniques and is today to a significant extent shaped by conventions.

Apart from the profound impact on the reader the literary moment frequently achieves, both the extensive range of portrayals of epiphany in literature and the different practices and conventions that came to be associated with writing about this type of experience make this multifaceted literary mode an interesting area of study. Therefore, in view of the considerable complexity of the poetics of the literary moment and its sustained popularity in 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry and prose, it would be difficult not to agree with Ashton Nichols’s remark suggesting that “the concept of literary epiphany has received surprisingly little theoretical attention in recent years”

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<sup>2</sup> Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (London: Peter Owen, 1971), p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> The terms *literary moment* and *literary epiphany* will be used in the same way, interchangeably and to denote the same concept, also in this study.

<sup>5</sup> Ashton Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1987).

although epiphany has become “a literary commonplace in poems and prose narratives.”<sup>6</sup> Although this gap has been partly bridged, as the monographs and articles authored by, among others, Morris Beja, Robert Langbaum or Ashton Nichols laid the basic theoretical foundations of the concept, both describing this literary mode and roughly tracing its development in literature written in the English language over the last two centuries, the body of literature devoted to the examination of the role of the literary moment in the work of particular writers and poets is still surprisingly small.

In this thesis I look at the use and development of the literary epiphany in the poetry of a writer who shared Joyce’s nationality and, like Joyce, is usually seen as one of the most influential Modernists. Unlike Joyce, however, who introduced his aesthetic theory of epiphany in the early versions of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the proponent of *epiphany* is Joyce’s literary alter ego, Stephen Dedalus, William Butler Yeats never explicitly wrote about the poetics of the literary moment in his work and never coined a literary term resembling Joyce’s *epiphany*. Nevertheless, Yeats was aware of the conventions of the Romantic moment and his poetry offers a remarkable variety of novel approaches to what is today usually labelled as the literary epiphany. The significance this expressive, yet rarely systematically studied literary mode acquires in the work of the Irish poet was the main reason behind the decision to devote a longer text to the analysis of the Yeatsian *Moment*. The poet’s ability to shape his numerous interpretations of the literary moment in many dissimilar, often almost unrelated ways – a trait uncommonly seen in other poets’ work – is particularly interesting. The originality and versatility of Yeats’s technique is demonstrated by a variety of traceable literary references, including the different degrees of

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<sup>6</sup> Ashton Nichols, “Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments: Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney,” in: *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*, ed. Wim Tigges (Amsterdam/Atlanta: GA, 1999), p. 467.



transformations of the Romantic and later motives, patterns and conventions related to the use of the epiphanic mode. Although Yeats is often seen as a Modernist, his poetry is known to be significantly influenced by Romanticism, and his esteem for the poets of the Romantic period, such as Shelley, Blake or Keats, is well acknowledged. Today, when the origins of the literary epiphany have been traced back to the poetry of the Romantics, Yeats's poetry may serve as an excellent illustration of how the original, mainly Wordsworthian aesthetics of the Romantic moment gradually changed and evolved, a telling example of a literary mode "in a state of transition" between Romanticism and Modernism. Simultaneously, studying Yeats's use of the convention of the literary moment may shed light on Yeats's Romantic lineage and on the different phases of the poet's life-long dialogue with Romanticism, as the degrees in which Yeats decided to transform the elements of the Romantic literary moment are often reflective of how Yeats positioned himself in relation to Romanticism.

The originality of Yeats's technique is also related to a very specific use of imagery in many Yeats's poems. Much has been said and written about Yeats the occultist and Yeats the visionary, which is not surprising, seeing that the degree of Yeats's interest in mysticism and in the occult is unique and unrivalled among other well-known, recognized European poets, with, possibly, the only exception of William Blake. Numerous monographs and articles have been devoted to the exploration of this profound interest in the supernatural the poet always exhibited, including countless interpretations of Yeats's complex system of theosophical ideas expounded in *A Vision*. Surprisingly little, however, has been said on the partly related topic of the epiphanic mode in Yeats's work. The poetics of the literary moment may sometimes make use of the framework of mysticism or occult philosophy as suggesting a certain aura of inscrutability and mystery is part of the convention, but it remains primarily a

mode of literary expression. These ideas serve as a means to achieve a specific literary effect – an aspect particularly significant given Yeats's reputation of a great and innovative Modernist poet. Analyzing Yeats's work from the perspective of the poet's use of the epiphanic mode may not shed new light on the body of theosophical ideas important to the poet, but may allow us to see how some of these ideas translated into Yeats's distinctive style of the literary epiphany by becoming a very original, rich source of imagery in numerous Yeats's poems.

Yeats's portrayals of the sudden moment of recognition range thus from the delicately outlined episodes inspired by the poetics of the Romantic moment and by the Burkean sublime, usually portraying a well-delineated speaker who gains a sudden insight originating in sensory experience, to the overpowering visionary moments of revelation inspired by Yeats's esoteric system of thought, with a broad spectrum of variously constructed literary moments in-between. The examination of Yeats's epiphanic mode in the broader perspective of the development of the technique over time may allow us to see and appreciate the import of Yeats's distinctive style of the literary epiphany against the background of the literary practices of the poet's predecessors and his contemporaries. It may also allow us to see how and in which aspects the epiphanic mode of Yeats's later years sometimes approximates the poetics of the modern-day literary moment.

One of the assumptions underlying the analysis of the literary moment in the poetry of W. B. Yeats that is undertaken in the next chapters is the Romantic origin of the convention. In choosing this assumption I follow the theses proposed by Robert Langbaum, Ashton Nichols, Morris Beja and M. H. Abrams, authors who pioneered in studying the theoretical aspects of epiphany in literature and formulated conclusions usually acknowledged and accepted in the later literature of the subject. The

assumption suggesting that the Romantic literary moment and the Modernist epiphany are closely related, as they are two manifestations of a literary practice that developed over time, and that the modern-day literary epiphany has its origins in the Romantic moment has been accepted and developed by Nichols in his 1987 book *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment*. The kinship between the literary practices of English Romantic poets and later, Victorian and Modernist models of the literary moment was, however, pointed out earlier by critics who undertook first in-depth analyses of the theoretical aspects of this literary mode. Robert Langbaum, who refers to the practice of writing consisting in organizing texts by making use of the device of the literary moment as the *epiphanic mode*, analyzed the Romantic origins of the concept in his frequently cited 1983 article “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature.” Langbaum links the epiphany in literature to the lyric form, stating that “[i]t is significant that the epiphanic mode begins with the Romantic poets, for whom lyric becomes the dominant genre. It is also significant that the epiphanic mode appears in fiction just at the time when fiction begins to approximate the intensity of the lyric.”<sup>7</sup> The resemblance between the Romantic moment and the Modernist epiphany was, however, noted earlier – in 1971 – by M. H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* and by Morris Beja in *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*. Although in *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* Beja focuses primarily on Modernist prose, in the second chapter, “The Tradition,” he sees the origins of the epiphany in literature in Romantic poetry, noting, for instance, that “many of Wordsworth’s best-known poems [...] are records of epiphanies.”<sup>8</sup> Analyzing Modernist prose in the subsequent chapters

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” in: *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*, ed. Wim Tigges (Amsterdam/Atlanta: GA, 1999), p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 32.

of his book, Beja goes on to suggest that the Modernist epiphany retained much of its Romantic characteristic, observing that “the concept of epiphany itself is of course extremely Romantic, as is Joyce’s presentation of it.”<sup>9</sup>

Since critics often come up with proposals involving slightly different criteria a literary moment has to fulfil to deserve its name, thus creating a range of less and more inclusive definitions, it was necessary to choose the most suitable categorization. To identify the wide variety of strategies used by Yeats as a means of immortalizing the Moment in his poetry and to carefully trace the development of Yeats’s technique of writing in the epiphanic mode, the analyses undertaken in the next chapters will be guided by the choice of a relatively inclusive framework that sees epiphany as a literary mode which, usually borrowing from earlier conventions, presents certain elements, or characteristics, of the supposed psychological phenomenon of the moment of recognition using multiple approaches and strategies. As a result, a number of the so called *visionary epiphanies* or epiphanies-visions will be examined, although their status as “epiphanies” is sometimes disputed or seen as borderline, especially by those critics who are inclined to see the literary moment almost exclusively through the lenses of Joyce’s use of epiphany in prose. But, seeing that in Yeats’s poetry the sense of the revelatory is conveyed in multiple ways, by a number of approaches that use the established conventions in different degrees, it would be unreasonable to exclude the strategies less reflective of the most representative conventions, as they testify to Yeats’s versatility as a poet, show the development of the aesthetics of the literary moment in Yeats’s work and, possibly, may allow us to see the process in which new conventions of the literary moment, or new models, can be formed. The status of such epiphanies-visions, including the arguments in favour and against the inclusion of the

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<sup>9</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, pp. 78-79.

visionary epiphanies as one of the categories of the literary epiphany, will be further discussed in the chapter that surveys several of the theoretical aspects of the literary epiphany.

Simultaneously, it will be important to distinguish between Yeats's literary moments constructed in accordance with well-established conventions – in Yeats's poetry it is the model of the Romantic moment that is frequently reworked – and those which depart from the established pattern, as this may both shed light on Yeats's Romantic and later inspirations and on the poet's strategies of reworking, breaking or defying such earlier conventions. For this reason the readings of poems undertaken in the chapters examining Yeats's poetry will often to a degree focus on the examination of Yeats's literary moments against the background of earlier, mainly Romantic literary practices and conventions related to writing in the epiphanic mode and will also in many cases consider how accurately those literary moments reflect the less and more inclusive present-day descriptions and criteria defining the literary epiphany.

To identify and characterize the different strategies Yeats pursued and to trace the transformations of the poet's epiphanic mode, a number of aspects, characteristic traits or models of the literary moment may be examined. One of such aspects is related to the literary characterizations of the situation in which the supposed phenomenon of epiphany typically occurs. Several of the following questions may be asked where it is relevant in order to establish in what degree the new model resembles certain well-known conventions and patterns: Does the description of the "moment" reveal the presence of a specific, recognizable *epiphaneae*? Is this character identical with the poem's speaker? Is such a participant-observer placed in a definite, well-described geographical location? Is there an identifiable *trigger*, a sensory stimulus which sets off the epiphany? What is the nature of this trigger? Is it something

insignificant, mundane, seemingly banal or trivial? Something charged with certain significance of its own, for example, a work of art? A traditional vehicle of the sudden illumination such as light? Finally, the emotional impact of the moment of recognition, its power to transform the epiphanees and other positive or negative overtones of the occurrence may also be taken into account and evaluated, since the archetypal Romantic moment of recognition is a positive, transformative episode, while the Modernists were more inclined to portray epiphany as “demonic,” accompanied by negative emotions, summoning up, as a result, the image of a meaningless, chaotic or essentially empty world.

Since the function of the literary moment in both poetry and prose is usually to create a sense of significance and to emotionally engage, astound or shock the reader, a convincing idea must be accompanied by a thoughtfully conceived literary form. This form helps convey the impact and significance of the poem’s epiphany, and therefore any analysis of the literary moment must necessarily involve a closer look at particular uses of language. This includes the poem’s prosody, its use of figurative language, symbols and images, use of sounds, narrative modes and a variety of other means of poetic expression. As the specific uses of language may be related to earlier conventions and uses of the literary moment, the form the Moment is given may be thus identified as relatively novel, or as one intentionally relying on earlier conventions. In certain cases, the changes introduced to the original version of a poem may also be telling of the way in which the poet’s idea of the poem’s literary moment changed. This type of analysis accompanies the readings of Yeats’s “A Memory of Youth” and “The Wild Swans at Coole.”

Although Yeats often creatively reused elements of well-known conventions of the literary epiphany, many of the strategies he pursued are novel and predominantly

Yeatsian ideas. The chapters examining Yeats's poetry look at the poems in what is essentially a chronological order, so it is also the development of such strategies over time that may be traced. This approach may help establish whether or not this development may be seen in terms of a gradual departure from the established conventions related to this mode of writing in the direction of innovation and novelty.

The theoretical framework which places the analyzed texts in relation to the existing definitions of the notion of the literary moment is supplied by the studies undertaken by Robert Langbaum, Morris Beja and Ashton Nichols. Beja's *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* and Langbaum's article "Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," will be mainly referred to in discussing certain theoretical aspects of the literary epiphany, including definitions and criteria related to this literary mode, while Nichols's findings and observations included in his monograph *The Poetics of Epiphany* will frequently become a point of reference in discussing the origin and development of the Romantic convention of the literary moment. Adopting the theoretical frame of reference drawn up by these authors includes the use of several terms they popularized: Ashton Nichols's terms *literary moment* and *literary epiphany* will be used interchangeably, as in Nichols's book, to denote a recognizable, particular use of the poetics of the literary moment in a passage of a text written in the *epiphanic mode* – the latter is Robert Langbaum's term.

Apart from the references to a number of other relatively recent academic publications discussing the theoretical aspects of the literary moment, Joyce's aesthetic theory of epiphany will be occasionally invoked. Joyce's contribution to the study of epiphany essentially consists of a few relatively short passages from Joyce's novels in which Stephen Dedalus discusses his aesthetic theory, but the Irish writer remains a very important, major point of reference in literary studies also on account of his novel

use of the literary moment in his work and because he is credited with the invention of the literary term *epiphany* that is frequently used today. The other important literary figure who enormously contributed to the development of the poetics of the Moment and whose name will often appear in the subsequent chapters is William Wordsworth. The contribution of other writers and poets will be also briefly pointed out. In the discussion of Yeats's views on the impact of poetry and on the creation of a specific mood in a poem – both related to the subject of the literary epiphany – the relevant passages from Yeats's *Autobiographies* and from essays and letters written by Yeats will be cited. Since numerous aspects of Yeats's epiphanic mode are related to the influence of Romanticism, Yeats's own thoughts on his Romantic inspirations, academic publications discussing Yeats's Romantic lineage and monographs interpreting Romantic models of the literary moment will be referred to.

As has already been mentioned, the subject of the literary moment in Yeats's poetry has not been yet explored in depth. The only texts to date explicitly discussing the subject of the Yeatsian Moment are Ashton Nichols's survey of the Yeatsian epiphany in his book *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment*<sup>10</sup> and Philipp Wolf's article “‘The Lightning Flash’: Visionary Epiphanies, Suddenness and History in the Later Work of W. B. Yeats.”<sup>11</sup> Wolf's article, in which the critic analyzes, among others, “The Gyres,” “The Second Coming” and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” relates Yeats's visionary epiphanies and Yeats's theory of the gyres to the subject of history and historical time as seen in the philosophical perspective. Wolf explores the subject he chose and delineated in great depth, analyzing Yeats's view of time and history as it is inscribed in Yeats's

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<sup>10</sup> One of four sections in the chapter “Epiphany in Twentieth-Century Poetry,” in which Nichols discusses the literary moment in the work of 20<sup>th</sup>-century poets, pp. 181-89.

<sup>11</sup> One of 24 articles devoted to the poetics of the literary moment in Wim Tigges's *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*, pp. 177-83.



poetry and Yeats's theosophical ideas and examining this view against the background of the philosophy of Yeats's contemporaries and their successors, but his highly, narrowly specialized topic is in its assumptions and findings very different from the idea lying behind this research. In contrast, Ashton Nichols's analysis of Yeats's "great moment" is conceived within the framework of Nichols's exploration of the Romantic Moment and its later developments, and discusses Yeats's epiphanic mode in a broader perspective, thus placing it in the context similar to the one presented in this thesis. Nichols's survey is, however, at its nine pages inevitably brief. Although the analyses undertaken in the subsequent chapters explore the subject of the literary moment without relying on Ashton Nichols's points and observations included in his analysis of the Yeatsian epiphany, I am nevertheless very indebted to him as his pioneering study of the literary epiphany in poetry, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, offered the very framework within which Yeats's poetry is explored here.

To give the subject of the literary moment in Yeats's poetry a broader background, the first chapter surveys and discusses the place of the literary moment in today's literary studies. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section is devoted to the origins and history of the epiphanic mode as seen from the perspective of the successive studies undertaken by literary critics after Joyce. This short survey may also help explain and illustrate the assumption of the Romantic origin of the Moment, one underlying the analysis of Yeats's poetry in Chapters III-V. The last part of this section describes some of the criticisms levelled at the practice of writing in the epiphanic mode and at the concept of epiphany today and briefly discusses the accusations. The second section is a general overview of several theoretical aspects of the literary epiphany; it also briefly characterizes the different facets of the supposed psychological phenomenon of "epiphany" as portrayed in literary texts. The

examination of the different aspects of the literary moment in this section, including well-known and less well-known, controversial and less controversial definitions and criteria proposed by literary critics, makes it possible to broadly define the concept and to roughly delimit the scope of application of the term *literary epiphany*. This will later help identify how and in which aspects Yeats's poetics of the literary moment corresponds to other models of the literary epiphany and how well it reflects the different modern-day characterizations of the epiphanic mode in literary studies.

The second chapter discusses the cultural background and the different ideas that helped shape the convention of the literary epiphany; it also briefly characterizes the poetics of the literary moment as it has been practised since Wordsworth. The Yeats-related contexts of this development may be especially important here, as the survey of the characteristic portrayals of the phenomenon of the sudden moment of recognition in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries may reveal to what degree Yeats's literary moment was inspired by the models popularized by other authors: both Yeats's predecessors and his contemporaries. Simultaneously, a review that briefly looks at the different interpretations of the literary moment in the work of writers and poets Yeats knew and read may also help identify which ideas or "philosophies" of the Moment never appealed to the poet enough to leave a distinctive impression on his work.

Chapters III, IV and V interpret the use of the convention of the literary moment in selected Yeats's poems and are arranged chronologically, according to the dates of publication of the volumes of Yeats's verse. Chapter Three includes the poems published in two important collections of Yeats's early poetry, *The Rose* (published in 1893) and *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899). Although the "Modernist turn" that is in W. B. Yeats's poetry illustrated by the gradual abandonment of traditional forms often inspired by Irish myth and by the intentional choice of a more distinctive voice began

earlier than 1914, Chapter Four starts with the collection *Responsibilities* (1914), which both formally and thematically represents the most radical break with earlier approaches, and includes the poems from two subsequent volumes, *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan" is analyzed in the same chapter, as the poem is significant in the context of Yeats's aesthetics of the visionary moment that is discussed therein and also because the poem was included in *A Vision* (1925) and only later republished in the volume *The Tower* (1928). The last of the chapters that trace the development of the epiphanic mode in Yeats's poetry, Chapter Five, examines the poems written within the period of the last 15 years of the poet's life (1925-1939). Those poems were published in the volumes *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) *New Poems* (1938) and *Last Poems* (1939). The first of the four volumes, *The Tower*, marks yet another stylistic and thematic turn in Yeats's poetry. The directly expressed Romantic sensibility of many earlier poems is suppressed; the tone becomes more austere and rebellious. This new attitude is accompanied by numerous ironic self-portraits. The poetry of this period mourns the past – both the poet's personal history and the "Romantics" of a bygone era – and yet (or therefore) often indirectly invokes the spirit of Romanticism.

In the three chapters that focus on Yeats's poetry, the interpretations will review those various aspects of particular poems that are in the most substantial degree related to the effective and novel use of the epiphanic mode, which means that in one case the primary focus may be the poem's reworking of a Romantic convention, while in another poem a detailed examination of a novel and innovative form of presentation of the Moment will take precedence over other aspects. The last part of the thesis, the

conclusion, summarizes, systematizes and reviews the most important findings of the preceding chapters.

## CHAPTER ONE

### EPIPHANY IN LITERATURE AND LITERARY CRITICISM

#### 1.1 The Origins and Development of the Concept in Literary Criticism

Whenever the subject of epiphany in literature is debated, there is a very good chance – in fact, one verging on certainty – that a certain name will pop up at one point during such a scholarly discussion. That name is, of course, James Joyce – and once the name has been mentioned, a passage from Joyce's unfinished manuscript *Stephen Hero* almost invariably follows:

By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments.<sup>12</sup>

While the first sentence of this frequently quoted fragment examining the nature of epiphany has managed to achieve a certain status of notoriety among critics, as the literary, figurative language of Modernist prose does not allow for an unambiguous, clear-cut definition of what has since become a widespread and almost commonplace term in literary criticism, the second part of the quotation offers a particularly important and startlingly valid *raison d'être* of the literary technique.

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<sup>12</sup> James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 211.

Epiphanies may certainly be the most unusual and valuable moments for all those who claim to be able to experience them, but only when “recorded with extreme care” do they become much more: the fabric of modern literature. As such, they allow generations of readers to experience what probably is “the most delicate and evanescent” quality of literature itself.

The concept of epiphany as a literary mode and a literary device emerged in the study of literature in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its contemporary critical reception certainly owes much to James Joyce, who is also often given the credit of being the first writer to use the word *epiphany* in a secular context – before Joyce the word was often used in a religious sense, as the name of the Christian holiday, the Feast of Epiphany. The “most delicate and evanescent of moments” fascinated Joyce’s supposed alter ego, Stephen Dedalus, and they must have held a similar appeal to the young Joyce, who decided to use the epiphanic mode in both *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Although Joyce pioneered in giving the word the literary connotations it never had before, he was – contrary to what is often believed – not the first to use the word in the lay context. Ashton Nichols and Robert Langbaum note that *epiphany* was invoked by Ralph Waldo Emerson in a very novel, surprisingly Joycean sense as early as 1838.<sup>13</sup> In his journal Emerson wrote: “And presently the aroused intellect finds gold and gems in one of these scorned facts, then finds [...] that a fact is an Epiphany of God”<sup>14</sup> – thus forging the typically modern (or even Modernist) connection between the “epiphanic revelation” and the “triviality” of the epiphanic event suggested years later by Joyce’s aesthetics.

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<sup>13</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” pp. 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston and Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), p. 488, quoted in: Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 41.

While it is generally agreed that Joyce influenced the criticism of the epiphanic mode in literature in a major way, his term gradually has come to describe a relatively wide variety of approaches, techniques and phenomena. What is more – and this unfortunate coincidence does not make the study of this literary mode easier – the term *epiphany* is often used interchangeably with the term *Moment* that functioned long before Joyce’s appropriation of *epiphany*. Nevertheless, the similarity between the literary technique allegedly “invented” by the Modernists and the earlier, mainly Romantic attempts to “record” the fleeting moment of heightened perception in poetry or prose has been often noted and explored since Joyce.

Although Joyce’s epiphanies almost immediately drew attention of critics and readers, the first critical attempts at systemizing the phenomenon of the literary moment and reconstructing its historical background in literature were not made until the 1970s. In his 1957 book *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* Northrop Frye briefly invokes Joyce’s aesthetic theory and even coins his own new concepts of *demonic epiphany* and the *point of epiphany* (both functioning within the framework of Frye’s mythological criticism), but the concepts are not essential to Frye’s book and did not attract much critical attention at the time. Nevertheless, Frye appears to have been one of the first critics to pinpoint the kinship between the “moments” in Romantic poetry and the secular “epiphanies” in Joyce’s early prose: in his book *A Study of English Romanticism* he does not only note that “Joyce uses the word [epiphany] as a critical term in *Stephen Hero*, and appears to have adopted it because of his full agreement with the Romantic tendency to associate all manifestations of divinity with the creative spirit of man,”<sup>15</sup> but also decides to extend the usage of the word *epiphany* in literary

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<sup>15</sup> Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1983), p. 158. In this way Frye emphasizes the new, modern character of epiphany, where the creative agent is the human mind, as opposed to the concept of the traditional theophany – the distinction made later also by Ashton Nichols in *The Poetics of Epiphany*.

criticism to the Romantic “moments” and “spots of time.” A similar approach to the study of epiphany is adopted in 1971 in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, where M. H. Abrams examines the Romantic epiphany by focusing on the Wordsworthian spots of time, but at the same time notes and stresses the influence of the Romantic literary moment on the poetry of Modernist authors, including T. S. Eliot.<sup>16</sup>

While critics such as Frye or Abrams were aware of the Romantic origins of the twentieth-century epiphanic mode, none of them explored this connection in full. One of the first thorough studies of epiphany and its origins in literature was, surprisingly, published as late as 1971: the book was Morris Beja’s *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*. Beja, however, focuses only on prose, interpreting novels written by Modernist authors such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe. He asserts that epiphany was often used as a tool giving structure to the unstructured, non-linear and fragmented Modernist prose.<sup>17</sup> Beja finds Joyce’s concept of epiphany very influential and chooses to apply the Joycean term throughout the book, but at the same time he firmly adheres to the idea that the literary epiphany was not invented by James Joyce. His study is probably the first to systematically look for the origins of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century epiphanic mode in Romantic poetry and in the later, Victorian developments of the technique. Writing about the Romantic origins of the epiphanic mode in prose, Beja calls attention to the influence of William Wordsworth’s poetry on the development of the Modernist literary epiphany:

We can see from this and other passages [Beja quotes from Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* above this commentary] that until the modern period the major figure in English literature to have

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<sup>16</sup> M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 22.



made extensive use of epiphany is not a novelist, but a poet, and a Romantic poet, two facts which are not merely coincidental. It is, then, no wonder that Joyce once gave “highest palms” in English literature to Wordsworth, together with Shakespeare and Shelley. Many of Wordsworth’s best-known poems – “Resolution and Independence,” “Stepping Westward,” “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” “The Solitary Reaper” – are records of epiphanies.”<sup>18</sup>

Beja, analyzing the origins of the Modernist literary moment in prose, cites F. Scott Fitzgerald, who explicitly linked his, Hemingway’s and Wolfe’s techniques of writing with Wordsworth’s ambition to convey the emotions accompanying the Moment in the most convincing manner:

F. Scott Fitzgerald writes that what he, Wolfe and Hemingway as well have in common is the attempt in their fiction “to recapture the exact feel of a moment in time and space” – an attempt which, as we shall see, he is correct in associating with “what Wordsworth was trying to do.”<sup>19</sup> [...] We shall see that this aim appears in other modern novelists, too, and that many of them feel, as well, that the work of art attains its greatest power when the artist does not merely record, but produces in his audience a sense of new and sudden vision.<sup>20</sup>

In his 1983 article “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” Robert Langbaum shares Beja’s perspective and argues that “[i]f we take as models of the modern short story Joyce’s stories in *Dubliners*, as well as Chekhov stories, we see that the modern short story is plotless and apparently pointless in order that it may be epiphanic.”<sup>21</sup> Like Beja, Langbaum does not stop here; he goes on to suggest that “once we realize this, we can understand that one origin of the modern short story is in

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<sup>18</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Andrew Turnbull (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), p. 251, quoted in: Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 47.

*Lyrical Ballads*, in the plotless and apparently pointless story, for example, of Simon Lee.”<sup>22</sup>

Definitely, however, this does not amount to saying that Modernist writers were directly influenced by the first Romantics: both Langbaum and Beja see the literary epiphany as a technique that is constantly evolving, taking different shapes. Consequently, Joyce is not seen as the first and only proponent of the epiphanic mode in Modernist prose. Rather than that, Langbaum sees the origin of the Modernist epiphany in prose in the *spots of time* and moments of consciousness characteristic of the poetry of the Romantic period, claiming that these models were later developed by Victorian and early Modernist writers. Robert Browning is particularly credited with forging a link between the Romantic moment and its later, twentieth-century equivalents, especially in Modernist prose; his form of a character-revealing dramatic monologue is seen as a prototype of the Modernist epiphany. Langbaum points out that although the literary epiphany developed later in prose than in poetry, the Modernist epiphany evolved before Joyce: “[w]ith very few exceptions, the epiphanic mode does not appear in fiction until the turn of the century with James, Conrad, Proust and with the development of the modern short story by Chekhov, Joyce, Lawrence.”<sup>23</sup> Often, Joyce is even denied the influence he might have had on Virginia Woolf’s “frozen moments” or “moments of being”: Jay Losey suggests that Virginia Woolf’s epiphanic mode derives not from Joyce, but from Walter Pater.<sup>24</sup>

As we have seen, the first comprehensive critical studies of epiphany in literature focused on the Romantic literary moment and on the epiphanic mode in Modernist prose, and were also concerned with the manner in which the former

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<sup>22</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> Jay Losey, “Demonic Epiphanies in Larkin and Heaney,” in: *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*, ed. Wim Tigges (Amsterdam/Atlanta: GA, 1999), p. 379.

influenced the latter. Surprisingly, relatively little has been written on the subject of epiphany in Modernist poetry, although such literary critics as Abrams or Langbaum did not overlook the connection between the Wordsworthian spots of time and the twentieth-century developments of the epiphanic mode in poetry. Still, the first publication to systematically examine the literary epiphany in poetry is the study *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment* published in 1987 by Ashton Nichols. Although Nichols mainly seeks to establish the nineteenth-century genesis of the literary epiphany, and for the most part examines 19<sup>th</sup>-century poetry, in the last chapter of his book he also briefly inspects the epiphanic mode in the work of several twentieth-century poets.<sup>25</sup> Nichols also maintains that although the designation *epiphany* was not used during the Romantic period and the Victorian era, it was then that the literary technique was born and developed. The Romantic poets, among them Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, prepared the ground for the development of the epiphanic mode in the poetry of Tennyson, Browning and Hopkins. All of them, consciously or not, incorporated many of their predecessors' ideas and techniques related to what Nichols identifies as the modern literary epiphany. Nichols masterfully shows how one idea led to another and to what extent it was possible for one poet to influence his followers, so that the reader is presented with a compelling and consistent history of the *modern literary moment*. Nichols devotes the last pages in his book to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century poets writing in the epiphanic mode and shows how indebted they are to their Romantic and Victorian forefathers. He also admits that the literary epiphany is by no means old hat in 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry: "although a complete analysis of these developments [i.e., of the developments of the literary epiphany in poetry in the 20th century] is beyond the

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<sup>25</sup> Chapter VI, entitled "Epiphany in Twentieth-Century Poetry," pp. 181-211.

scope of this book, a look at poems by Yeats, Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Seamus Heaney suggests the contemporary importance of the literary form first explored in Wordsworth's spots of time."<sup>26</sup> Thus, Nichols's book is also the first to explore the poetics of the literary moment in Yeats's work, although, as the book focuses mainly on Romantic poets, Nichols's characterization of the Yeatsian moment is inevitably very brief.

What has emerged so far is a relatively consistent and not very controversial illustration of the development of the literary moment. Morris Beja's book *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Ashton Nichols's monograph *The Poetics of Epiphany* and Robert Langbaum's article "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature" are frequently quoted and rarely contested. However, this fortunate agreement concerning the development of a literary mode cannot obscure the controversy that often surrounds the notion of epiphany in literary criticism today.

Epiphany may often be seen as suspicious by those critics who are inclined to accept its alleged alliance with concepts such as truth, transcendent, "occult" knowledge or one absolute meaning – notions often contested and criticized in the field of postmodern thought. It is not the origins and development of the Moment in literature that are criticized, but rather the idea behind the concept itself: mainly the "spiritual" or "metaphysical" aspects suggested by certain critical perceptions of the notion of epiphany. Other criticisms include the claim that the epiphanic mode looks "archaic" in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> literature, as it is merely a literary convention invented by the Modernists. It has to be stressed here that the criticisms levelled at the concept are usually inextricably related to how epiphany is defined by a particular critic. It is mainly for this reason that epiphany is today viewed in so many different

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<sup>26</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 181.

ways – fortunately, in many cases without the critical bias that characterizes those more radical approaches, as, for example, in Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, where the philosopher does not imply that the concept itself is flawed; instead, he looks at diverse presentations of epiphany in literature and uses his findings to analyze modern culture.

The implications of viewing the literary epiphany through the postmodern lenses can be easily explored on reading *The Visionary Moment: A Postmodern Critique*, a book by Paul Maltby. Maltby’s radically postmodern views lead him to believe that both the notion of *visionary moments*<sup>27</sup> and the visionary moments themselves should be closely examined from a new perspective and necessarily revised because the concept, as defined by Maltby, challenges the basic assumptions of the postmodern apparatus. For example, according to Maltby, visionary moments “claim the communication of pure and transcendent knowledge” and “are premised on the meditation of an occult faculty (‘insight,’ ‘intuition’).”<sup>28</sup> Such pretensions to absolute knowledge are no longer tenable and should be, according to Maltby, exposed as too far-reaching and inappropriate. Maltby also suggests that visionary moments create the illusion of a unified, autonomous self and cautions against being seduced by their rhetoric: “We must also reckon with the postmodern dissolution of the self as a biologically given and unitary entity and its redefinition as an aggregate of historically constituted and contradictory subject positions. From this standpoint, self-knowledge

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Maltby, *The Visionary Moment: A Postmodern Critique* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 1. As a *visionary moment* Maltby often qualifies what other critics usually identify as *epiphany*: “To illustrate the extent to which this convention pervades poetry and fiction, I shall quote three of the four authors of the hitherto only published monographs on the topic. (All four have adopted the term ‘epiphany,’ a term whose limitations I shall discuss in chapter I),” says Maltby. The three authors referred to are Nichols, Bidney and Beja. Maltby’s term is broader as it includes the additional category of “manifestations of the sacred.”

<sup>28</sup> Maltby, *The Visionary Moment*, p. 19.

could only ever amount to the privileging of one among many subjectivities as *the Self*,”<sup>29</sup> writes Maltby.

Maltby’s perspective suggests that the visionary moment does not fit very well in the postmodern framework. Still, his distrust often seems more materialistic than truly postmodern as there is still a place for a specifically conceived metaphysics in postmodernism. Nonetheless, the most questionable part of the argument appears Maltby’s notion of the visionary moment, especially the way it is defined and the range it is ascribed in the book. For example, against Joyce’s formulation of *epiphany*, Maltby claims that “to insist on the secular status of the visionary moment is to exclude those moments that take the form of a sudden manifestation of the sacred.”<sup>30</sup> Maltby also contends that “the typical visionary moment is a singular and rare occurrence.”<sup>31</sup> While Maltby’s choice, including the choice of the term *visionary moment* and defining this notion the way the critic did, is legitimate, the consequences of such a choice are unconvincing. Placed somewhere half-way between mystical experience and the Joycean epiphany, Maltby’s visionary moment does not have much in common with what Ashton Nichols defines as the modern, or “new” literary epiphany, i.e., one which has been in use since Romanticism:

In traditional revelation, the ineffable aspect of the experience – the supposedly unreachable essence – was primary. In the modern literary epiphany, by contrast, the perceptual experience and its transformation into language is primary. The new epiphany does not try to point beyond language [...]. [...] The modern epiphany emphasizes the perception of significance rather than the interpreted meaning of the significant event.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Maltby, *The Visionary Moment*, p. 21. Emphasis original.

<sup>30</sup> Maltby, *The Visionary Moment*, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Maltby, *The Visionary Moment*, p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 33.

The critics also disagree as to how the literary epiphany relates to human experience. In his 1999 article “Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney,” Ashton Nichols observes that “epiphanies offer textual moments when words record the mind’s ability to “mark” or “re-mark” certain cognitive events, or kinds of events,”<sup>33</sup> and later stresses the role of experience once again, claiming that “epiphany records the act of the mind noticing its own activity, commenting on its ability to perceive objects or experience emotions, remarking on its power to process the data of consciousness.”<sup>34</sup>

When defined in this way, epiphany portrays a complex phenomenon, and Nichols suggests that the attempts to appropriately investigate and systemize this phenomenon only within a narrowly conceived field of literary theory may prove not enough. Nichols’s suggestion is thus to widen the field of inquiry by probing and applying some of the ideas proposed by cognitive neuroscientists and cognitive linguists. Stressing the significance of memory for the studies of the literary moment, Nichols refers to the book *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* by Daniel L. Schacter. Schacter, according to Nichols, “points out the extent to which neurology is altering our understanding of what memory is and how it functions.”<sup>35</sup> Later in his article Nichols discusses Mark Turner’s *Reading Minds*, finding the idea of the embodied mind very significant also for the study of the phenomenon of epiphany. He quotes Turner as saying “analysis of acts of language, including literature, is composed of ‘acts of human brain in a human body in a human environment.’”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Nichols, “Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney,” p. 468.

<sup>34</sup> Nichols, “Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney,” p. 468.

<sup>35</sup> Nichols, “Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney,” p. 471.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Turner, *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (New York: Princeton, 1991), pp. vii-viii, quoted in: Nichols, “Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney,” p. 473.

This point of view is challenged by Maltby, who in *A Visionary Moment: A Postmodern Critique* claims the following:

As a literary convention, the visionary moment derives much of its credibility from the common belief that such moments are experienced in real life. Indeed, this belief is surely a factor in the survival of a convention which, from a postmodern perspective, looks so archaic. Thus, as a preliminary step in the critique of the use and implications of the moment as a literary convention, we must probe the assumption on which it partly rests: Are visionary moments experienceable outside of literature?<sup>37</sup>

Maltby later disproves the possibility of existence of the visionary moments in life using again the definition of epiphany he supplies himself. Again, the Moment is seen as necessarily resulting in acquiring “absolute” knowledge: “Neither should we confuse the sudden self-insight with the absolute or transcended self-knowledge typical of literary visionary moments,”<sup>38</sup> writes Maltby. In contrast, Nichols’s notion of the new epiphany does not entail the essentialist claims of Maltby’s visionary moment: it is only the “moment of inspiration” which is “absolute and determinate,” while “the significance provided by epiphany is relative and indeterminate.”<sup>39</sup> In Nichols’s approach those “sudden self-insights” Maltby dismisses as not “visionary” enough to be classified as visionary moments are often seen as epiphanies *par excellence* – as Nichols’s understanding of epiphany never excludes moments of keen, vivid perception that do not entail the epiphanee’s conviction of acquiring “transcended self-knowledge.” In *The Poetics of Epiphany* the critic estimates that “Wordsworth asks only for an intensified imaginative perception of this world. The meaning of such experience is open-ended; in a sense it is endless.”<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, for

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<sup>37</sup> Maltby, *The Visionary Moment*, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Maltby, *The Visionary Moment*, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 29.



Nichols, to reject the possibility of “epiphanic” insights in life is to reject the idea that the human mind is capable of attaching more emotional significance to certain moments-events than to others – and to question that would be an extraordinary claim.

In his article “Demonic Epiphanies: The Denial of Death in Larkin and Heaney,” discussing the negative epiphanies of death and dying in the work of the two poets in the light of postmodern theory, Jay Losey chooses what may be seen as a “middle ground” approach and expands the discussion on the complicated relationship between epiphany and postmodernism arguing that “a postmodern notion of epiphany exists, but [...] it cuts against the grain of postmodernism.”<sup>41</sup> Losey’s argument proposes that postmodernism transformed and significantly changed several aspects of the formerly practiced conventions shaping the epiphanic mode; nevertheless, the new, “postmodern” epiphanic is still acknowledged as thriving in the poetry of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Contrary to Malby’s assumptions, literary epiphany is not viewed as an instrument supposed to accentuate the possibility of acquiring certainty or absolute knowledge in an unpredictable world: according to Losey, 20<sup>th</sup> century poets often “employ a postmodern epiphanic mode to convey their deep mistrust of knowing.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, according to Losey, it is possible to view the 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century epiphanic mode not as essentially antagonistic to postmodernism, but, in its numerous manifestations, as one emphasizing the postmodern sense of mistrust.

The scholars who see the convention as outdated usually attempt to prove their point discussing contemporary prose. Thus, the demise of the epiphanic mode was announced by Miriam Marty Clark in her 1993 article “After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age.” Clark focuses on contemporary prose rather than poetry and sees the literary epiphany as distinctively Modernist. She claims that the

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<sup>41</sup> Losey, “Demonic Epiphanies: The Denial of Death in Larkin and Heaney,” p. 376.

<sup>42</sup> Losey, “Demonic Epiphanies: The Denial of Death in Larkin and Heaney,” p. 399.

literary epiphany may be today mistakenly seen as a device still desirable or even necessary because of the continuous popularity of certain aesthetic ideas originating in Modernism. These Modernist ideas, Clark maintains, are mistaken for a “timeless” characteristics of the genre of the short story. They induce critics to think that the strength of literature lies – or should lie – in its ability to convey the notion of the ineffable, unrepresentable or unwriteable. “Such views essentialize,” Clark writes, “what is arguably modern.”<sup>43</sup> To prove her point, Clark cites Jean-Francois Lyotard, who defines modern art as “the art which devotes its ‘little technical expertise’ [...] to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists. To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible.”<sup>44</sup> Concluding her argument, Clark warns that such “assimilation of modernist epistemology into definitions of the genre is doubly problematic for the critic of the contemporary short story.”<sup>45</sup> While this line of argument aptly illustrates the postmodern “incredulity” towards the epiphanic mode, it also quite rightfully asserts that literature is always subject to ever-changing literary aesthetics and fashions. So is the literary epiphany. Jiří Flajšar to some extent agrees with Clark when he claims that “[r]egardless of one’s position in this matter, the postmodern objections to the authority of the epiphanic mode will continue to shape the writing in this mode,”<sup>46</sup> and yet – reasonably, it seems – he finds the allegedly “postmodern” conclusions of the demise of the literary epiphany too hurried.

It is worth noting that Clark appears to share Malby’s conviction that a “proper” epiphany is a suspect all-encompassing near-mystical experience resulting in

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<sup>43</sup> Miriam Marty Clark, “After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age,” *Style*, Vol. 27, No. 3, Fall 1993, Questia Online Library, <http://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-15473873/after-epiphany-american-stories-in-the-postmodern> (6 Sept. 2014).

<sup>44</sup> Clark, “After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age,” Questia Online Library.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, “After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age,” Questia Online Library.

<sup>46</sup> Flajšar, “Is There a New Trend in Literary and Culture Criticism?,” p. 155.

acquiring absolute knowledge. Again, the implied definition may be one of the reasons why the critic rejects epiphany. She defines it as “the point of contact with meaning or wholeness,”<sup>47</sup> and though she accepts that the Modernist insights are often pessimistic in their nature and frequently result in alienation (as in *demonic epiphanies* (Frye, Losey) or Maltby’s *catastrophic moments*), she claims that contemporary, post-modern prose, as opposed to the Modernist practice, lacks (maybe even should lack) the “climactic insight into a truth about the human condition.”<sup>48</sup> Donald Barthelme and Robert Coover are given as two examples of postmodern writers who use “disruption, improbability, and modal discontinuity”<sup>49</sup> in their stories. Such contemporary stories seen from within a Modernist frame of reference, Clark claims, “seem mute, inert, inchoate.” Simultaneously, epiphany is no longer seen as an important and almost indispensable structuring device, as in the Modernist approach: for Clark, lack of structure becomes often itself a new organizing principle in postmodern stories.

While Clark’s observations on the absence of epiphany in those “self-conscious,” typically postmodern short stories are valid, it has to be remembered that there is another tendency in contemporary literature, one described by Jay Losey: when a writer consciously strives to make the tool of the literary epiphany fit the postmodern framework. This approach is especially valid for poetry and usually consists in a difficult, but valuable dialogue with earlier – Romantic, Victorian or Modernist – conventions. The epiphanic mode does not disappear, but it seems to move even further in the direction set by the Modernist mistrusts and disbeliefs; it also becomes more and more self-conscious. It is perplexing and paradoxical, and though the episodes it describes seem accidental and insignificant, they are still noticeable and

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<sup>47</sup> Clark, “After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age,” Questia Online Library.

<sup>48</sup> Clark, “After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age,” Questia Online Library.

<sup>49</sup> Clark, “After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age,” Questia Online Library.

not infrequently essential. “To what, then, could I have aspired in my craft?” asks Clark in the epigraph to her article, citing the words of the Italian postmodern architect Aldo Rossi, and she promptly offers his answer to the question: “Certainly to small things, having seen that the possibility of great ones was historically precluded.”<sup>50</sup> As in Paul Maltby’s argument, Clark’s epiphany is a “big,” semi-mystical experience threatening the postmodern commitment to relativity and heterogeneity, and its ethos is shown as almost a meta-narrative. However, it has to be pointed out that epiphany is a “small thing” almost by definition, at least by its most frequently invoked Joycean – unmistakably Modernist – definition: the mundane and the ordinary are often thought to be conventional vehicles of the epiphanic “flash.” This limiting concept of epiphany may be – as in Maltby’s case – one of the reasons why Clark, surprisingly, finds Raymond Carver’s prose anti-epiphanic, although Carver is one of the writers whose stories are most frequently analyzed in terms of the literary moment. Thus, it appears that one of the reasons why the contemporary literary studies occasionally announce the death of the epiphanic mode is not, as it is sometimes suggested, the fundamental disagreement between the philosophy of postmodernism and the claims made by the Moment, but rather the characteristics and definitions ascribed to the notion by critics.

In conclusion, however, it remains to be said that the literary epiphany indeed seems to “cut against the grain” of postmodernism – not because it postulates the existence of the Ineffable, the Certain, or the Absolute (though in some instances it may obviously attempt to direct the reader’s imagination in this direction), but, possibly, because it proves that literature has still the potential to engage a vast part of human psyche, to captivate imagination and to provoke a wide range of emotional

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<sup>50</sup> Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1981), p. 12, quoted in: Clark, “After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age,” *Questia Online Library*.

rather than intellectual responses. Epiphany usually does not agree well with postmodern irony, satire, playfulness or intellectual overanalyzing – it usually imparts seriousness and a sense of significance, and thus may be often legitimately seen as a concept or literary tool strongly related to the tradition of High Modernism. Nevertheless, it is likely to survive and evolve because its conventional templates do not limit the number of its possible creative transformations – after all, the Moment itself reflects the ability of the human mind to imaginatively transform experience and to reflect on this process.

## 1.2 Literary Epiphany Today: Aspects, Definitions, Classifications

What is, then, an *epiphany*? Over the years the word has come to describe various overlapping strategies of writing both in prose and poetry; similarly, the characteristics of the epiphany understood as an experience described in literary texts are often discussed, but rarely agreed upon among critics. Simultaneously, the Modernist, Joycean term *epiphany* is today often used almost interchangeably with the term *Moment* that has Romantic origins. In his article on the typology of literary epiphanies, Wim Tigges notes that in the past writers used diverse designations to name a similar phenomenon or the same literary device:

In the course of his book [*The Poetics of Epiphany*], Nichols demonstrates how Wordsworth's "spots of time" are modified in Coleridge's "phantasy," Shelley's "moment," Browning's "infinite moment" (or "good minute"), Yeats' "great moment," T. S. Eliot's "timeless moment," Pound's "image," Wallace Stevens's "moment of awakening" and Heaney's "revelation" [...]. To this list we may add, on the authority of Beja, Pater's "pauses in time" or "pulsations," Henry James's "sublime

instants,” Conrad’s “moment of vision,” and Virginia Woolf’s “frozen moment.”<sup>51</sup>

Ashton Nichols observes that “by now it should be obvious that the range of literary epiphanies [...] and the debate about what constitutes *epiphany* should be discussed in terms of Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance; that is, *epiphany* works less well as a word requiring generic definition and more effectively as a term that describes a cluster of related rhetorical practices.”<sup>52</sup> Fortunately, the practice of literary criticism shows that certain experiences or episodes are today more likely to be considered *epiphanies* than others; simultaneously, literary criticism to a certain extent delimits the usage of terms such as *literary epiphany* or *epiphanic mode*, describing a number of characteristic aspects of the literary practices to which these terms are often applied.

Before any characterization of *epiphany* is attempted, it is necessary to distinguish between the epiphany understood as a “psychological” phenomenon that is often described in literary texts and its textual equivalent, the literary epiphany – a literary mode that is to a significant degree shaped by convention. The definitions or descriptions characterizing the experience of epiphany as it is presented in literature often differ. For example, the critics who are mainly interested in the Modernist or Joycean epiphany may look for the origins of the epiphanic revelation exclusively in the ordinary and the commonplace, and thus, appropriating the term, sometimes insist on its restricted use. However, the term usually becomes more inclusive when it is used in the context of the development of the epiphanic mode in literary texts written from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on. Wim Tigges suggests that delimiting the scope of the

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<sup>51</sup> Wim Tigges, “Towards a Typology of Literary Epiphanies,” in: *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*, ed. Wim Tigges (Amsterdam/Atlanta: GA, 1999), p. 24.

<sup>52</sup> Nichols, “Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney,” p. 474.

definition is necessary, as allowing for too much latitude may effect in an unnecessary inclusion of dissimilar forms of experience that have little in common with what is usually considered the central aspects of epiphany-phenomenon: “should [our ultimate definition] include religious conversion, the *coup de foudre*, orgasm, *déjà vu*?<sup>53</sup> asks Tigges in his article.

Certain characteristics of epiphany understood as an experience are non-controversial: it is usually portrayed as a very brief, involuntary, sudden, unexpected and intense experience that consists in an unusual and significant transformation of information in the mind of the epiphanee. It is usually accepted that epiphany may originate in sensory or non-sensory information, though some critics insist that the sensory component (“the trigger”) must be present in order to talk about an epiphany. When it originates in sensory information, the epiphany-phenomenon is usually described as a brief and often life-transforming moment of heightened perception accompanied by an instantaneous mental recognition of the significance of what is being perceived. If we accept that epiphany may originate in non-sensory information (e.g., memories, dreams), epiphany consists in a sudden and unexpected transformation (processing) of this information. Such a transformation is also accompanied by epiphanee’s instantaneous recognition of the moment’s significance.

Although the term is popularly understood as a “sudden discovery,” it is often stressed that the Moment does not have to convey any specific knowledge. Ashton Nichols suggests that epiphany “does not convey knowledge; it produces a feeling that gradually becomes a conviction.”<sup>54</sup> Still, this “feeling,” although usually present, is not the sole constituent of the epiphanic “flash” (unless Nichols’s intended meaning of “feeling” was not “emotion,” but a more general “sensation”), as the response

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<sup>53</sup> Tigges, “Towards a Typology of Literary Epiphanies,” p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 79.

produced by the mind may take varied forms (visual, emotional, verbal, etc., or any combination of such forms). Although epiphany may sometimes result in a sudden realization (“insight”) that may be verbalized in the form of a statement or a question, such a well-defined recognition is not essential for every epiphany; it is rather the subjective significance of the episode as perceived by the epiphanees which is important and crucial.

One of the most frequently described and non-controversial features of the epiphany is also the perceived disparity and incongruity between the stimulus and the mind’s response to this stimulus. Typically, this response is perceived as unexpected and remarkable. This incongruity may be the reason why epiphany may be often seen as mystifying, irrational or inexplicable by the character or speaker who experiences it. While the degree in which such a lack of correlation is noticeable is relative, the episodes in which a strong emotional reaction is a predictable effect of, for example, a direct shocking statement are not considered epiphanies. Therefore, it appears that the disparity between the stimulus and the reaction is a very important feature of a “convincing” epiphany, also because this disparity is usually proportionate to the degree in which experience is imaginatively transformed in the involuntary “flash.”

Epiphany understood as a psychological experience is in literary studies usually seen through the lens of its descriptions in literature, and thus its characteristics and definitions rarely explore or invoke the physiological or biological aspects of the phenomenon. Some critics, as we have seen, may even assume that epiphany is merely a literary convention and thus may not exist “outside literature.”<sup>55</sup> Although others, for example Ashton Nichols,<sup>56</sup> are convinced that the practice of the literary moment may

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<sup>55</sup> Maltby, *The Visionary Moment*, p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> Nichols, “Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments: Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney,” p. 467-480.



be in many ways reflective and telling of the manner in which the human brain functions in its environment, the question whether epiphanies described in literature have their biological equivalents – or, to put it differently, whether it is possible to experience “epiphany” in one’s life – is not particularly important in the context of literary studies. The existing definitions of epiphany relate to the phenomenon as it is portrayed in literary texts, and such depictions are to a significant extent shaped and categorized by the existing convention. Such an approach is not unreasonable, as it is literature and the literary convention of epiphany that is usually studied, not human experience. It also appears that any possible connection between the phenomena described in literary texts and the various, supposedly similar phenomena that may be experienced by human subjects and studied by neuroscientists may be difficult to explore due to the nature of the literary concept of “epiphany” that may, by giving the name *epiphany* to diverse forms of experience described in literary texts, legitimize external similarities between phenomena that may be nevertheless seen by neuroscientists as only distantly or superficially related. Therefore, the definitions of the Moment quoted below usually place the “phenomenon” of epiphany in the context of literature, unless, as in the case of Joyce’s well-known description, such portrayals of the experience of epiphany are supplied by characters or speakers in non-academic texts.

In the frequently quoted passage from *Stephen Hero*, Joyce describes epiphany as “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself.”<sup>57</sup> Since 1970s the notion of epiphany has been frequently examined in literary criticism and various characterizations of the experience described in literature have been offered. In *Supernatural Naturalism* M. H.

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<sup>57</sup> Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, p. 211.

Abrams characterizes the Romantic moment, as it was described by many Romantic writers, as “a deeply significant experience in which an instant of consciousness, or else an ordinary object or event, suddenly blazes into revelation; the unsustainable moment [which] seems to arrest what is passing, and is often described as an intersection of eternity with time.”<sup>58</sup> In *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* Morris Beja rephrases Stephen Dedalus’s description, and adds two criteria every epiphany should, according to Beja, meet, defining it as “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind – the manifestation being out of proportions to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it.”<sup>59</sup> The criterion of incongruity Beja introduces means that “there is no epiphany unless the revelation is not strictly relevant to whatever produces it.”<sup>60</sup> As the powerful impact of epiphany and the absence of an obvious connection between the sensory components of the experience and the type or intensity of the epiphanees’s response indeed appear to be hallmarks of epiphany, the criterion of incongruity is uncontroversial.

Beja’s second criterion, the criterion of insignificance, requires of the stimulus in which epiphany originates to be relatively “trivial” or “insignificant.” This requirement seems to be directly related to the quality of “triviality” referred to in *Stephen Hero*,<sup>61</sup> and Beja admits that “in this quality lies one of the principal roots of the increasing use of epiphany in modern literature.”<sup>62</sup> For James Joyce it is indeed the ordinary, the everyday and the mundane that seem most epiphanic: “God is a shout in the street,” has the famous Stephen Dedalus’s dictum. Joyce’s influence proved to be

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<sup>58</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, p. 385.

<sup>59</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 18.

<sup>60</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 16.

<sup>61</sup> Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, p. 211. “This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies.”

<sup>62</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 17.

pervasive, and for many critics the very disparity between the “triviality” of the stimuli triggering the epiphanic response and this response itself is the trademark of the “true” epiphany. While, however, Beja’s criterion of incongruity is rarely questioned, the criterion of insignificance is often contested by those critics who see the literary epiphany as a convention that has continually evolved since Romanticism. The poetics of the commonplace and the ordinary certainly renders the Modernist epiphanic more spectacular and surprising by stressing the disparity between the stimulus and the response, yet at the same time the originality and perceived significance of the initial stimulus by no means preclude the Moment from becoming unanticipated and arresting. Martin Bidney openly rejects the constraint of insignificance as, according to Bidney, it “seems too rigid.”<sup>63</sup> “For example,” Bidney continues, “it would rule out Walter Pater’s red-yellow fire flowers, dazzling and brilliant in themselves, and manifestly epiphanic to Pater.”<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Bożena Shallcross finds the “triviality criterion” too strict, stating that it is “especially not valid in the case of artistic epiphanies, which originate in visual masterpieces.”<sup>65</sup> In Shallcross’s opinion, “the idea that trivial things produce epiphanies owes much to the prose of James Joyce and other modernists.”<sup>66</sup>

Literary descriptions of the phenomenon known as epiphany may also tell us in what circumstances epiphany is often thought to originate. Most epiphanies are triggered by direct sensory stimuli, although they may also sometimes be caused by “a memorable phase of the mind itself” suggested by Joyce, e.g., dreaming or reminiscing. When a specific external stimulus can be identified, it usually belongs to

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<sup>63</sup> Martin Bidney, *Patterns of Epiphany: From Wordsworth to Tolstoy, Pater, and Barrett Browning* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Bidney, *Patterns of Epiphany*, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Bożena Shallcross, *Through the Poet’s Eye: The Travels of Zagajewski, Herbert, and Brodsky* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2002), p. xvi.

<sup>66</sup> Shallcross, *Through the Poet’s Eye*, p. xvi.

one of the categories described by Wim Tigges: according to Tigges, epiphanies are usually related to, or prompted by a place, person, object or verbal perception.<sup>67</sup> Thus typical examples of the circumstances in which epiphanies arise may be encounters with strangers (e.g., in Wordsworth's poetry or Joyce's prose), being in a particular place (here Tigges gives the example of the rose garden in Eliot's *Four Quartets*), looking at a particular object or listening to a conversation. However, seeing that epiphanies are usually related to the observer's perception of something outside his or her mind, it is also possible to classify them according to the senses activated by particular stimuli. Such categorization makes it possible to account for the epiphanies triggered by involuntary memory and related to the sense of smell and sense of taste. Some epiphanies may be triggered by sensory information processed by two or more senses (e.g., rain pattering against a window).

The literary descriptions of the phenomenon often emphasize the sudden and transitory nature of epiphany. Moreover, Robert Langbaum's *criterion of suddenness* suggests that epiphany is always caused by "a sudden change in external conditions [that] causes a shift in sensuous perception that sensitizes the observer for epiphany."<sup>68</sup> While Langbaum's criterion appears unnecessarily rigid, the experience of epiphany, as it is described in literature, often involves such a "shift in sensuous perception."

Although some of the most convincing epiphanies are triggered by sudden changes in external conditions, they as often, it appears, originate in a "shift in sensuous perception" that is initiated by the epiphanee. One of the most frequently portrayed mechanisms of epiphany suggests that epiphanies often occur when a mental activity, usually one requiring a great deal of concentration, is suddenly interrupted. It is not surprising that this phenomenon was described by William Wordsworth, as

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<sup>67</sup> Tigges, "Towards a Typology of Literary Epiphanies," p. 28-30.

<sup>68</sup> Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," p. 44.

Wordsworth's poetry often portrays moments of acute perception preceded by an activity which involves "steady expectation" or "steady observation"<sup>69</sup>: "if this intense condition of vigilance should suddenly relax, at that moment any beautiful, any impressive visual object, or collection of objects, falling upon the eye, is carried to the heart with a power not known under other circumstances"<sup>70</sup> says the poet. While the connection between the activities requiring heightened concentration and the mind's ability to perceive and transform sensory information in an atypical way when such activities are suddenly interrupted may be effectively studied only by scientists, the descriptions of the phenomenon in literature suggest that even if such a connection does not exist, epiphany is often portrayed as occurring in these circumstances.

It is also important to distinguish between epiphanies related to the epiphanee's past experience and the phenomena in which the role of memory is insignificant. In *The Poetics of Epiphany* Ashton Nichols introduces the notions of the *proleptic epiphany* and the *adelonic epiphany*. According to Nichols, adelonic epiphanies originate in "powerful perceptions that are transformed immediately by the associative powers of the imagination,"<sup>71</sup> while proleptic epiphanies occur when "the mind, in response to a present predisposition, transforms a past experience to produce a new sense of significance."<sup>72</sup> Nichols's division is usually accepted as one of the most basic distinctions.

The literary epiphany is of course distinct from the phenomenon it frequently describes. It is a literary practice ("epiphanic mode") which, according to critics such as Beja, Nichols or Maltby, has been in regular use since Romanticism. In "Cognitive

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<sup>69</sup> Thomas de Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 160-61, quoted in: Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," p. 53.

<sup>70</sup> De Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, p. 160.

<sup>71</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 74.

<sup>72</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 74.

and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments: Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney” Ashton Nichols defines epiphanies (“phenomena”) as “powerful moments in which the mind records its own activity of linking a powerful sensory experience to a memorable emotion.”<sup>73</sup> Therefore the literary epiphany, according to Nichols, “records a moment of heightened and self-reflexive cognitive awareness.”<sup>74</sup>

Most critics maintain that the literary epiphany usually consists in a literary presentation of the epiphanic moment, yet at the same time they agree that this description conventionally seeks to create in the reader a response that to a certain extent imitates the predicted impact of the epiphany understood as a psychological phenomenon. Nichols describes this important aspect of the technique as follows: “literary epiphany is used by authors to show one way that the verbal imagination operates, by heightening a perception through language to suggest psychic intensity and emotional importance.”<sup>75</sup> Losey emphasizes the function of the literary epiphany by stressing that “the most successful epiphanies occur in the reader’s imagination, empowering writers to establish an intimacy between character and reader.”<sup>76</sup> Simultaneously, Losey notes that “modern writers include the transformation of an experience or event into a highly charged moment of self-awareness, the successful dramatization of that experience, enabling readers to participate in the moment.”<sup>77</sup> Robert Langbaum makes this aspect a defining feature of the literary epiphany and looks for the origins of the epiphanic mode in the poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, stating that “we need the term [*epiphany*] to understand one line of innovation in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature.”<sup>78</sup> To prove his point, Langbaum quotes the opening

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<sup>73</sup> Nichols, “Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney,” p. 478.

<sup>74</sup> Nichols, “Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney,” p. 468.

<sup>75</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Losey, “Demonic Epiphanies: The Denial of Death in Larkin and Heaney,” p. 379.

<sup>77</sup> Losey, “Demonic Epiphanies: The Denial of Death in Larkin and Heaney,” pp. 379-80.

<sup>78</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 43.

lines of William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence," suggesting that it is essential to distinguish "between Blake, who makes statements about epiphany, and his younger contemporaries Wordsworth and Coleridge, who create structures that produce epiphanies in the reader."<sup>79</sup> Ashton Nichols observes that epiphany "is always put into words as a poem or prose narrative, and a major part of its function is the sharing of the experience with the author's readers."<sup>80</sup> Sandra Humble Johnson also defines the literary epiphany in terms of its intended impact on the reader:

The major difference between the epiphany and the vision in post-Wordsworthian terms is the engagement of the reader: the literary epiphany works upon the reader, forcing him into an experienced moment, while the vision is a literary moment experienced or "read" by the reader from what could be deemed the "outside" of the moment.<sup>81</sup>

The whole process of "creating structures that produce epiphanies in the reader" is, of course, complex. Joyce's literary alter-ego, Stephen Dedalus, believed that "it was for the man of letters to *record* [emphasis mine] those epiphanies with extreme care," suggesting that the literary epiphany is usually inspired by an involuntary mind-event that took place in the mind of the author. In his essay "Vorticism," Ezra Pound also refers to the act of "recording" while commenting on his poem "In a Station of the Metro": "In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective,"<sup>82</sup> writes the poet. The essay describes the problems Pound had to face when he tried to write a poem describing his experience. This experience, as reported by Pound in his essay, appears to have been an involuntary act

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<sup>79</sup> Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," p. 43.

<sup>80</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 231.

<sup>81</sup> Sandra Humble Johnson, *The Space Between: The Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie Dillard* (Kent, Ohio and London, England: The Kent State UP, 1992), p. 13.

<sup>82</sup> Ezra Pound, "Vorticism," in: Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 89.

of heightened, transformed perception of a scene and thus, seeing how epiphany is usually defined, may be seen as a type of an epiphany-phenomenon experienced in one's life. However, in the same essay Pound addresses the issue which may be even more important in the context of literary studies than the question asking to what degree epiphanies may be inspired by their authors' experience: whether a description of a mental event may create in the reader a response that in its intensity and form approximates the response envisaged by the author. Pound expresses his reservations as to whether the sole act of "recording" is always sufficient to produce the desired effect upon every reading: "I dare say it [the poem "In a Station of the Metro"] is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought."<sup>83</sup>

To account for this feature of the literary epiphany, Robert Langbaum introduces his *criterion of fragmentation or the epiphanic leap*: "the text never equals the epiphany; the poetry, as Browning put it, consists in the reader's leap."<sup>84</sup> Talking about the "reader's leap," Langbaum refers to Browning's letter to Ruskin, and – probably – to the passage in which Browning explains why language is not and cannot be transparent to the reader:

I *know* that I don't make out my conception by my language,  
all poetry being a putting in infinite within the finite. You  
would have me paint it all plain out, which can't be; but by  
various artifices I try to make shift with touches and bits of  
outlines which *succeed* if they bear the conception from me to  
you.<sup>85</sup>

The two poets suggest that a successful literary moment requires cooperation between the writer and the reader: while the writer's responsibility is to "translate" the experienced or imagined privileged moment into words with the Joycean "extreme

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<sup>83</sup> Pound, "Vorticism," p. 89.

<sup>84</sup> Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," p. 44.

<sup>85</sup> Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley, *Browning: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), pp. 14-15.



care,” he has achieved his aim only when it is possible for the readers to ultimately experience the “epiphanic” intensity of the described event. Ashton Nichols describes this process as follows:

Epiphanies are neither visionary nor mystical nor rare. They are, in Wordsworth’s phrase, scattered everywhere. They are vivid transformations of perception that intrude on the poet’s ordinary perceptual consciousness as a result of the poet’s willingness to feel deeply about the details of ordinary experience. The poet often does not do so consciously, which accounts for the extrasensory quality that may be attributed to these moments. The emotion attached to the epiphany presents a value that is left to the reader to interpret. The recipient may suggest, but never delimits, the meaning of the experience.<sup>86</sup>

Whether or not literary epiphanies always originate in such involuntary “transformations of perception that intrude on the poet’s ordinary perceptual consciousness” is not obvious (although Nichols appears to suggest that they in fact do not have to be in every respect involuntary, resulting from “the poet’s willingness to feel deeply about the details of ordinary experience”). While this issue is related to a more general, complex problem of the relationship between literature and experience, it is probably interesting to note that one of the poets who saw the origin of many of their literary moments in sudden “epiphanies,” involuntary acts of intense perception they themselves experienced, was W. B. Yeats. At least three poems, “The Cold Heaven,” “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” and “The Magi,” are thought to be inspired by such sudden transformations of the poet’s perception. The momentary “visions” that were later alluded to in “The Cold Heaven” and “The Magi” originated in two acts of observation of the sky, while the involuntary flashback that inspired “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” was, according to Yeats, prompted by water flowing down a toy fountain in a shop window in London.

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<sup>86</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 28.

One of the problems in qualifying the literary epiphany as such is related to the epiphany/vision distinction. As has been said, the epiphany-phenomenon, although usually triggered by sensory information, may sometimes originate in dreams or memories. Still, those critics who see epiphanies primarily as phenomena related to sensory perception may insist on the obligatory presence of a sensory component of the experience even in the case of the proleptic epiphany, which transforms past experience. For example, the famous passage describing the sudden involuntary recollection of a situation that took place in childhood in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), where the involuntary memory is triggered by a madeleine cake, is considered a typical subcategory of the proleptic epiphany: the epiphany of "the past recaptured."<sup>87</sup> Yeats's "epiphany," in which the poet's childhood memories are triggered off by the sound of flowing water, belongs to the same type. If the condition of the presence of the sensory stimulus is not fulfilled, some critics may be inclined to talk about a vision, not epiphany. However, it is usually accepted that the proleptic epiphany may also assume the form of a "sudden sensation of new awareness upon recall of an event at first ignored."<sup>88</sup> In this case the presence of a sensory stimulus does not appear necessary, as the involuntary, "epiphanic" component of the experience is "the sudden sensation of new awareness," not the recollected situation itself (this situation might have been recollected suddenly or not, voluntarily or not, prompted by an easily identifiable sensory stimulus or not). It appears, then, that the core aspect of the epiphany-phenomenon consists in a sudden, unusual and involuntary transformation of the information present in the mind of the epiphanee. Epiphany may be constituted, and usually is, by an act of intense perception triggered by sensory information, but the usage of the term *epiphany* should not, it

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<sup>87</sup> Tigges, "Towards a Typology of Literary Epiphanies," p. 27.

<sup>88</sup> Tigges, "Towards a Typology of Literary Epiphanies," p. 27.

appears, be restricted to such episodes, otherwise we risk unnecessary exclusion of the experiences whose mechanism is very similar and whose literary descriptions often follow the same conventions.

However, even when one nevertheless accepts that epiphany *has to* originate in sensory information, the problem may return when the reader of, say, Joyce's prose turns to poetry. Especially in poetry, also in Joyce's poetic pieces *Epiphanies*,<sup>89</sup> the literary presentations of moments of heightened perception are not always complete or chronological accounts and the details concerning the identity of the speaker and his or her immediate surroundings are often withheld from the reader. Apart from the obvious "suspects" when the epiphany is described in terms of an experience directly triggered by a sensory stimulus that is easily recognizable in the text, as is often the case with Wordsworth's moments of recognition, whether the character or speaker actually experiences the sensory stimuli or just recalls, dreams about or imagines the presence of the visual, auditory or other components setting off the epiphany is not always clear. Langbaum, discussing Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "The Windhover," notes that depending on the reader's choice as to whether the windhover is actually observed or only an idea pondered on by the speaker, we may read the poem as an epiphany or a metaphysical poem:

Hopkins' sonnet "The Windhover" raises an interesting problem of interpretation. If we make the subtitle "To Christ Our Lord" apply from the beginning and read the bird throughout as an emblem of Christ, we have the extended conceit of a metaphysical poem. But if, as seems more likely, we read the bird as really observed, we have a Romantic nature

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<sup>89</sup> James Joyce, "The Epiphanies," in: James Joyce. *Utwory Poetyckie. Wydanie Dwujęzyczne*, trans. Maciej Słomczyński (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1975), pp. 39-64. Surprisingly, it is usually not the case with Joyce's poetic epiphanies. Although James Joyce's epiphanies in *Dubliners* and in *A Portrait* are usually triggered by external agents, Joyce also wrote several short "dream epiphanies," prose passages (usually not exceeding 160 words) describing short episodes or situations where such external stimuli are not necessarily present. These prose passages were published as "The Epiphanies" in James Joyce's *Poems and Shorter Writings*.

poem; and it is only in the moment of epiphany, when the falcon gains power through buckling and diving, that he is transformed for the poet-priest into an emblem of Christ, who gained power through a downward movement into martyrdom: “Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!”<sup>90</sup>

Still, ultimately Langbaum finds the poem epiphanic not only because he assumes that the bird is observed by the speaker, but mainly because

[t]he analogy is emotional not logical, since the observer stops short of considering the purpose of the bird’s dive; that is why we have epiphany, not conceit. Epiphany and conceit exclude each other.<sup>91</sup>

Considering the above problems with the interpretation of Hopkins’s sonnet, the following question may be posed: Should the presence of sensory stimuli in a literary presentation of an episode be required in classifying this description as a literary moment? Langbaum introduces his *criterion of psychological association* by insisting that “epiphany is not an incursion of God from outside; it is a psychological phenomenon arising from a real *sensuous* experience, either present or recollected.”<sup>92</sup> This probably means that Langbaum does not rule out the possibility of epiphany being “entirely” a product of imagination, a “memorable phase of the mind itself” suggested by Joyce and repeated in Beja’s definition, as even such “memorable phases of the mind itself,” activities related to reminiscing, imagining and dreaming, may be traced back to the elementary sensory information in which they had to originate. Langbaum is conscious of how limiting his definition may often prove and he expresses his reservation, interestingly, invoking Yeats’s poem “Leda and the Swan,” and then considers the inclusion of the category of *visionary epiphanies*:

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<sup>90</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 57.

<sup>91</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 57.

<sup>92</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 44. Emphasis supplied.

“Leda and the Swan” raises a problem, however, for my definition of epiphany, in that there is no observer on the scene, so that we must read the poem as visionary. Yet the vision is so sensuously conceived as to make an effect unlike that of traditional visions and like that of modern realistic epiphanies (which are themselves sensuously vivid fictions); I am tempted therefore to suggest a category of visionary epiphanies.<sup>93</sup>

It appears that Langbaum’s criterion of psychological association, especially when we look at it in the context of the critic’s discussion of the Yeats sonnet, may merely suggest that epiphany should constitute a credible and persuasive description of human experience (“Epiphany is not an incursion of God from outside”), and it is probably for this reason that Langbaum insists on the convincing description of the circumstances prompting the epiphany.

Joyce’s epiphanies in prose and Wordsworth’s spots of time are often seen as model examples of the literary moment in literature mainly owing to the significance of Wordsworth’s and Joyce’s contribution to the development of the convention, but probably also because they usually present the episode leading to the epiphany in its entirety and in a very detailed manner. Nevertheless, to always insist on the all-encompassing, comprehensive portrayal of this exact structure or pattern, including the presence of the sensory “trigger,” would probably prove too limiting in poetry. According to Beja and Nichols, the epiphanic mode makes use of diverse portrayals of certain “marked” cognitive events in order to structure the text by giving more prominence to the chosen fragments; it also aims to engage the reader. Unlike in prose, in poetry – and this is particularly relevant to Modernist and later poetry, often fragmented, irregular, discontinuous and oblique – such meticulous “setting the scene,” involving introducing the speaker and pointing to the specific nature of the

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<sup>93</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 58.

stimulus or stimuli setting off the epiphany, may sometimes substantially affect the poem's form and weaken the poem's effect, especially when the preconceived impact of the poem's literary moment is to be paired with the terseness of the poem's form. Therefore, it appears, while this complete structure of the "epiphanic episode" is often preserved and reflected in longer narrative poems that feature a distinct, recognizable speaker-observer (Wordsworth, Coleridge) and in Modernist prose (e.g., in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Dubliners*), shorter poems frequently make use of the malleable substance of the lyrical form to construct literary moments that convey a sense of significance and a sense of sudden discovery, but not necessarily feature a recognizable epiphanee. Often, they only sketchily, if at all, evoke the specific circumstances accompanying or prompting the epiphany. The latter approach to writing in the epiphanic mode appears to be increasingly common in twentieth-century poetry and later, and in one of its most extreme and earliest forms may be represented by Ezra Pound's *haiku* poems, such as the famous two-line poem "In a Station of the Metro." This category also extends to such "visionary" poems as the aforementioned Langbaum's example, "Leda and the Swan." Although the sonnet presents its insight without introducing an identifiable, first-person speaker or character, it constitutes a very convincing portrayal of a human mind processing the information it acquired, as it culminates in an instant of a sudden and startling recognition. Consequently, rather than insist on the strict use of the criteria such as Langbaum's criterion of psychological association, it is probably better to accept that the modern epiphany is a presentation of "a powerfully felt moment which occurs nonrationally"<sup>94</sup> and describes this moment in the manner suggesting "intensity and

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<sup>94</sup> Nichols, "Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney," pp. 379-80. The adverb "nonrationally" is here suggestive of the quality described by Beja's criterion of incongruity: "there is no epiphany unless the revelation is not strictly relevant to whatever produces it."

emotional importance.”<sup>95</sup> Simultaneously, the poetics of the literary moment places the acts of mind it presents in the context of credible human experience. As a literary technique, the Moment also reveals “the mind’s ability to value its experience and to record that valuation in language.”<sup>96</sup>

Epiphanic mode aims thus at portraying minds “caught in the act” of processing information in a manner considered unusual or unexpected and aspires to do so in a particularly vivid, convincing way. This definition will be an important point of reference in the chapters discussing Yeats’s poetry (Chapters III-V) and was the main criterion according to which the poems were selected.

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<sup>95</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 5.

<sup>96</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 46.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LITERARY MOMENT: AN INTERPRETATIVE OVERVIEW**

The development of the literary convention of epiphany over time reflects how differently the “privileged moment” was approached and portrayed by writers and poets living in different epochs and societies. The content of the epiphanic “flash,” its implied interpretation and emotional impact, the diverse circumstances in which the phenomenon could occur, and, last but not least, the literary forms those authors chose to describe the Moment were to a vast extent contingent on the type of culture and ideas that shaped a particular time, including these authors’ own, new ideas. The manner in which the presentation of the epiphanic “flash” changes is closely related to what an epoch, or a period stands for and how it pronounces its different hopes, allegiances and fears. As the various representations of epiphany are also determined by earlier conventions of writing in the epiphanic mode, the new idiom adopted by writers who used the technique was usually formed in the dialogue between the novel ideas and such earlier conventions.

In this chapter I shortly outline the development of the convention as seen from the perspective of such new ideas and literary fashions of the day that could influence writing in the epiphanic mode in a given time. This unavoidably rather brief survey of how the convention changed may later help locate Yeats’s distinctive voice against the



background of the literary practices that have been shaping the literary moment since the publication of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. It may also help determine which practices or ideas related to the conventions of the literary moment Yeats often reflected – and sometimes chose not to reflect – in his diverse presentations of epiphany and thus help identify those elements of Yeats's strategies of writing in the epiphanic mode that were particularly novel and original.

It is often assumed that certain characteristic traits of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century epiphany-experience, as portrayed in prose and poetry of the time, evolved from the different textual practices related to portraying various types of experience interpreted as a revelation of the supernatural or a manifestation of God. Thus *theophany* is often seen as a predecessor of the present-day *epiphany*.<sup>97</sup> Although attributed to the divine intervention – to God, angels or divine messengers, especially in Judeo-Christian tradition – and thus, according to Ashton Nichols, qualifying as theophanies,<sup>98</sup> those “divine manifestations” share many important characteristics with their modern secular equivalent. For example, fire or light often accompanies Biblical visions, both in the Old Testament and the Gospels: in his vision, Moses sees a burning bush, the Star of Bethlehem prepares the Magi for their *Epiphany*, light blinds St Paul on his way to Damascus and the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles in the form of tongues of fire. Later, Christian mystics will often speak of light or fire appearing in their visions – Blaise Pascal's famous description of his mystical experience begins with the word *feu*. And while the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnesses the birth of the Romantic epiphany with its much less violent language, fire and light often remain a vehicle of the epiphanic significance. There are other similarities: both religious theophany and the modern-day

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<sup>97</sup> Views expressed by, for example, Ashton Nichols in *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment* and Wim Tigges in his article “The Significance of Trivial Things: Towards a Typology of Literary Epiphanies.”

<sup>98</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 169.

epiphany often involve an unusual, distorted perception of time: one second may seem like “ages” or one hour like a second. Moreover, the modern-day “moment” is often described as a time of blessing that may bring about profound transformation. Although Ashton Nichols suggests the possible influence of ancient Greek tradition and invokes Frank Kermode’s distinction between *Kairos* and *Chronos*,<sup>99</sup> *Kairos* being the blessed time of such a mystical experience or epiphanic moment, this characteristic may still be in a significant degree shaped by the Christian tradition.

Contemporary writers may not be mystics, but they often make use of diverse elements of the orthodox theophany and do so for different reasons: for example, to play with convention. And although the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary epiphanies play with the classic notion of theophany in varying degrees, the religious trope still remains one of the most frequently invoked. In Romantic poetry several of Wordsworth’s epiphanies retain a sense of the transcendent, mystical communion with God, while in her poem “I Heard a Fly Buzz – When I Died,” Emily Dickinson plays with the notion of the final revelation of death, “when the King / be Witnessed – in the Room,”<sup>100</sup> introducing her sinister epiphany of a fly filling the consciousness of the dying person with its menacing drone. Years later, James Joyce’s very choice of the word *epiphany* and the writer’s appropriation of other religious terms in his aesthetic philosophy are symptomatic of the same Christian, “spiritual” frame of reference. Joyce formulates his idea of epiphany in the juxtaposition of two types of “spirituality”: one of them is the traditionally Catholic faith in which Joyce was brought up and which he abandoned, the other – the “spirituality” of the liberated artist whose only idol is art. Unlike Joyce, in his later poetry T. S. Eliot often pledges his

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<sup>99</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 24.

<sup>100</sup> Emily Dickinson, “[I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died],” in: Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, New York and London: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), p. 465.

strong allegiance to the Christian heritage, yet his depiction of transformative “moments” is often marked by the Modernist sense of loss, expressing disbelief in the possibility of immediate relief. Finally, elements of traditional religious experience are often brought into play in literature in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the literature usually classified as postmodern writing. In Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* the heroine of the story, Oedipa Mass, experiences a series of quasi-mystical insights whose description draws in part on the imagery of religious experience (the Word/*Logos*, litany, etc.):

The voices before and after the dead man’s that had phoned at random during the darkest, slowest hours, searching ceaseless among the dial’s ten million possibilities for that magical Other who would reveal herself out of the roar of relays, monotone litanies of insult, filth, fantasy, love whose brute repetition must someday call into being the trigger for the unnameable act, the recognition, the Word.<sup>101</sup>

The prevailing paradigm of the strictly religious, *theophanic* content of the privileged moment as portrayed in literary and non-literary texts is seriously challenged in Romanticism. The literary moment in Romantic poetry begins to show the influence of several factors shaping the culture of early Romanticism – one of these factors is the influence of the concept of the sublime. Although Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was published in the middle of the eighteenth century – in 1757, Wordsworth’s early poetry, especially his poems published in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, is often concerned with the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime. Wordsworth’s Romantic epiphany is not placeless; the “moments” are usually inspired by earthly, material things, elements of natural landscapes: the sky, mountains, ruins, light or vegetation.

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<sup>101</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), p. 180.

Typically, the revelations the Moment brings are not attributed to divine intervention, though they may often be suggestive of a supernatural order, and the impact of the experience is closely linked to the epiphanee's ability to feel, dream or imagine.

Beauty, often the beauty of nature, regularly becomes the source of the "epiphanic" sensibility in Romantic poetry, yet the potential of the sublime is even more promising. According to Burke's *Enquiry*,

[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>102</sup>

Burke qualifies that "[w]hen danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience."<sup>103</sup>

Burke's *Enquiry* may not be the first treatise on the concept of the sublime – the sublime was discussed in antiquity by Longinus – but in Burke's *Enquiry* the term is used not only to describe lofty, elevated speech (as in Longinus), but mainly to designate the various sources of the "strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling." As strong emotion is one of epiphany's hallmarks and epiphanies usually originate in sensory stimuli, the early Romantic interpretation of the notion of the sublime stands very close to epiphany. Therefore it is not surprising that it shapes to a

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<sup>102</sup> Edmund Burke, "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful with an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste, and Several Other Additions," in: *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, Vol. I*, The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, Vol. I. (of 12), by Edmund Burke, release date: March 27, 2005 [EBook #15043], [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm#a\\_philosophical\\_inquiry](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm#a_philosophical_inquiry) (6 Sept. 2014). Emphasis original.

<sup>103</sup> Burke, "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," Project Gutenberg EBook.

significant degree the Romantic literary moment and determines the character of its departure from religious theophany. The sublime is very closely linked to the notion of grandeur or infinity, which makes it a new interesting source of the epiphanic significance but, paradoxically, also suggests its affinity to spiritual experience: “Magnificence, which involves a great profusion of things splendid or valuable in themselves, is sublime, and is exemplified in the starry heavens, whose apparent disorder augments their grandeur.”<sup>104</sup> In *Patterns of Epiphany* Martin Bidney defines epiphany as “a moment that is felt to be expansive, mysterious, and intense,”<sup>105</sup> adding that “‘expansiveness’ implies that the moment in question seems to mean much more than its limitedness in time and space might warrant.”<sup>106</sup> Apart from the criteria of intensity and expansiveness, both related to the notion of the sublime, the third condition – mysteriousness – is also related. The sublime is, according to Burke, obscure, indistinct: “In reality, a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sorts an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever.”<sup>107</sup>

Although the tradition of celebrating the ordinary as the raw material of epiphany is often seen as originating in Modernism, the artist’s belief in the value of the ordinary and its important role in the creation of “moments” can be dated back to Romanticism. In the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* William Wordsworth explains how “ordinary things” or “situations from common life” may become significant for a vigilant observer:

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a

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<sup>104</sup> Burke, “A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,” Project Gutenberg EBook.

<sup>105</sup> Bidney, *Patterns of Epiphany*, p. 3.

<sup>106</sup> Bidney, *Patterns of Epiphany*, p. 2.

<sup>107</sup> Burke, “A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,” Project Gutenberg EBook.

selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect [...].<sup>108</sup>

Wordsworth's ordinary, though, is to be found far away from big cities: "Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity,"<sup>109</sup> says the poet in the "Preface." The perfect Romantic moment is sought for in solitude, and solitude itself is desirable. The Wordsworthian epiphanic is often inspired by mountains, lakes, ruins, isolated spots and places of local lore, where the solitary walker seems to be on the hunt for the classical Burkean sublime, frequently taking delight in all that is immense, awe- or terror-inspiring. The city life does not seem to possess the same appeal, and yet it is "in lonely rooms, and mid the din / Of towns and cities" where the awe-inspiring places and events may be recollected and thus may comfort the speaker. Simultaneously, the city is recognized as a disordered, chaotic place that may confuse or depress its inhabitants unless they are ready to actively absorb themselves in the act of perceiving and thus become able to see "the parts / As parts, but with a feeling of the whole":

Oh, blank confusion! true epitome  
 Of what the mighty City is herself,  
 To thousands upon thousands of her sons,  
 Living amid the same perpetual whirl  
 Of trivial objects, melted and reduced  
 To one identity, by differences  
 That have no law, no meaning, and no end –  
 Oppression, under which even highest minds  
 Must labour, whence the strongest are not free.

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<sup>108</sup> William Wordsworth, "The Prelude; Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind," in: William Wordsworth, *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994), p. 828.

<sup>109</sup> William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1800), in: William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, Volume 1*, eds W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 144.

But though the picture weary out the eye  
 By nature an unmanageable sight,  
 It is not wholly so to him who looks  
 In steadiness, who hath among least things  
 An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts  
 As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.<sup>110</sup>

This passage, surprisingly, anticipates the Modernist inclination to see the modern life as fragmented, almost “a heap of broken images”<sup>111</sup> from Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. This modern “City” is conceived of as indifferent and chaotic, reminding the reader of Eliot’s bleak visions of London, though, obviously, Wordsworth’s City is not marked by the stigma of World War I. Ultimately, however, it is possible for the speaker to go beyond the trivialities and sorrows of the everyday in an attempt to experience a unifying vision. Still, although the exuberant imagination of the genuine Romantic poet never obeys the disheartening call of reality, the city rarely becomes the source of epiphanic sensibility in Romantic poetry. Wordsworth’s poetic practice also repeatedly proves that it is the impulse to escape modernity and civilization that usually triumphs and gives inspiration for the poet’s epiphanic mode.

Apart from the fascination with the sublime and the predilection for natural beauty that profoundly influence the Romantic imagination, the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century epiphanic mode is marked by specifically Romantic sensitivity and spirituality. The Romantic hero is a vagrant searching for a mythical land of plenty and believing in the existence of the ideal. The joy of the quest he undertakes may be occasionally spoilt by exhaustion and weariness, but not by lack of expectation. The visions and the blessings are to be found in solitude and silence, be it the manifestations of the Imagination, the Emersonian Oversoul, the transcendent Beyond, God or revelations of the sublime.

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<sup>110</sup> Wordsworth, “The Prelude; Or, Growth of a Poet’s Mind,” in: Wordsworth, *The Collected Poems*, pp. 827-828.

<sup>111</sup> T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in: T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London and Boston: Faber, 1963), p. 63.

The commotion of modern life is avoided not only because solitude is so important, but also because of the conviction that what is most desired is most difficult to attain and should be sought for in very distant locations (both in space and, figuratively, in time) – lasting happiness and spiritual fulfilment are almost never expected to be found “here” or “now.”

The character of the spiritual pursuit in Romanticism is well illustrated by the German concepts of *Sehnsucht* and the *Blaue Blume*. While Novalis’s *Blue Flower* is a symbol of a chase after something which is beyond attainment, *Sehnsucht* expresses Romantic longing, being a paradoxical mixture of joy, desire, unfulfilment and nostalgia. Not surprisingly, however, when life is conceived of as a never-ending journey towards the Ideal, the “small” epiphanic moments and “spots of time” signposting the road become particularly significant. They are usually seen as liberating, life-changing episodes, yet the bliss they suggest does not really belong to the present time. The frequently discussed literary moment at the end of Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight,” where shining icicles become a locus of the revelatory, is a vivid premonition of future happiness – not the speaker’s, however, but the speaker’s young son’s. Wordsworth’s spots of time frequently originate in childhood memories and although the past itself cannot be brought back, they may still transform the epiphanees’ adult life. The Romantic epiphany is often inspired by trifles, and though its promises are not always spectacular, it is offered to everyone and is to be found everywhere. As a literary mode, epiphany becomes successful because it appeals to everyone’s experience, portraying in detail well-known situations or objects and familiar landscapes, and at the same time seems to persuade the reader that the ordinary man in the street may be almost as capable of spiritual elation – or spiritual fear – as a religious mystic.



Romanticism's faith ends with the beginning of the age of rapidly growing industrialization and although the poetics of the literary moment does not disappear, it becomes less bound by earlier, Romantic conventions and approaches. Many Victorian poets use the epiphanic mode to express the need to escape industrialization or to escape the changes in society, others – to reintroduce religious themes, as does Tennyson in his well-known poem "Crossing the Bar." A very novel and distinctive approach to the poetics of epiphany characterizes the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins, a Catholic priest, sees the natural world as testifying to God's presence in the universe, thus – considering the content of those manifestations – his "moments" appear purely religious, theophanic rather than epiphanic. However, the divine order is in Hopkins's poetry often revealed in the elements of the physical world, often inanimate objects, through the qualities of *inscape* and *instress*, which brings Hopkins closer to the practitioners of the epiphanic mode than to mystics. As noted by Nichols and Langbaum, a distinctive variation of the literary moment becomes a hallmark of much of Robert Browning's work, and is of particular importance in Browning's dramatic monologues, in which detailed description often leads to character revelation. Browning's epiphanic mode is frequently seen as an important forerunner of the Modernist epiphany in prose.

While Hopkins and Tennyson, choosing the themes of God and religion, often manage to escape the anxieties of the age of industrialization and Browning often places his characters against historical rather than contemporary backgrounds, many writers who acknowledge the significance of life-changing transitory moments must at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century grapple with the disquietudes of modern life. Still – and not surprisingly – many artists accept the challenge and begin to explore the potential of urban space, as if asking questions whether or not this newly-discovered space is

capable of becoming the source of the new sublime. The presence of fellow human beings in the streets is significant and provides new stimuli for those looking for new forms of artistic expression. The amount of detail to be found on every corner of the street further embeds the epiphanic experience in the ordinary and the everyday, paving the way to what is perceived as the most archetypal Modernist “moment” in literature written in the English language – the Joycean epiphany.

Celebrating every moment of living in a big city becomes one of recurrent themes in Walt Whitman’s poetry as early as in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though much of Whitman’s poetry is said to be inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s philosophy, Whitman is not always the typical Transcendentalist looking for spiritual experience in uninhabited places. Emerson echoes the admirers of the Burkean sublime and English Romanticists when he confesses: “I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.”<sup>112</sup> While Emerson, much in the spirit of Jonathan Edwards, boldly asserts in “Nature” that solitude is essential for one’s spiritual health and that “to go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society,”<sup>113</sup> Whitman’s metaphysics calls for a stroll through the crowded streets of Manhattan:

Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than  
 mast-hemm’d Manhattan?  
 River and sunset and scallop-edg’d waves of flood-tide?  
 The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the  
 twilight, and the belated lighter?

What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices I  
 love call me promptly and loudly by my nighest name as I approach?

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<sup>112</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1836), p. 13.

<sup>113</sup> Emerson, *Nature*, p. 9.

What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that  
 looks in my face?  
 Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?<sup>114</sup>

Whitman repeatedly admits that the appeal of urban space does not consist in the beauty of architectural forms or the glamour of other inanimate objects: it is the presence of humans that enlivens Whitman's "city of tall façades of marble and iron,"<sup>115</sup> making it a surprising counterpart to the Thoreauvian refuge. Whitman's New York is a city of passing strangers where the figure of the stranger becomes a symbol of communication and connectedness, making the metropolis both a sanctuary and a place of sensual pleasure. The figure of the stranger is also symbolic of the interconnectedness of all people, including past and future generations, and, often, of the author-reader relationship:

Stranger, if you, passing, meet me and desire to speak to me,  
 why should you not speak to me?

And why should I not speak to you?<sup>116</sup>

Whitman's *flaneur*, though he breaks with the Romantic tradition of preferring the wild or the rural to the urban, is still the optimistic Transcendentalist who believes in the transformative, positive impact of every fleeting experience, and – this attitude is particularly evident in *Leaves of Grass* – in lasting happiness. Still, two years after *Leaves of Grass* had made Whitman's name famous throughout America, a European poet published a highly influential volume of verse in which the figure of an urban stroller, though as prominent as in Whitman's poetry, was presented differently. This author was Charles Baudelaire, who in 1857 published *Flowers of Evil* and in the

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<sup>114</sup> Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," in: Walt Whitman, *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. Michael Warner (London and New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 136-137.

<sup>115</sup> Whitman, "City of Ships," in: Whitman, *The Portable Walt Whitman*, p. 238.

<sup>116</sup> Whitman, "To You," in: Whitman, *The Portable Walt Whitman*, p. 227.

poem “À une passante” (A Passer-by) introduced the figure of the observer who, upon noticing a good-looking woman in the crowd, in the middle of a “deafening street,” bewails the impossibility of knowing her. The poem, which is an account of the moment when the woman is sighted, ends in ominous recognition of the speaker’s powerlessness:

A lightening flash . . . then night! Love passing by,  
Whose sudden glance bestowed new life on me,  
Shall I not see you till eternity?

But it’s too far! Too late! *Never*, maybe!  
I know not where you are – you, where I go,  
You whom I should have loved – and felt it so!<sup>117</sup>

Baudelaire’s city becomes a pretext to appreciate what he defines in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” as *modernity*: “By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”<sup>118</sup> The essay is often read as a prologue to the impressionist movement; still, Baudelaire acknowledges not only his appreciation of the subjective and the fleeting, but for the immediate and everyday as well, arguing that “however much we may love *general* beauty, as it is expressed by classical poets and artists, we are no less wrong to neglect *particular* beauty, the beauty of circumstance and the sketch of manners.”<sup>119</sup> Baudelaire’s interest in the transitory and the fugitive is akin to Walter Pater’s appreciation of the fleeting moment and to Virginia Woolf’s aesthetics of the fugitive and subjective in her novels. A more distant echo of Baudelaire’s appreciation of modernity can be found in Joyce’s portrayals of those “trivial incidents,” the “most

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<sup>117</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “To a Passer-by,” in: Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Poems*, trans. Joanna Richardson (London and New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 171.

<sup>118</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in: *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (New York: Routledge 2004), p. 40. Emphasis original.

<sup>119</sup> Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” p. 37.

delicate and evanescent of moments”<sup>120</sup> found somewhere on Stephen’s way home in Dublin and described in Joyce’s short prose pieces published as *Epiphanies*. Both artists, the Baudelairian painter and the Joycean writer-to-be, are endowed with similar “epiphanic consciousness” that allows them to attune to the rhythm of the city and to identify the most valuable snapshots of city life. Still, Joyce’s aesthetics of epiphany is in many respects a reflection of young Joyce’s Romantic sensibility, or, if not Joyce’s himself, of the Romantic sensibility of Stephen Dedalus: the “bird-girl” episode in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is emblematic of the Romantic epiphany, one very similar to Wordsworth’s literary moments. In *Ulysses*, however, young Stephen’s epiphanies are recalled in a passage that is suggestive of ironic distance to one’s younger self:

Reading two pages apiece of seven books every night, eh? I was young. You bowed to yourself in the mirror, stepping forward to applause earnestly, striking face. Hurray for the Goddamned idiot! Hray! No-one saw: tell no-one. Books you were going to write with letters for titles. Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W. Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria? Someone was to read them there after a few thousand year, a mahamanvantara. Pico della Mirandola like. Ay, very like a whale. When one reads these strange pages of one long gone one feels that one is at one with one who once...<sup>121</sup>

The voluntary acceptance of the new urban environment possibly contributed to the creation of what is often seen as the Joycean revelation of the ordinary and the trivial. In *Stephen Hero* the young Stephen Dedalus explains to his friend Cranly the nature of the “spiritual” process in which an ordinary object, an often-seen element of

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<sup>120</sup> Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, p. 211.

<sup>121</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2010), p. 37.

the cityscape, may become “epiphanised” when it is subjected to the scrutiny of an artist’s “spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus”.<sup>122</sup>

He told Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany. Cranly questioned the inscrutable dial of the Ballast Office with his no less inscrutable countenance:

– Yes, said Stephen. I will pass it time after time, allude to it, refer to it, catch a glimpse of it. It is only an item in the catalogue of Dublin’s street furniture. Then all at once I see it and I know at once what it is: epiphany.<sup>123</sup>

Stephen’s remark is possibly a somewhat tongue-in-cheek reflection of Joyce’s aesthetic theory, in which Thomas Aquinas’ philosophy is important in the context of Stephen’s interest in the “qualities of universal beauty” (Aquinas’ *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas*) and their relation to the “necessary phases of artistic apprehension.” Discussing the third quality, radiance (*claritas*), Stephen explains how he understands the concept:

– The connotation of the word – Stephen said – is rather vague. Aquinas uses a term which seems to be inexact. It baffled me for a long time. It would lead you to believe that he had in mind symbolism or idealism, the supreme quality of beauty being a light from some other world, the idea of which the matter is but the shadow, the reality of which it is but the symbol. I thought he might mean that *claritas* is the artistic discovery and representation of the divine purpose in anything or a force of generalisation which would make the aesthetic image a universal one, make it outshine its proper conditions. But that is literary talk. I understand it so. When you have apprehended that basket as one thing and have then analysed it according to its form and apprehended it as a thing you make the only synthesis which is logically and aesthetically permissible. You see that it is that thing which it is and no other thing. The radiance of which he speaks is the scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing. This supreme quality is felt by the artist when the aesthetic image is first conceived in his imagination. The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley

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<sup>122</sup> Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, p. 211.

<sup>123</sup> Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, p. 211.

likened beautifully to a fading coal. The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the aesthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of aesthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like to that cardiac condition which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley's, called the enchantment of the heart.<sup>124</sup>

Joyce's "luminous silent stasis of aesthetic pleasure" is one of many Modernist expressions of the idea that the act of intuitive, momentary apprehension of what is usually conceived of in terms of parts or fragments often makes it possible to see it as a harmonious, united whole. Although Stephen rejects the idea that the "mystery" of the object's *claritas* might point beyond this object and thus be suggestive of "the reality of which it is but the symbol" or "a force of generalization which would make the aesthetic image a universal one, make it outshine its proper conditions," both the language of his description of the "mysterious instant" and the idea of a harmonious whole that can be momentarily apprehended by an artist are still suggestive of a Romantic sensibility. Still, Stephen's contemplation of *claritas* as a quality describing purely aesthetic aspect of a percept may be indicative of his fascination with the idea of "art for art's sake" which was important to many Modernist writers. A similar idea of unity that can be apprehended in an act of imaginative recognition is the theme of Yeats's "Among School Children." Yeats's idea of unity, represented by the image of the dancer and the dance concluding the poem and juxtaposed with a series of images suggestive of imperfection and separation in the preceding stanzas, is evocative of the poet's concept of the Unity of Being:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,

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<sup>124</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 2011), p. 155.

Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
 O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?<sup>125</sup>

Striving for the lost sense of unity becomes one of important motifs in T. S. Eliot's poetry: this unity can be apprehended in numerous portrayals of moments of visionary perception whose imagery is often religious – as in *The Waste Land* or *Four Quartets*. The impulse behind the concepts of unity in Yeats and Eliot is of course different from the aesthetics that liberates Joyce's alter-ego, Stephen Dedalus, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, allowing him to absorb modernity with every pore of his being. Yeats's and Eliot's moments of perception of fragments as unity are emblematic of the quest these poets undertake in an attempt to escape, but, ultimately, to transfigure what they see as modern disorder and disintegration. Richard Sheppard diagnoses Yeats's and Eliot's resistance to the modern age by suggesting that the reason for their rebellion is that “the order which is replacing the aristocratic one ignores all the fluid parts of personality – the feelings, the spirit, the unconscious, the imagination – and that rationality, predictability, utilitarianism have torn the potentiating centre out of language.”<sup>126</sup> Therefore, according to Sheppard, “Eliot, Yeats and Rilke seem, like Hofmannsthal, to be intent on preserving the sense of eternity which inhabits the few fragments left to them by the past, and without which, they suggest, all would be blackness, boredom and despair.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> W. B. Yeats, “Among School Children,” in: W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), p. 262.

<sup>126</sup> Richard Sheppard, “The Crisis of Language,” in: *Modernism. A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 326.

<sup>127</sup> Sheppard, “The Crisis of Language,” p. 324.



In Leonard Wilcox's discussion of DeLillo's *White Noise*, the Modernist moment of revelation which calls attention to its own well-organized "essence" and often contrasts this content, or the manner in which the content is expressed, with the experience of omnipresent disorder and fragmentation characterizing living in the modern age is described as typically Modernist. Wilcox shares the frequently expressed belief that postmodern literature often uses the tools of parody and pastiche to portray the sudden moment of recognition, explaining how the perceived "exhaustion of late modernist, existentialist notions of heroism" is in DeLillo's novel illustrated by parodies and pastiches of the Modernist epiphany. The latter is defined as follows:

[A]t the core of the modernist version of the heroic is the notion of the constitutive power of the imagination, the idea of an autonomous and authentic subjectivity out of which springs vision and illumination. Such is the modernist "epiphany": a moment of profound imaginative perception in which fragments are organized and essence revealed, and (on the level of narrative) in which a hermeneutical core of meaning is contained within a constellation of luminescent images. [...] By rendering moments of "heroic" vision and imaginative epiphany as parody and pastiche [...] DeLillo implies the exhaustion of late modernist, existentialist notions of heroism.<sup>128</sup>

Reading Wilcox's characterization of the Modernist epiphany one realizes, however, that this description constitutes an equally accurate portrayal of the Romantic, especially Wordsworthian, moment of recognition. It is not surprising; in fashioning their literary moments in such a way as to place particular emphasis on "the constitutive power of the imagination" and "the idea of an autonomous and authentic subjectivity out of which springs vision and illumination" suggested in Wilcox's

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<sup>128</sup> Leonard Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's 'White Noise,' and the End of Heroic Narrative," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Autumn, 1991, pp. 349, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208561> (6 Sept. 2014).

analysis, the Modernists show themselves to be the spiritual heirs of the Romantics. Such is the epiphany concluding Yeats's "Among School Children," such is the moment of recognition in Joyce's *Portrait* when Stephen observes the girl wading in the sea.

But Modernism certainly has its own, very good reasons to be interested in the convention which celebrates the value of the moment. The literary moment may help portray the human mind striving to attune to the cacophony of stimuli pouring from the world outside, and therefore proves an ideal tool for the Modernist artist, one often obsessed with sketching portraits of his own mind processing the data. Modernism's emphasis on subjectivity and individual experience, often accompanied by an interest in psychoanalysis and its methodologies, almost certainly contributed to the development of the technique of interior monologue, but also, possibly, to the rediscovery of the literary moment. In one of his letters F. Scott Fitzgerald's observes that he and many other American Modernist writers share the same objective of writing with the intention "to recapture the exact feel of a moment in time and space."<sup>129</sup> In the early 1920s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the modern aesthetics emphasizing the significance of the transitory moment becomes the hallmark of Virginia Woolf's writing. The Modernist focus on individual perception results in a specific attitude to temporality; this, in turn, often entails the rejection of the constraints of chronological structure of events in the Modernist novel. Morris Beja observes that "such constant disruption of chronology has been even more common in motion pictures, which have so profoundly influenced the fiction of our time."<sup>130</sup> The new, original treatment of the temporal in novels and short stories caught the attention of critics, who often discussed the purpose and significance of this Modernist innovation. Michael Hollington notes

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<sup>129</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, p. 251.

<sup>130</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 22.

that in Frank Kermode's 1967 *The Sense of an Ending* the critic suggests that "Modernist writing does not forsake sequential arrangement entirely; rather it uses our normal temporal expectations and frustrates them,"<sup>131</sup> and contrasts Kermode's belief with that of Joseph Frank. Frank, who in his 1945 essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" argued that the rejection of the sequential, chronological order enables the reader to envisage the Modernist literary work of art in terms of a spatial object, was inclined, Hollington claims, to see "novels like *Ulysses*" as "designed as single, static images outside time."<sup>132</sup>

Fitzgerald's conviction that one of the most important objectives of the Modernist writer is to "recapture the exact feel of a moment in time and space" was shared by many Modernist poets, who frequently presented their own theories on how to express the "emotion" accompanying the moments of intense, vivid perception in modern poetry. Highlighting the significance and impact of the momentary experience was a common practice among the Imagists. The *image*, whose clear, convincing presentation became one of the most important precepts of the Imagist movement, was defined by Ezra Pound's as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."<sup>133</sup> Pound's "intellectual and emotional complex" of the image is to be apprehended and appraised as a finite aesthetic object. The transparency of the image is primary; anything that does not contribute to this effect is considered "ornamentation"<sup>134</sup> that Pound rejects: the poet destroys the original version ("a thirty-line poem") of "In a Station of the Metro," because, he asserts, "it was what we call

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<sup>131</sup> Michael Hollington, "Svevo, Joyce and Modernist Time," in: *Modernism. A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 432.

<sup>132</sup> Hollington, "Svevo, Joyce and Modernist Time," p. 432.

<sup>133</sup> Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," *Poetry*, Vol. I, No. 6, 1913, p. 200.

<sup>134</sup> Pound, "Vorticism," p. 89.

work ‘of second intensity.’”<sup>135</sup> For Pound, “the point of *Imagisme* is that it does not use images as ornaments. The image is itself the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language.”<sup>136</sup>

Not surprisingly, *images* were often inspired by urban environment, as in the case of the abovementioned “In a Station of the Metro,” where Pound draws on the imagery of nature and spring to portray what was still a technological novelty – a station of the Paris Métro. The quotidian and the trivial were also an important source of the Imagist revelatory, especially in William Carlos Williams’s poetry. Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” exemplifies the Imagist fascination with the visual and, simultaneously, presents the trivia of ordinary life, while in the poet’s “This Is Just to Say” the object of aesthetic valuation is everyday emotion. Pound’s image is in many respects antithetical to Wordsworth’s moment of recognition: the former is typically shown in its aesthetic aspect in a relatively short, often experimental form that presents a photographic instant of human consciousness, while the latter usually dramatizes the psychological aspect of experience in the form of a longer narrative poem and usually introduces an identifiable human speaker.

A different strategy of conveying emotion in a literary text was described by T. S. Eliot in the well-known essay “Hamlet and His Problems,” which discusses what Eliot sees as certain shortcomings in Shakespeare’s presentation of the play’s protagonist. Eliot claims that “[t]he only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion

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<sup>135</sup> Pound, “Vorticism,” p. 89.

<sup>136</sup> Pound, “Vorticism,” p. 89.

is immediately evoked.”<sup>137</sup> Although Eliot’s formula is relatively broad, not explicitly related to writing in the epiphanic mode, as Eliot’s “particular emotion,” unlike Pound’s *image*, does not have to be presented as manifesting itself, or culminating in an “instant of time,” it resembles the paradigm of the literary epiphany in that it relates the “emotion” that is to be evoked to “sensory experience” and emphasizes the importance of the latter. Eliot’s idea of objective correlative, especially when it is examined in the context of writing poetry, expresses a concern which is, it appears, not entirely new. Eva Hesse notes that

[t]he use of what Eliot [...] was to term the “objective correlative” is a much older stratagem than is generally supposed. Eliot himself picked it up, albeit unconsciously and indirectly, from Sanskrit philosophy, and it was apparently also known to the eleventh century T’ang poet Wei T’ai, who wrote: “Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling, for as soon as the mind [of the reader] responds and connects with the thing, the feeling shows [...].”<sup>138</sup>

Although Eliot discussed his formula in the context of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the idea of the objective correlative certainly influenced Eliot’s own poetry. Many of Eliot’s poems contain passages in which experience is shown as firmly embedded in sensory perception. This fascination with details of everyday life and with fragments that are often considered separately but ultimately make up the totality of human experience is also one of important features of Eliot’s literary moment. In Eliot’s poetry, as in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, it is, paradoxically, the most solid and the most material that best connects with the elusive and indefinable substance of human memory.

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<sup>137</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Hamlet and His Problems,” in: T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, Inc, 1932), pp. 124-125.

<sup>138</sup> Eva Hesse, introduction to *New Approaches to Ezra Pound*, ed. Eva Hesse (London: Faber, 1970), p. 23. The quotation is from *Poems of the Late T’ang*, trans. A. C. Graham (London, 1965).

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
 Memory and desire, stirring  
 Dull roots with spring rain.  
 Winter kept us warm, covering  
 Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
 A little life with dried tubers.<sup>139</sup>

[...]

“You gave me Hyacinths first a year ago;  
 “They called me the hyacinth girl.”  
 – Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,  
 Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence.  
 Oed’ und leer das Meer.<sup>140</sup>

Another Eliot poem in which the material becomes a means of conveying strong emotion is “Journey of the Magi.” The poem relates the long expedition undertaken by the Magi from the point of view of one of the travellers, who reminisces about the journey years later. Rather than explore the emotional impact of the events related in the poem from the very beginning, Eliot describes them in terms of sensory experience, presenting a series of images in Stanza I and Stanza II. Even though in the second stanza the material objects the poet describes become less realistic and acquire symbolic meaning, the emotional significance of the experience is still downplayed. It is in the last, third stanza where this significance is revealed – the poem ultimately ends in a dramatic realization:

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
 With an alien people clutching their gods.  
 I should be glad of another death.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in: Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, p. 63.

<sup>140</sup> Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in: Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>141</sup> Eliot, “Journey of the Magi,” in: Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, pp. 109-110.

Eliot is one of many Modernist writers who frequently present the sudden moment of recognition in its dramatic, negative aspect. Both the Romantics and the Modernists enthusiastically embraced the poetics of epiphany because it well agreed with their appreciation of individuality, subjectivity and – to a certain extent – irrationality. While, however, the Romantic visionary still abounded in faith – if not in God, then in an orderly, harmonious universe, in the existence of the Ideal or in the Imagination and his own poetic genius – the confidence and self-belief of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century man was shaken by Darwin and Freud, and then shattered by the atrocities of the First World War. Consequently, the Modernist epiphanic often serves as a means of expressing the anxieties and fears of the age, or, otherwise, as a way of eluding or escaping reality in an often failed attempt to find meaning. The Modernist moments of recognition often appropriate the capitalist turmoil as the new fabric of the epiphanic moment, celebrating the new reality of living in a big city, but the opposite impulse – to escape this reality – may still arise. But even escaping it, the Modernist literary moment, unlike the Romantic epiphany, often ultimately testifies to the futility of all spiritual endeavour in modern time. When epiphany becomes empty, an insight into an abyss, or, using Northrop Frye's terminology, "demonic" – it cannot be "redemptive" or positively transformative any more.

Fortunately, the Modernists were innovators and although in their epiphanies they often focused on negative aspects of human existence, they as often celebrated the Moment in its aesthetic aspects. While not every Modernist poet is a follower of Pound's Imagism, the expressiveness of the poetic image becomes a very important part of the aesthetics of the literary moment at the time. Wallace Stevens is a representative example of a Modernist poet who in his poems skilfully employs the

aesthetics of one succinct, well-chosen image to evoke emotion, and thus often creates a moment of epiphanic vision:

. . . Children,  
 Still weaving budded aureoles,  
 Will speak our speech and never know,  
  
 Will say of the mansion that it seems  
 As if he that lived there left behind  
 A spirit storming in blank walls,  
  
 A dirty house in a gutted world,  
 A tatter of shadows peaked to white,  
 Smear'd with the gold of the opulent sun.<sup>142</sup>

As often, Wallace Stevens uses the aesthetics of a single, resonating image to convey ideas, as in the poem “The Snow Man.”

This Modernist strategy continues to influence the poetics of the literary moment today: the poem “Antarctica,” written by the British poet Michael Symmons Roberts and included in his 2013 volume of poetry, constitutes a good example of a comparable approach. A sense of the sudden, startling insight is conveyed here without introducing a first-person speaker; the poem does not relate, it presents an evocative image that becomes a locus of emotion:

No one sleeps alone here, and only fishermen dream  
 of wax-white orcas, blind and red-eyed, circling  
 under ice-sheets swept by katabatic winds.  
  
 Of course, this is not *true* Antarctica, where clutches  
 of tough scientists cross dates off charts. No,  
 this is *alter*-Antarctica, home to sibling-selves.  
  
 Once a month they send a greyhound to the brink,  
 where ice peters into water. Then the dog pelts back.  
 The time it takes gives them a reading of the future.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Wallace Stevens, “A Postcard from the Volcano,” in: Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 158.

<sup>143</sup> Michael Symmons Roberts, “Antarctica,” in: Michael Symmons Roberts, *Drysalter* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013), p. 6. Stanzas quoted: 3,4 and 5.



## CHAPTER THREE

### THE BARD AND THE MYSTIC:

#### THE ROMANTIC EPIPHANY OF THE EARLY YEARS (1885-1903)

Yeats's literary epiphanies are remarkably diverse. The poet's lifelong interest in symbolism and symbols, Celtic mythology, Irish history and the occult imbued his moments of vision with an aura often very different from what is usually described – for example, by Ashton Nichols in *The Poetics of Epiphany* – as “visionary” or “epiphanic” in English Romanticism, the literary tradition which profoundly shaped the poetics of the literary moment. Still, in Yeats's early collections of verse such as *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899), the influence of Romanticism and – consequently – of the Romantic tradition of the literary moment is of great significance. Yeats's interest in the Romantic convention of the Moment is noticeable in his first collections of verse, where the young poet's allegiance to Romanticism is manifest, and the similarities between the Romantic epiphanic mode and the epiphanic mode in early Yeats are indeed striking. In the late 1890s through 1900s Yeats's ideas on the visionary, the epiphanic and the revelatory will be to a significant degree changed and reshaped by his growing interest in Symbolism and his fascination with the occult, and then further revised in the era of Modernism, which advocated experimentation with its omnipresent campaign to “Make It New.” Yeats, however, never succumbed to short-lived fads and fashions and was always able to skilfully

combine innovation and tradition. His mature poetry becomes increasingly diverse and so does Yeats's epiphanic mode. Among the poems of this later period one can find such touchstones of Modernism as "The Second Coming," with its visionary mode verging on the vertiginous, but also lyrics such as "The Wild Swans at Coole," in which Yeats's indebtedness to such literary giants as Shelley, Keats or Wordsworth is still noticeable, and whose epiphanic mode still reflects much of the Romantic convention of the Moment, but is nevertheless changed, adapted and made unmistakably Yeatsian.

Encouraged by his father, the young Yeats read Blake, Shelley and Coleridge, and his lifelong sympathies remained with Romantic poets and decidedly outweighed his interest in Victorian writers, who were of lesser importance to the poet. Commenting on the meeting that took place in 1886 in Dublin when Yeats became acquainted with Gerard Manley Hopkins, Timothy Webb gives an account of how this encounter imprinted on Yeats's memory: "Many years later, Yeats wrote about Hopkins as someone 'whom I knew,' vacillated about which poems should be included in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* and mis-remembered, or misrepresented, the occasion: 'a boy of seventeen, with Walt Whitman in his pocket, had little interest in a querulous, sensitive scholar.'" <sup>144</sup> But even later in his life Yeats's dislike of Victorianism – perhaps with one significant exception of the Pre-Raphaelites, who appealed to the young poet's imagination and shared his love of Romanticism – is still evident. According to George Watson, "[h]is best known assault on qualities that he associated with Victorian poetry comes in the sprightly, controversial introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), where he condemns its irrelevant

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<sup>144</sup> Timothy Webb, "Victorian to Modern," in: *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 9.

descriptions of nature, its scientific and moral discursiveness, along with ‘the political eloquence of Swinburne, the psychological curiosity of Browning, and the poetical diction of everybody.’”<sup>145</sup> Yeats, in the same introduction, jokingly asserts that in 1900 “Victorianism had been defeated”<sup>146</sup> as “then in 1900 everybody got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank absinthe with his black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody committed suicide; nobody joined the Catholic Church; or if they did I have forgotten.”<sup>147</sup> Yeats clearly disliked the version of modernity that characterized Victorianism and Victorians and, it appears, in his young years he wanted to distance himself from his own time and even, adopting a typically Romantic attitude, escape the disorder and noise of big cities such as London. Very much interested in literature, history and Irish folklore, the young poet popularized Romantic poetry, especially the poetry of William Blake, founded the Rhymers’ Club in London and was a moving force behind the Celtic Revival movement. Although he was a member of the Church of Ireland, Yeats was not particularly interested in organized religion and in 1886 joined the Theosophical Society, where he hoped to broaden his knowledge of the occult. Before this, in 1884, Yeats met George William Russell, his lifelong friend, later known as AE, writer and painter as much interested in spirituality and mysticism as Yeats himself.

Yeats’s abiding interest in Romantic poetry significantly influenced his early poems. While in his first collection of verse, *Crossways*, the Romantic frame of reference becomes evident mainly in his frequent alluding to the local folklore and Celtic mythology, and through exploring the conflict between the desire of an

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<sup>145</sup> George Watson, “Yeats, Victorianism, and the 1890s,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, eds Marjorie Elizabeth Howes and John S. Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 36.

<sup>146</sup> W. B. Yeats, introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, ed. W. B. Yeats (Oxford: OUP, 1936), p. xi.

<sup>147</sup> Yeats, introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, p. xi.

individual to live on one's own and the need to be part of family or society, in *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) such typically Romantic themes are more frequently accompanied by an acute awareness of Romantic stylistics and literary conventions. One of such important conventions is the literary epiphany, or, more precisely, in the context of Romantic poetry, the Romantic moment. In *The Rose* Yeats recreates the Romantic moment at least twice, in the poems "When You Are Old" and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Although the poems are not similar, one of them being a part playful, part melancholy commentary on the passage of time, possibly intentionally reminding the reader of the genre of sentimental album dedications, and, at the same time, alluding to one of the sonnets written by Pierre de Ronsard, the other expressing the typically Romantic fantasy of a city dweller who yearns for primordial harmony and bliss, both of them preserve what may be seen as the characteristically Romantic model of the Moment.

"When You Are Old" begins as a cliché, probably tongue-in-cheek<sup>148</sup> portrait of an older woman sitting by the fire and reminiscing about the days when she was young, attractive and popular with young men, and then builds up the tension – in what is structurally one sentence – for the final melancholy expression of grief and regret:

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,  
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;  
And bending down beside the glowing bars,  
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled  
And paced upon the mountains overhead  
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.<sup>149</sup>

Here, Yeats appears to be critically conscious of the Romantic convention of the literary moment, and his intention was probably to recreate or reproduce this

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<sup>148</sup> Yeats was 28 at the time when this poem was published in 1893; Maud Gonne, to whom the poem was probably addressed, only 26.

<sup>149</sup> Yeats, "When You Are Old," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 62.

convention very closely. Whether in “When You Are Old” Yeats intended to playfully explore such a well-established pattern, creating an ironic *étude* designed to play with the convention or was motivated by a quixotic urge to revive the Romantic literary tradition for a short time against the Victorian pose he did not particularly like is difficult to ascertain, but the similarities are indeed striking. One of the most frequently anthologized poems written by Coleridge, “Frost at Midnight,” quoted by Nichols as one of the model examples of the Romantic convention of the literary moment,<sup>150</sup> resembles “When You Are Old” in many details: both poems juxtapose the tranquil inner space of one’s home (one striking similarity is also the fireplace) and the space outside one’s house, and both try to connect and, at the same time, contrast these two settings by focusing on two different sources of light. One source is the “earthly” light of the fire, possibly symbolising one’s mind or individual life, the other is the light of celestial bodies (in the Coleridge poem the light of the moon reflected in the icicles), suggestive of transcendence, eternity and infinity. In “When You Are Old” such subdued “indoor” or “inner” light is radiated by the glowing bars of the fire, while the diffused light that contributes to the change of mood at the end of the poem from playful or even mocking to melancholy and emotional is the glow of “a crowd of stars.” Similarly, in Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” the tranquil, tame light in the speaker’s home is “the thin blue flame” of the fire:

Sea, and hill, and wood,  
 With all the numberless goings-on of life,  
 Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame  
 Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;  
 Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,

Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 81.

<sup>151</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Selected Poems*, ed. Richard Holmes (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 46.

Conversely, the imaginary shining icicles reflect the light of the moon outside the safe haven of home, thus symbolising a non-individual or “someone-else’s” experience (e.g., past or future generations), eternity or transcendence:

Or if the secret ministry of frost  
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,  
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.<sup>152</sup>

Although the parallels between “When You Are Old” and “Midnight Frost” are clear, “Midnight Frost” is not the only Romantic poem that makes use of the motif of light to construct its credible epiphanic moments. A very similar strategy was often pursued by Coleridge’s friend and compatriot, the most celebrated, it appears, practitioner of epiphany among the Romantic poets, William Wordsworth. Martin Bidney, who, using the phenomenological framework, analyzed motifs and techniques that contributed to the creation of the unique “pattern” of the Wordsworthian moment, claims that “the pattern of motion that gives life to Wordsworthian epiphany is most frequently a communication of movement between widely separated lights, generally the movement between a radiant centre and a higher, lighted sphere or myriad-lighted circumference by means of a path or line of light.”<sup>153</sup> Bidney analyzes which categories of objects usually function as such sources of light, further specifying that “often, the light will be concentrated in small points or sparks, as in glow-worms, glistening rocks, or sudden gleams of sunshine on the hills or among the clouds. The power of these concentrated sparks or points of light can be immense: they

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<sup>152</sup> Coleridge, *Selected Poems*, p. 48.

<sup>153</sup> Bidney, *Patterns of Epiphany*, p. 33.

communicate with kindred lights, sometimes at huge distances, and the strength of one such central spark may be enough to determine the fate of worlds.”<sup>154</sup>

The idea that light, especially the light of stars, makes the spectator attentive to and conscious of the mysteries of existence was popularized by Burke in “A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful”:

The starry heaven, though it occurs so very frequently to our view, never fails to excite an idea of grandeur. This cannot be owing to the stars themselves, separately considered. The number is certainly the cause. The apparent disorder augments the grandeur, for the appearance of care is highly contrary to our idea of magnificence. Besides, the stars lie in such apparent confusion, as makes it impossible on ordinary occasions to reckon them. This gives them the advantage of a sort of infinity.<sup>155</sup>

Burke’s idea was also widespread in Romanticism; the impact such celestial objects may have on the imagination was described by Emerson in *Nature*.<sup>156</sup> The importance of the star imagery for the convention of the literary moment has been noted by Wim Tigges in “Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany,” where Tigges analyzes not only Romantic, but also Modernist poetry. Tigges most probably alludes to the Modernist concept of epiphany when he stresses the “trivial” aspect of the star-object: “That the star is such a potent epiphany-raiser may have something to do with the fact that it is both a magnificent and a trivial object, and has

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<sup>154</sup> Bidney, *Patterns of Epiphany*, p. 32.

<sup>155</sup> Burke, “A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,” The Project Gutenberg EBook.

<sup>156</sup> Emerson, *Nature*, pp. 9-10. “But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and vulgar things. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these preachers of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile. The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible.”

in the course of time amassed both rationally mechanical and romantically spiritual associations and connotations.”<sup>157</sup> However, although it is obvious that the star imagery can still be used by Modernist writers, it is mainly in the Romantic period when this motif is given special prominence and becomes almost a paradigm, a pattern to follow. To a certain extent, after the Romantic era the starry sky becomes a powerful symbol of Romantic attitudes.<sup>158</sup>

In “When You Are Old” Yeats imitates the Romantic approach to writing in the epiphanic mode: the poem’s creative amalgamation of this literary mode with the elements of the aesthetics of the Burkean sublime is part of the Romantic convention. Romantic poets, especially William Wordsworth, often scrupulously obey an unstated assumption suggesting that there is a certain category of objects or situations that can be successfully used for “constructing” moments of new awareness and, not surprisingly, the majority of such objects fulfil Burke’s criteria for the sublime: thunderstorms, wilderness, rugged, austere landscapes, celestial bodies (the moon, the stars), darkness, light, mountains, the sudden, the unexpected,<sup>159</sup> etc. Often, however, the sublime is accompanied by its opposite: the beautiful, the insignificant and the commonplace. Yeats’s poem reproduces this Romantic convention very closely: the first portent of the epiphany concluding the poem is the steady blaze of the “glowing

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<sup>157</sup> Tigges, “The Significance of Trivial Things,” p. 26.

<sup>158</sup> Polish poet Cyprian Norwid skilfully employs this Romantic paradigm of a star in his poem “In Verona,” where the falling star and the associations it may trigger in the observers become an emblem of the Romantic position which advocates reaching beyond the obvious, the material and the scientific as the hallmark of being human, as opposed to post-Romantic, or anti-Romantic attitudes of other observers, advocating unimaginative adherence to the pronouncements of science and logic.

<sup>159</sup> Burke, “A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,” The Project Gutenberg EBook. In the section “Suddenness” Burke says: “In everything sudden and unexpected, we are apt to start; that is, we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses us to guard against it. It may be observed that a single sound of some strength, though but of short duration, if repeated after intervals, has a grand effect.”



bars” of the fire, while the image concluding the poem is inspired by the aesthetics of the sublime (mountains and “the crowd of stars”):

how Love fled  
And paced upon the mountains overhead  
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.<sup>160</sup>

Yeats’s decision to follow the Romantic convention and end his poem with such a spiritual, romantic image is remarkable, because it shows how the young Yeats preferred not to focus on the grotesque imagery of the immediate, the bodily and the material, including the reality of physical death and decay, but chose, in a manner characteristic of many Romantic poets, the vaguely melancholy, but at the same time inspirational world of allegedly never-ending spiritual longings portrayed as transcending the world of the living. The poem is not entirely Yeats’s original creation: its subject matter and form relatively closely reproduce both the subject matter and the form of a sonnet written by the French Renaissance poet Pierre de Ronsard, “Quand vous serez bien vieille”<sup>161</sup> (one of Ronsard’s *Sonnets for Hélène*). But Yeats chooses to speak “stealing” Ronsard’s voice only up to a point: when Ronsard decides to resort to the rhetoric of a sly lover (one to a certain degree resembling the rhetoric of the speaker in Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress”), urging Hélène to choose him by painting the grisly image of the future, with his body decaying in the grave, and using the imagery of the physical and the immediate (e.g., his dead body, but also images suggesting sensuality, such as life portrayed as a “quickly fading rose”), Yeats evidently refuses to comply, breaking free of Ronsard’s theatrical, “sermonizing” pattern by choosing his own Romantic aesthetics of the sublime and using the imagery

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<sup>160</sup> Yeats, “When You Are Old,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 62.

<sup>161</sup> Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 153.

of distant mountains and stars to close his poem. Ronsard's sonnet is devoid of such semi-spiritual overtones and does not end with an epiphany; rather than that, in the last two lines the speaker energetically urges his lover to espouse his *carpe diem* philosophy:

I'll be underneath the ground, and a boneless shade  
 taking my long rest in the scented myrtle-glade,  
 and you'll be an old woman, nodding towards life's close,  
  
 regretting my love, and regretting your disdain.  
 Heed me, and live for now: this time won't come again.  
 Come, pluck now – today – life's so quickly-fading rose.<sup>162</sup>

In her discussion of the form in "When You Are Old," Helen Vendler asserts that Yeats changed the original form of Ronsard's Petrarchan sonnet because in the nineties he clearly preferred to write poems devoid of dramatic tension and focused on the creation of a distinctive and unified emotional mood instead. Such unified poetic mood could be easily broken by introducing multiple perspectives in the poem and, as a result, introducing more drama.<sup>163</sup> Vendler explains:

He [Yeats] thereby preserves homogeneity of mood and referent at the expense of the French poem's tension between the narrative of the mistress's living future and the poet's somber vision of his rest in the grave. [...] The creation of a coherent emotional "atmosphere" [...] continues to be Yeats's aim in the nineties. The true inner quarrel of the binary Petrarchan sonnet is too much for him, as are the conflicting perspectives of the four-part Shakespearean sonnet. He therefore continues with the more manageably unifiable pentameter douzain [...].<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Pierre de Ronsard, from *Sonnets for Hélène*, "When you are very old..." in: Anthony Weir, trans., *Tide and Undertow: A Book of Translations* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1975), p. 23.

<sup>163</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 154.

<sup>164</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 154.

Vendler observes that this “aesthetic of the unbroken note,”<sup>165</sup> organizing many of Yeats’s early poems, is explained and confirmed by Yeats himself. In a lost letter to Lafcadio Hearn, Yeats, according to Hearn, clearly voiced his preference “to close so short a poem with a single unbroken mood.”<sup>166</sup> Yeats’s statement, very important in the context discussed by Vendler, in his specific choice of the word “close” may also be of the utmost importance for anyone who is interested in Yeats’s epiphanic mode. It is also telling of Yeats’s fascination with the poetics of Romanticism, the movement that was the first to fully appreciate the importance of certain special moments of heightened perception and the potential of a specific, recognizable mood in poetry. Yeats’s strategy reflects the Romantic adaptations of the convention also because, according to Leon Waldoff, “[i]n Romantic poetry moments of recognition tend to occur at or near the ends of poems.”<sup>167</sup>

“Romanticism characteristically intensifies certain moments,”<sup>168</sup> observes Ashton Nichols in *The Poetics of Epiphany*, and it appears that Yeats’s tendency to close many of his early poems with lines embodying the philosophy of such a “single unbroken mood,” the strategy which approaches and often overlaps with what is today defined as the poetics of the literary moment, has its origins in Yeats’s *conscious* decision to employ such “single-mood closures” as organizing principles in many of his shorter poems. Such a conscious tactic shares many similarities with Wordsworth’s choice to construct his poems around the famous *spots of time*. While, however, Wordsworth’s spots of time were usually positively transforming – hidden repositories of spiritual strength to be used in difficult time – and, as a poetic method, often

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<sup>165</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 155.

<sup>166</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Collected Letters*, ed. John Kelly (Oxford: OUP, 2002), p. 101, quoted in: Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 155.

<sup>167</sup> Leon Waldoff, *Wordsworth in His Major Lyrics: The Art and Psychology of Self-representation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 45.

<sup>168</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 93.

organized longer poems, Yeats's closing "moods" of his early years are often imbued with ambivalent emotions, combining melancholy, romantic longing or nostalgia. Still, they roughly correspond to the character of emotions accompanying the Romantic moments of recognition and thus portray a Romantic sensibility.

Yeats's "mistranslation" of the sonnet is then a result of a conscious tactic adopted by a poet who clearly prefers the interplay of the often seemingly subdued, but ultimately very powerful emotions of Romantic poetry to the strong, gaudy colours of the Renaissance eloquence. To achieve the brief poetic effect of the last lines, it was probably necessary to gradually lead the reader to experience this organizing "emotion" of the poem and to arrange this relatively short poem in such a way as to avoid any unnecessary distractions, such as the gallows humour of the Ronsard's version that would certainly impede the reader's perception of the subtle Romantic epiphany at the end. Hence, possibly, Yeats's preference to *close* his shorter poems with lines recreating the impact of Romantic literary moments may naturally lead to creating structures which have to be relatively unified.

Aside from "When You Are Old," examples of such shorter early poems that draw on Romantic tropes and themes and are characterized by the unity of tone and by endings that build up to a distinctive mood include "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (written in 1888, volume *The Rose*), "The Sorrow of Love" (1891, *The Rose*) or "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (1897, *The Wind Among the Reeds*). Later this scheme returns in the collection *In the Seven Woods* (e.g., "Adam's Curse," c. 1902) and in the volume *Responsibilities* in the short lyric "A Memory of Youth" (1912). In Yeats's later collections the number of poems where the unity of tone is preserved and single-mood endings are introduced is significantly lower, but this blueprint never disappears completely (notable example is "Coole Park, 1929"). And as the poetry of Yeats's later

years becomes more and more idiosyncratic and unconventional, it is not surprising that in one specific case Yeats decides to turn the scheme of a “unified mood” around: in the poem opening the collection *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz,” a very distinctive atmosphere is created in the opening lines, where the poet “sets the scene” by describing a situation from the past.

One of Yeats’s earliest poems that make use of the poetics of the Romantic moment and at the same time draw heavily on Romantic themes, voicing the Romantic (and also Transcendentalist) belief that happiness can only be found when an individual is daring enough to reject the rules imposed on him or her by society and to choose a solitary, but peaceful life away from the hustle and bustle of big cities is one of Yeats’s most famous. “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” written 1888, was inspired by Thoreau’s *Walden*, a book that had a very profound influence on the poet when he was a child and spent his holidays in Sligo in Ireland. According to the poet, the inspiration for the poem was “a sudden remembrance” experienced during his stay in London. In “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” Yeats does not only approach the poetics of the Romantic moment by using a unified, short poetic form, but his description of the incident makes this experience almost a “textbook case” of the proleptic epiphany, i.e., the epiphany-experience that consists in a sudden recapturing of one’s past and is usually triggered by a trivial object or situation – here the “little tinkle of water” Yeats heard in London:

I had still the ambition, formed in Sligo in my teens, of living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in Lough Gill, and when walking through Fleet Street very homesick I heard a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. From the sudden remembrance came my

poem “Innisfree,” my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music.<sup>169</sup>

In the poem the experience is given a Romantic colouring by very clear allusions to Thoreau and his stay at Walden Pond (in the cabin Thoreau built in a secluded place) and by the rhythm of the poem, with its diction approaching the prophetic (the prophetic tone is even more striking on hearing the poem read by Yeats himself). Yeats wanted to stress the need for seclusion not only by speaking of it in the poem, but also by choosing the form that allows more freedom in the articulation of the three stanzas: “I had begun to loosen rhythm as an escape from rhetoric and from that emotion of the crowd that rhetoric brings,”<sup>170</sup> writes Yeats in his *Autobiography*. Hence, both the form and the theme of “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” make it possible for Yeats to create a poem that “translates” his experience into the language of the Romantic moment. It does so by moving from the seemingly external world of nature, Irish landscapes, lakes and islands, to the internal world of the creative, imaginative human mind which suddenly reminisces about the past, involuntarily forced into this activity by the “trigger” that is here the repetitive – real or imaginary – stimulus of “dropping” and “lapping” that appears to be gradually changing, finally revealing itself as indistinguishable from the rhythm of the speaker’s heart:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> W. B. Yeats, “The Trembling of the Veil. Book I. Four Years: 1887-1891,” in: W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Vol. III: Autobiographies*, eds William H O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 139.

<sup>170</sup> Yeats, “The Trembling of the Veil. Book I. Four Years: 1887-1891,” pp. 139-140.

<sup>171</sup> Yeats, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 60.

Of course, Yeats's epiphanic mode here, although inspired by the aesthetics of Romanticism, is not merely a repetition of the Romantic approach. The most novel, experimental aspect of the poem is Yeats's creative usage of rhythm that is supposed to give the poem its trance-like quality. The poem achieves this effect in a very original way: by paralleling its own music with the poem's subject matter, thus reflecting in its form the rhythmical, recurring sounds ("lapping" water, the speaker's beating heart) that accompany the vision. In his essay "Symbolism of Poetry," Yeats explains the significance of rhythm in poetry, especially in relation to the imagination and creativity:

The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols. If certain sensitive persons listen persistently to the ticking of a watch, or gaze persistently on the monotonous flashing of a light, they fall into the hypnotic trance; and rhythm is but the ticking of a watch made softer, that one must needs listen, and various, that one may not be swept beyond memory or grow weary of listening; while the patterns of the artist are but the monotonous flash woven to take the eyes in a subtler enchantment.<sup>172</sup>

The days of Yeats's early and almost exclusive interest in Romanticism, the interest that resulted in, among others, comparatively orthodox reinterpretations of the convention of the Romantic Moment, were soon to be over. The poet's vision changed, challenged by new ideas, especially by his emergent interest in Symbolism. Yeats's essay "Symbolism in Poetry" (1900) illustrates how Yeats's literary explorations were at the time inspired both by contemporary authors (mainly those associated with the

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<sup>172</sup> W. B. Yeats, "The Symbolism of Poetry," in: W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume IV: Early Essays*, ed. Richard J. Finneran and George Bornstein (New York: Scribner, 2007), p. 117.

Symbolist movement) and their novel ideas on literature, and older writers, especially Romantic poets. Although Yeats was well familiar with the theories of French Symbolism – Arthur Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* was one of the first books on the topic written in English and was dedicated to Yeats – Yeats’s symbolism was very unique, still much indebted to Romanticism and his own involvement in the Celtic Revival Movement. In his discussion of symbolism and symbols Yeats talks about “the continuous indefinable symbolism which is the substance of all style”<sup>173</sup> and, to support this argument about the continuity and ubiquity of symbolism, quotes a poem written not by one of his contemporaries, such as the French Symbolists, but by the Scottish pioneer of the Romantic movement, Robert Burns. In the same passage Yeats, partly drawing on the theories of French Symbolism, explains his theory of symbols, suggesting that the poet’s skilful choice of symbols is the main factor determining the emotional impact of a poem:

There are no lines with more melancholy beauty than these by  
Burns –

‘The white moon is setting behind the white wave,  
And Time is setting with me, O!’

and these lines are perfectly symbolical. Take from them the whiteness of the moon and of the wave, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty. But, when all are together, moon and wave and whiteness and setting Time and the melancholy cry, they evoke an emotion which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms. We may call this metaphorical writing, but it is better to call it symbolical writing [...].<sup>174</sup>

Yeats understood the importance of emotions that are induced in certain circumstances in the reader and was aware, as we have seen in the quotation, of the

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<sup>173</sup> Yeats, “The Symbolism of Poetry,” p. 114.

<sup>174</sup> Yeats, “The Symbolism of Poetry,” pp. 114-115.



subtle relationship and balance that must exist between elements of a poem if such a poem is to have the desired emotional impact. The poet's concern with how a specific emotion may be evoked in a poem is significant not only in the context of symbolism, but also in the context of the poetics of the literary moment. The literary moment usually aims to emotionally involve the reader: "any reader of a literary epiphany becomes a potential participant in the experience, who can likewise undergo the passage from an awareness of integrity through a sense of symmetry to a recognition of the significance of an experience."<sup>175</sup> Although, understandably, Yeats does not use the word *epiphany* in his discussion of symbols and emotions in poetry, his theory of "symbolical writing" resembles certain modern-day descriptions of epiphanic mode in poetry. The absence of an obvious logical connection between the material (the moon) and the immaterial (Time) that Yeats describes in the passage quoted above ("whiteness of the moon and of the wave, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect") may be seen as illustrative of one of the most important traits of the literary epiphany, the "incongruity" that, according to Morris Beja, must characterize every epiphanic experience.<sup>176</sup> But Yeats's notion of "symbolical writing" is here more specific than the general concept of writing in the epiphanic mode, as Yeats focuses on the role of certain expressive symbols in the creation of a specific mood and of the poem's "emotion." This new approach to writing significantly changes Yeats's epiphanic mode, making it more dependent on the symbolic and on the obscure and less evidently inspired by the Romantic conventions of the literary moment.

The poetics of a symbol shapes Yeats's 1899 volume of verse, *The Wind among the Reeds*. Many of the symbols Yeats uses here are inspired by the poet's

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<sup>175</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 12.

<sup>176</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 16.

interest in Celtic mythology and in the occult: this gives such frequently exploited symbols as the rose or the dance additional significance, making them obscure, but at the same time intriguing by creating an aura of the mystical and the numinous. Although the presence of such spiritually-laden, occult symbols helps Yeats create very distinct, recognizable voice in the poems of the time, Romantic ideas and attitudes are still important in *The Wind among the Reeds*. One of the poems which combine the frequently reworked Romantic theme of searching for the unattainable, exemplified in Romanticism by Novalis's symbol of the blue flower, with Yeats's novel approach in which the symbolic takes precedence over the natural is "The Song of Wandering Aengus," a poem which ends in an epiphany "coloured" by the presence of evocative symbols.

The poem relates an extraordinary event: the speaker, whose name is Aengus, confesses that he is "old with wandering" and tells a story of meeting a fairy-tale creature: a silver trout which turned into a "glimmering girl" on the night he felt "a fire" inside his head and decided to go fishing. Aengus pledges to find the girl who called him "by his name" and disappeared. The story, inspired by Irish mythology, is deceptively simple. According to the myth, Aengus, who is a god of youth, beauty, love and poetic inspiration, falls in love with a girl who is able to change herself into a swan. Yeats, however, transforms the myth and shows Aengus as an old, lonely man whose only dream is to find the mysterious temptress, who, he hopes, will bring him eternal happiness. Yeats's tactic of portraying the Irish god of youth (Aengus Óg, Aengus the young), who in the myth is always able to get whatever he wants to get, as an old man whose life is eternal journeying towards something beyond reach is original and effective, but Aengus's portrait becomes even more vivid and dramatic owing to Yeats's treatment of time in the poem. The opening lines "I went out to the

hazel wood / Because a fire was in my head”<sup>177</sup> and the story Aengus relates in the first three stanzas, with their accumulation of detail, may suggest that the mystifying incident happened on the previous night, but in the last stanza this reading can be challenged:

Though I am old with wandering  
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,  
I will find out where she has gone,  
And kiss her lips and take her hands;  
And walk among long dappled grass,  
And pluck till time and times are done  
The silver apples of the moon,  
The golden apples of the sun.<sup>178</sup>

Did the fairy girl appear only yesterday to the weary, aged Aengus, who had already been “old with wandering”? It is possible. It is also possible, however, that Aengus’s weariness is caused by his long quest for the “glimmering girl,” and the event he now recalls took place in the distant past, even in his youth, and now he is possessed by memories, constantly reminiscing about the same event, and forgets about the present day, fixated on the past and the future. His obsession verges on madness: thus Aengus becomes one of many in the long line of Yeatsian characters who are mad or obsessed. The impossibility to determine the exact time of the episode described by Aengus makes the hypothesis of his madness even more plausible: Aengus cannot tell the time; he only notices how days turn into nights. This prepares the reader for the epiphany at the end of the poem, where the specific is replaced by the symbolic and the earthly paradise imagined by the old man acquires a number of non-earthly characteristics. The first reference to time in the poem determines for how long this bliss will continue, and, according to the speaker, it will last “till time and

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<sup>177</sup> Yeats, “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 76.

<sup>178</sup> Yeats, “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 76.

times are done.” Here the dreaming Aengus again becomes an immortal, one of the deities whose existence may only be put to an end by what may only be conceived of as the abolition of time. The final image of perfection and communion is achieved by using the complementary imagery of the sun and the moon, and the effect of this juxtaposition is strengthened by the symmetrical form of the last two lines. The moon and the sun, envisioned as apples plucked by Aengus, suddenly interrupt the narrative and create space for imaginative exploration of the indefinite, ambiguous ending. The moon and the sun (powerful symbols on their own) when considered together with the phrase “till time and times are done” introduce a cosmologic order transcending the world of everyday human affairs, yet at the same time the value of individual experience and Aengus’s attachment to the life of senses are strongly suggested by the image of apples, evocative of sensual pleasures and sexual fulfilment.

The originality of the image that closes the poem proves that at the time Yeats tested the potential of symbolism in poetry, but was still significantly influenced by the literature of the Romantic period. In the essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” from *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903), Yeats explores the symbolism of the sun and the moon (and, accordingly, gold and silver) referencing Romantic poets and their poetry:

Some old magical writer, I forget who, says if you wish to be melancholy hold in your left hand an image of the Moon made out of silver, and if you wish to be happy hold in your right hand an image of the Sun made out of gold. The Sun is the symbol of sensitive life, and of belief and joy and pride and energy, of indeed the whole life of the will, and of that beauty which neither lures from far off, nor becomes beautiful in giving itself, but makes all glad because it is beauty.<sup>179</sup>

Thus Aengus’s sun in is probably a symbol of happiness, joy and stability, possibly also of human love; the moon, on the other hand, becomes a symbol of dreaming and

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<sup>179</sup> Yeats, “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” p. 70.

of a never-ending pursuit of what is continuously out of reach. Holding the “two images” in his hands, Aengus becomes a paradoxical figure possessed by different, but very human emotions. Aengus’s creed is of a poet-bard who is, according to Yeats, neither Blake nor Shelley, and yet is possessed by the independent spirit of both archetypal bards:

In ancient times, it seems to me that Blake, who for all his protest was glad to be alive, and ever spoke of his gladness, would have worshipped in some chapel of the Sun, but that Shelley, who hated life because he sought “more in life than any understood,” would have wandered, lost in ceaseless reverie, in some chapel of the Star of infinite desire.<sup>180</sup>

Yeats’s Aengus becomes a semi-human, semi-divine figure; a madman, seeker, sage, bard and creator capable of uniting contradictory aspects of life. He is one of many mythological figures that populate the poems in *The Winds among the Reeds*, whose mythological scenery created by Yeats is very characteristic of the spirit of the Celtic Revival, and whose dramatic effect is heightened by Yeats’s interest in symbolism. The visionary, epiphanic quality of several poems in this collection (and, also, in the two shorter collections of poems that followed *The Wind among the Reeds*, namely *In the Seven Woods* and *The Green Helmet and Other Poems*) is directly related to the impact of those new symbols, and yet Yeats’s poetry of the time still owes much to Romanticism. Still, beginning from *The Winds among the Reeds*, the unmistakably Yeatsian voice of the visionary and seer becomes more and more distinctive and will gradually be changed into the voice of a more experienced and, ultimately, Modernist poet.

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<sup>180</sup> Yeats, “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” p. 72.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE NEW VOICE:

#### THE YEARS OF THE MODERNIST EXPERIMENT (1904-1924)

This new voice is best heard beginning from Yeats's *Responsibilities*, a book of new poems published in 1914. The critical response to this collection usually emphasizes Yeats's change of focus from the mythological and imaginative to the political, which, taking into account the subject matter of the majority of poems in this volume, is definitely a very accurate judgment. One must not forget, however, that *Responsibilities* contains many poems that confirm Yeats's lifelong predilection for the visionary and the mystical. Furthermore, this group of poems is significant in Yeats's oeuvre owing to a different, novel poetic method Yeats adopted to achieve the effect of the visionary and the revelatory. The mythological framework of the dreamy Celtic sagas is for the most part gone. The Yeatsian type of symbolism as it was expressed in *The Wind among the Reeds*, rooted in the ideas of the Celtic Twilight and often invoking the most fundamental and powerful symbols, such as the moon, the chase, the rose or the dance, does not pervade Yeats's poetry in *Responsibilities* to such extent as in the earlier volumes. A break with the Romantic tradition is also manifest. The form of these new poems is characterized by brevity and less frequent use of archaism or inversion, but this largely Modernist minimalism surprisingly well agrees with Yeats's

new poetics of the vision. In *Responsibilities*, Yeats literary moments become, it appears, more expressive than ever.

The new approach to writing poetry was maybe best summarized by Yeats himself in the poem “A Coat,” a wry, ironic commentary closing Yeats’s *Responsibilities*, whose argument will be repeated later in “The Fisherman” from the volume *The Wild Swans at Coole*:

I made my song a coat  
Covered with embroideries  
Out of old mythologies  
From heel to throat;  
But the fools caught it,  
Wore it in the world’s eyes  
As though they’d wrought it.  
Song, let them take it,  
For there’s more enterprise  
In walking naked.<sup>181</sup>

Yeats’s ambition to write poems “as cold / And passionate as the dawn”<sup>182</sup> certainly does not start with *Responsibilities* – in 1914 Yeats describes his past discontent with the poetic style of *The Wanderings of Oisín* (published in 1889) and writes about the gradual process of re-inventing his style:

Years afterwards when I had finished “The Wanderings of Oisín,” dissatisfied with its yellow and its dull green, with all that overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement, I deliberately reshaped my style, deliberately sought out an impression as of cold light and tumbling clouds. I cast off traditional metaphors and loosened my rhythm, and recognizing that all the criticism of life known to me was alien and English, became as emotional as possible but with an emotion which I described to myself as cold. It is a natural conviction for a painter’s son to believe that there may be a

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<sup>181</sup> Yeats, “A Coat,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 178.

<sup>182</sup> Yeats, “The Fisherman,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 198.

landscape symbolical of some spiritual condition that awakens a hunger such as cats feel for valerian.<sup>183</sup>

In *Responsibilities* this aspiration is for the first time fully realized. It is the “middle Yeats” of *Responsibilities* and *The Wild Swans at Coole* where the “coldness” of the poet’s then almost transparent, lucid language paired with the emotional passion and the angst and anguish those poems bring to the surface produces the most astounding results. This approach to writing, to a vast extent shaping Yeats’s epiphanic mode at the time, will also be noticeable in many poems in his later volumes of poetry. The poems of this middle period are mostly free from “all that overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement”<sup>184</sup> of Yeats’s early phase; simultaneously, the authoritative, commanding tone of Yeats’s later style, which was brilliantly portrayed by W. H. Auden in the third part of his elegy “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” and which infuriated Orwell, is not yet present.<sup>185</sup>

One of the most remarkable poems that speak the language of epiphany in *Responsibilities* is “Paudeen,” a poem inspired by the same concern that inspired Yeats’s “To a Wealthy Man” and “To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing,” namely Yeats’s outrage at what he perceived as short-sightedness on the part of both the Dublin government and part of Irish society in their reluctance to grant funds for building a gallery that would house Sir Hugh Lane’s collection of modern paintings, his prospective and conditional gift to the Dublin Municipal Gallery. The direct origin

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<sup>183</sup> W. B. Yeats, “Reveries over Childhood and Youth,” in: W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Vol. III: Autobiographies*, ed. William H O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 86.

<sup>184</sup> Yeats, “Reveries over Childhood and Youth,” p. 86.

<sup>185</sup> George Orwell, “W. B. Yeats,” in: George Orwell, *Collected Essays* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2007), <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/o/orwell/george/o79e/complete.html> (accessed 6 Sept. 2014). Orwell criticized Yeats’s style in his attack on the poet as the “tendency towards ‘quaintness’ of language,” writing that “Yeats is even credited with simplicity because he uses short words, but in fact one seldom comes on six consecutive lines of his verse in which there is not an archaism or an affected turn of speech.”



of the poem's initial bitter expression of resentment was, according to Yeats, William Murphy's criticism of Yeats in *The Evening Herald* and *The Irish Independent*: "He replied to my poem 'To a Wealthy Man' (I was thinking of a very different wealthy man) from what he described as 'Paudeen's point of view,' and 'Paudeen's point of view' it was"<sup>186</sup> – explains embittered Yeats. Murphy's Paudeen (diminutive of *Patrick*) was a poor man in the street who, according to Murphy, might not benefit much from the government's spending on art and culture in this particular case; Yeats's "Paudeen" of the poem was Murphy himself, a representative of everything Yeats disliked in the political and journalistic establishments of Dublin, in Yeats's view one of the petty-minded, reactionary pseudo-pundits who could not – or would not – recognize the value and import of modern art for the Irish society.

"Paudeen" unpredictably soon loses its political frame of reference, presenting a non-specific landscape through which the hurt, resentful speaker is trying to force his way, struggling "among the stones and thorn trees":

Indignant at the fumbling wits, the obscure spite  
Of our old Paudeen in his shop, I stumbled blind  
Among the stones and thorn trees, under morning light;  
Until a curlew cried and in the luminous wind  
A curlew answered;<sup>187</sup>

There is no clear sense of direction here: the speaker acknowledges he "stumbled blind," probably trying to escape the disturbing rush of emotions or trying to direct the destructiveness of his feelings away from the potential recipient of the resentment, the "old Paudeen." The minimalist representation of the landscape, with the only adjectives being "morning" and the unexpected "luminous" used to describe the

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<sup>186</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1968), p. 125. The text is from Yeats's *Notes to early editions of Responsibilities: Poems and Plays*, 1914.

<sup>187</sup> Yeats, "Paudeen," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 161.

quality of the wind, produces an unusual effect. This landscape, envisioned as a wilderness of thorns and stones, could belong to Wordsworth's vision, yet its sketchy, diagrammatic portrayal in the poem places the poem's art firmly in the twentieth-century literature, confirming Yeats resolution to follow his new creed, "For there's more enterprise / In walking naked."

Despite the poem's novel form, the orderly structure of the episode described in "Paudeen" closely reproduces the structure of the conventional epiphany-experience portrayed in literature since Romanticism: what is being enacted here is a moment of a sudden and positively transforming realization triggered by an external stimulus in the moment when the agitated, wandering mind of the speaker in the poem is particularly susceptible to such a stimulus. What is more, the poem's development is mediated by light, a very conventional vehicle of the epiphany. Light announces its presence in a very direct way in the expression "under morning light," then in the phrase "luminous wind" and finally becomes a significant part of the final disclosure of the absolute which is symbolized by the "sweet crystalline cry" in the last line – although *crystalline*, again unexpectedly juxtaposed with the auditory *cry*, is a more veiled allusion to light, suggesting clarity, perfection and transparency:

and suddenly thereupon I thought  
That on the lonely height where all are in God's eye,  
There cannot be, confusion of our sound forgot,  
A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry.<sup>188</sup>

"Paudeen" is a rewriting of the Romantic structure of epiphany, but in the more austere, minimalist style Yeats adopted and without the mythological or symbolist background that accompanied much of Yeats's earlier poetry. Its epiphany is positively transforming, as the majority of Romantic epiphanies, and it uses – though in a very

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<sup>188</sup> Yeats, "Paudeen," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 161.

novel form – the imagery of light to achieve its effect. It is also one of a very small number of Yeats's poems that in a more direct and traditional way draw on Christian themes. Alexander Norman Jeffares notes in his *Commentary* to Yeats's poems that the idea very similar to the epiphany in "Paudeen" was expressed by Yeats in the poet's early memoirs, *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922).

I was crossing a little stream near Inchy Wood and actually in the middle of a stride from bank to bank, when an emotion never experienced before swept down upon me. I said, "That is what the devout Christian feels, that is how he surrenders his will to the will of God." I felt an extreme surprise for my whole imagination was preoccupied with the pagan mythology of ancient Ireland, I was marking in red ink upon a large map, every sacred mountain. The next morning I awoke near dawn, to hear a voice saying, "The love of God is infinite for every human soul because every human soul is unique, no other can satisfy the same need in God."<sup>189</sup>

Although it is possible to interpret "Paudeen" purely in terms of its description of a religious, almost mystical experience, the poem's themes may also be a veiled allusion to Yeats's "religion of art." Especially in the context of the political concerns of the "old Paudeens" Yeats disliked and to which he alluded in the opening lines, the image concluding the poem may symbolize an imaginary fulfilment of the artist's longing for ideal self-expression, one unhindered by this artist's "responsibilities," which, although impossible to avoid, may ultimately suppress the poet's sense of vision.

While "Paudeen" is a very good example of how the old Romantic convention of depicting a character who experiences a profound insight in the midst of a dazzling nowhere may be successfully implanted in the new, consciously pared-down, austere style of Yeats's *Responsibilities*, there are two important poems in this volume, "The

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<sup>189</sup> W. B. Yeats, "The Trembling of the Veil. Book V. The Stirring of the Bones," in: W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Vol. III: Autobiographies*, p. 284.

Cold Heaven” and “The Magi,” which prefigure Yeats’s very unique style of the visionary epiphany of his later collections. The positively transforming “message” of the epiphany in “Paudeen” is not present here, as the visionary insights in “The Cold Heaven” and “The Magi” are charged with pessimism and negativity. Both poems focus on those final visionary insights and, unlike “Paudeen,” there is no obvious clue given as to what triggered such potent images. What is present, however, is the speaker’s “eye,” an acknowledgement of the power of perception that immediately precedes the visionary moment. In “The Magi,” it is the first line, “Now as at all times I can see in the mind’s eye,”<sup>190</sup> that proudly announces the mind’s ability to create and to hoard images, while “The Cold Heaven,” also focused on the process of “seeing,” foregrounds the suddenness characterizing the epiphany introducing the speaker who proclaims “Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven.”<sup>191</sup>

Unlike “Paudeen,” in which the final insight is directly related to an external stimulus (the piercing cries of the curlews), the two poems cannot be thought of as model examples of the literary moment. As we have seen, Robert Langbaum’s definition of epiphany – one of the most restrictive definitions – excludes the instances when “nothing is physically sensed,”<sup>192</sup> and there is nothing in the texts of the poems that would allow the reader to assume with certainty that the vision has been triggered by a sensory stimulus. Still, Langbaum concedes that his definition may be controversial as it excludes Joyce’s *dream epiphanies*, short poetry pieces Joyce recorded in his notebook.<sup>193</sup> Of course, the reader is allowed to speculate. Could the vision of the Magi be directly inspired by a painting the speaker saw in a museum? By the smell of incense he accidentally inhaled on the Day of Epiphany? Maybe, maybe

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<sup>190</sup> Yeats, “The Magi,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 177.

<sup>191</sup> Yeats, “The Cold Heaven,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 176.

<sup>192</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 43.

<sup>193</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 44.

not, but is it important? The poem presents its insight as directly related to the mind's ability to perceive and process information and this act of creative transformation is the central aspect of every epiphany.

"The Cold Heaven" presents such a transformation in a very orderly way, notwithstanding the passionate and dynamic tone of the poem:

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven  
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,<sup>194</sup>

Unlike the first line in "The Magi" ("Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye"), the ambiguous "Suddenly I saw" may imply actual looking at the wintry or autumnal "cold" sky, especially when juxtaposed with the phrase that announces the beginning of the imaginative transformation only later in the poem, "And thereupon imagination and heart were driven." Nevertheless, it is impossible to rule out the possibility of the "heaven" being the product of the speaker's imagination, the first image in the sequence of many that constitute the vision in the poem.

"The Cold Heaven" thus allows the reader to choose whether he or she interprets "the rook-delighting heaven" as the product of the speaker's imagination or as an image that originates in the speaker's intense perception of what he actually sees in his surroundings. And while reading this image in terms of such a purely imaginative vision does not disqualify the interpretation of the last lines as the literary epiphany, as it is the skilful, convincing re-enactment of the moment of epiphany in the text of the poem that is crucial and deciding, it may be nevertheless interesting to note that Maud Gonne's account of Yeats's reply as to what inspired the poem describes the episode in terms of a sudden insight:

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<sup>194</sup> Yeats, "The Cold Heaven," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 176.

Madame MacBride [Maud Gonne] enquired the poem's meaning, and he [Yeats] told her it was an attempt to describe the feelings aroused in him by the cold and detachedly beautiful winter sky. He felt alone and responsible in that loneliness for all the past mistakes that tortured his peace of mind. It was a momentary intensity of dream-like perception, where physical surroundings remained fixed clear in the mind, to accentuate the years of thought and reality that passed in review in an instantaneous and yet eternal suspension of time.<sup>195</sup>

This insight, originating in “physical surroundings,” is described in terms of “feelings” and accompanied by the recognition of “an instantaneous and yet eternal suspension of time” – so it surprisingly closely corresponds to the descriptions of the phenomenon of epiphany.

After the initial, sudden act of “seeing” that introduces the ambiguity that has been discussed above, the focus on the inner transformation of the first image (the sky) is stressed by words and expressions that centre on the cognitive abilities of the human mind and on the speaker's attempt to explain the meaning of the image: the verb “seem” in the second line, the phrase “thereupon imagination and heart were driven” combined with “casual thought” in lines 3-4 and finally the recognition of the role of memories in line 5. Simultaneously, the poem's progression is to a significant degree determined by the choice of words or phrases that connote movement, violence or destruction (or all of them simultaneously), e.g., *burn*, *drive wild*, *vanish*, *cross*, *tremble*, *rock*, *riddled*, *quicken*, *stricken*:

And thereupon imagination and heart were driven  
 So wild that every casual thought of that and this  
 Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season  
 With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;

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<sup>195</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares, *W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet* (New York, Barnes and Noble Inc., 1966), p. 175.

And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,  
 Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,  
 Riddled with light.<sup>196</sup>

Surprisingly, although the insight at the end of the poem is nothing short of terrifying, a desperate recognition of a potential horror following one's death, again, as in "Paudeen," the epiphany is mediated by light. Light, although its presence is not directly stated in the poem, may well be the trigger setting off the epiphany, in a similar way as "a certain slant of light" is what distresses the speaker in Emily Dickinson's poem.<sup>197</sup> The first indication of the presence of light is noticeable in the second line. The ice that "burned" constitutes an oxymoron, heightening the effect Yeats achieves in his poem, yet simultaneously this "burning ice" is not unimaginable, a fitting metaphor Yeats creates to achieve, it appears, his "deliberately sought [...] impression as of cold light and tumbling clouds."<sup>198</sup> Light is invoked again later in the unsettling and ambiguous phrase "riddled with light," to a certain extent epiphanic on its own, where light quite explicitly becomes a source of suffering for the tormented speaker. The powerful effect this part of "The Cold Heaven" may have on the reader is in part attributable to the force and dynamism of the images in the poem, and in part to Yeats's skilful alluding to light as the traditional symbol of both illumination and God's mercy, here allowing the symbol to function on both levels. Light in the poem is a conventional source of enlightenment when the speaker realizes his guilt – whatever guilt it might be, as Yeats's vision is not orthodoxly Christian, but permeated with his occult beliefs – and when he later has a premonition about the destiny of souls. It is, however, mainly the reversed, negated symbolism of light as the carrier of God's

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<sup>196</sup> Yeats, "The Cold Heaven," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 176.

<sup>197</sup> Dickinson, "[There's a Certain Slant of Light]," in: Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 258.

<sup>198</sup> Yeats, "Reveries over Childhood and Youth," p. 86.

mercy that gives the imagery of light in the poem such an extraordinary, poignant force.

Although the structure of the poem closely reproduces the assumed chronological structure of the conventional epiphany, the character of the final realization places it poles apart from the mostly positive, radiant images of the Romantic moment:

Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,  
Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent  
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken  
By the injustice of the skies for punishment?<sup>199</sup>

Such negative epiphanies are relatively uncommon in Romantic poetry, but nevertheless exist: Wordsworth's "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known" and numerous Emily Dickinson's poems end with recognitions that are not positively transforming, but inspire terror. Fear, terror and negativity are also part of the Burkean aesthetic of the sublime, which was often important for Romantic writers, but Burke makes it clear that the sublime and actual suffering are mutually exclusive. Yeats's poetic practice (especially his "middle" period and late poetry) confirms Langbaum's observation that the model of the negative epiphany is most frequently used in Modernism. For Langbaum, the most extreme forms of the Modernist negative epiphany are "insights into the abyss,"<sup>200</sup> and their frequent practitioners are Stevens and Beckett. It is difficult, however, to estimate whether Yeats's epiphany in "The Cold Heaven" is to be interpreted figuratively, as an insight into the abyss, or, more literally, as the speaker's recognition of the existence of the supernatural, a theophany. Still, "The Cold Heaven" is one of Yeats's many poems where the violent, distinct

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<sup>199</sup> Yeats, "The Cold Heaven," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 176.

<sup>200</sup> Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," p. 42.



vision is accompanied by an epiphanic recognition of a negative kind. It is also one of Yeats's many poems, also among the poems written in the epiphanic mode, in which the final insight or intuition takes the form of a question.

"The Magi," another visionary poem in *Responsibilities*, reflects the pattern exercised in "The Cold Heaven," as here the vision is again accompanied by a dramatic recognition that is placed at the poem's end. In contrast with "The Cold Heaven," the reader is aware that the sequence of the images the poem presents may not be directly inspired by an external trigger, at least not at the moment of speaking. In the manner quite typical of the epiphanic mode, the visual is here juxtaposed with the enquiry concerning the "unsatisfied ones" and the reason for their never-ending quest, but the words "Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye" may suggest purely imaginary inspiration for the speculation in the poem.

"The Magi" constitutes what we may call, after Langbaum, a visionary epiphany. It becomes a characteristic template for many poems in Yeats's middle to late poetry. While the visionary character of the figures of the Magi is undeniable, the poem may be seen as embodying the poetics of the literary moment both because of the type of description used here (the focus is on *how* the Wise Men are seen by the perceiving "I/eye" of the speaker) and because the poem ends in the insight concerning the purpose of the Magi's quest:

Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,  
 In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones  
 Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky  
 With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,  
 And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,  
 And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,  
 Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,  
 The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Yeats, "The Magi," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 177.

Depending on how we wish to read the poem and interpret the vision, we may see the poem as epiphanic as a whole or as leading to the revelation which occurs in the last lines. The first reading is based on the assumption that the whole poem (which still, because of its textual form, must be necessarily read line by line) is an expression of a momentary, “epiphanic” apprehension of the image which arose instantaneously, as if subconsciously, in the speaker’s mind. Both the vision of the “unsatisfied” Magi floating in the blue sky and the revelation concerning their mysterious quest are intuitively perceived in the same moment. If, however, we decide that the description in lines 1-6 chronologically relates the process of conscious critical evaluation of, for instance, a work of art, or the process of conscious reminiscing about the details of an image seen in the past, then the epiphany is constituted by the insight concerning the unknown destination of the quest undertaken by the untiring pilgrims. This process begins, it would appear, as an uninvolved activity that requires analytical skills of an art historian, as the poem’s opening lines focus on the description of colours, shapes and outward appearances: the Magi are wearing “stiff, painted clothes” and are seen against the background of “the blue depth of the sky.” Still, the word *unsatisfied*, appearing as early as in the second line, is an important exception here, as it shows that the impression suggesting that this act of observation leaves the speaker uninvolved is false. In the subsequent lines it becomes clear that the speaker’s “reading” focuses on speculative questioning of certain details, and not, for example, on the assessment of the visual harmony of the image: the Magi’s faces resemble “rain-beaten stones,” their eyes are “fixed” for a reason, and they are still “unsatisfied.” To find answers to his questions, the speaker has to penetrate the mysteries of the travellers’ souls, and this is what he is clearly intent on doing.

Although there is a superficial logical connection between the image and the insight concluding the poem, as they both refer to Christianity and the Magi's quest, the image itself neither provides a non-speculative explanation of the powerful insight nor establishes a chain of associations that might lead from the Magi, through "Calvary's turbulence" to the unexplained re-enactment of the "uncontrollable mystery" of Bethlehem. The concluding lines are epiphanic because they present a mystifying, intuitive flash of revelation rather than a sound deduction concluding the speaker's argument.

The question whether the speaker's vision of those indefatigable travellers could be inspired by a particular, external "trigger" or is purely imaginative remains open: we may speculate, for example, that the speaker may be recalling a painting once seen in a gallery, as the pictorial quality of the details described in the poem may suggest a link between the vision of the poem and the traditional representations of the Magi. And while the circumstances in which it originated do not have to have any bearing on how we interpret the poem, it may be surprising to learn that in one of the notes to *Responsibilities* Yeats states that his Magi were inspired by what we may see as a "small epiphany" on its own: an act of intense perception that began as looking at "the blue of the sky":

After I had made the poem ["The Dolls"], I looked up one day into the blue of the sky, and suddenly imagined, as if lost in the blue of the sky, stiff figures in procession. I remembered that they were the habitual image suggested by blue sky, and looking for a second fable called them "The Magi," complimentary forms to those enraged dolls.<sup>202</sup>

Yeats's decision not to include any reference suggesting the origin of the "vision" in the speaker's physical surroundings does not make the poem less

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<sup>202</sup> Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, p. 148.

epiphanic, but it does make it more succinct. Regardless of how the origin of the visionary scene may be interpreted, the poem's gradual movement from the imaginative, visual description to the final augury of the second "uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor" firmly places the poem in the convention of the epiphanic mode. Simultaneously, a new paradigm for the poem written in the epiphanic mode is created. Yeats's visionary moment of "The Magi" sets the pattern for several of Yeats's most celebrated poems in his later collections, notably "The Second Coming" (included in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*) and "Leda and the Swan" (from *The Tower*), both of which begin as visionary dreams and end with insights expressed as speculative questions.

In his review of *Responsibilities* for *Poetry* magazine in 1914, Ezra Pound praised the "quality of hard light"<sup>203</sup> in the new poems, also in "The Magi." Pound extolled the change of style and applauded Yeats's new minimalism (the "walking naked" quality expressed by Yeats in "The Coat"):

I've not a word against the glamour as it appears in Yeats' early poems, but we have had so many other pseudo-glamours and glamourlets and mists and fogs since the nineties that one is about ready for hard light.

And this quality of hard light is precisely what one finds in the beginning of his *The Magi*.<sup>204</sup>

The predominance of the visual in the poems such as "The Magi" leads Pound to inquire about the origins of Yeats's new poetic method. Pound's answer to the question he himself asks in the review, "Is Mr. Yeats an Imagiste?" is negative: Pound still sees Yeats as a symbolist poet, but undoubtedly this austere visual quality of

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<sup>203</sup> Ezra Pound, "The Later Yeats. *Responsibilities*, by W. B. Yeats," in: *Poetry*, Vol. IV, No. 2, 1914, p. 64.

<sup>204</sup> Pound, "The Later Yeats. *Responsibilities*, by W. B. Yeats," p. 64.

several of the new poems electrifies Pound and provokes comparisons with Imagism. Such comparisons were not unsubstantiated, since Pound had defined an “Image” as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”<sup>205</sup> Pound concedes that Yeats’s poems are not inspired by the new movement<sup>206</sup> and stresses the differences between the poetic forms: the novel ones (the “devil’s metres” of the Imagists) versus the relatively traditional:

No, Mr. Yeats is a symbolist, but he has written *des Images* as have many good poets before him; so that is nothing against him, and he has nothing against them (*les Imagistes*), at least so far as I know – except what he calls “their devil’s metres.”<sup>207</sup>

In *Responsibilities* Yeats’s experimentation with form and imagery significantly contributes to the development of the poet’s individual style. “Paudeen,” “The Magi,” and “The Cold Heaven” are visionary and expressive, yet simultaneously relatively short. The images they present are sketched rather than painstakingly painted; the literary moments seem almost unprepared for, and yet, unlike the usually subtler, more understated Romantic epiphanies, they often overwhelm with the emotional charge they carry. In his subsequent collections of poems Yeats will often return to the aesthetic of the vision, developing his template of visionary epiphanies. Characteristically, the images that become parts of the Yeatsian vision originate in Yeats’s esoteric philosophies. The speakers in these poems – when speakers are present – are usually portrayed as unimportant, secondary parts of the cosmic machinery, witnesses to its destructive force or prophets of things to come, inescapably subjected to the processes beyond their control. The portrayals of such an indifferent,

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<sup>205</sup> Pound, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” p. 200.

<sup>206</sup> Between 1913 and 1916 Pound and Yeats frequently stayed together at Stone Cottage in England, and although Pound decidedly wanted to “modernize” Yeats, it was probably Yeats who became Pound’s mentor and not the opposite.

<sup>207</sup> Pound, “The Later Yeats. *Responsibilities*, by W. B. Yeats,” p. 67.

de-humanized world become more frequent in Yeats's middle- to late poetry; nevertheless, Yeats regularly returns to the poetics that focuses on individuals and their emotions and is largely devoid of the imagery and symbols originating in the occult. To portray relationships between individuals, the poet frequently chooses to return to the language of Romanticism. Although with time those Romantic overtones in Yeats's poetry become less frequent and less obvious, in *Responsibilities*, amid its overpowering visions and political concerns, Yeats unexpectedly revives the convention of the Romantic literary moment in the short lyric "A Memory of Youth."

In "A Memory of Youth" the speaker complains about his failed attempts to revive the feeling of love between himself and the person he once loved. These attempts are conscious, motivated by the speaker's decision to bring back the lost affection:

The moments passed as at a play;  
I had the wisdom love brings forth;  
I had my share of mother-wit,  
And yet for all that I could say,  
And though I had her praise for it,  
A cloud blown from the cut-throat north  
Suddenly hid Love's moon away.<sup>208</sup>

The speaker is disappointed as he realizes that "the wisdom love brings forth" and his "share of mother-wit" are not enough, and it seems impossible to be in love again – so, instead of being united by love, the lovers share the same frustration, sitting "silent as a stone" until their sadness is suddenly dispelled by what appears to be a very irrelevant occurrence:

Believing every word I said,  
I praised her body and her mind  
Till pride had made her eyes grow bright,

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<sup>208</sup> Yeats, "A Memory of Youth," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 174.

And pleasure made her cheeks grow red,  
 And vanity her footfall light,  
 Yet we, for all that praise, could find  
 Nothing but darkness overhead.

We sat as silent as a stone,  
 We knew, though she'd not said a word,  
 That even the best of love must die,  
 And had been savagely undone  
 Were it not that Love upon the cry  
 Of a most ridiculous little bird  
 Tore from the clouds his marvellous moon.<sup>209</sup>

On reading the first and the second stanza, it is not clear whether the situation portrayed here takes place at a location where the lovers can actually see the parts of the sky mentioned by the unhappy speaker, such as the moon, the cloud or “the darkness overhead.” These elements of the hypothetical landscape could be merely metaphors used to describe the lovers’ state of mind – they may, after all, be sitting in a living room belabouring the miserable situation in which they found themselves; one could even imagine them as being completely alone, separated by both distance and time, subjected to the continuous flow of their own melancholy thoughts. The cloud “blown from the cut-thrown north” darkens the “Love’s moon,” not just the *moon* – such a personification of Love makes the figurative reading quite plausible. Nonetheless, the last stanza, where the cry of the “ridiculous little bird” is mysteriously correlated with the reappearance of Love’s “marvellous moon,” makes the reader realize that it is probably the literal interpretation of the “landscape” that allows for one of the most satisfactory readings – when the poem’s ending becomes a skilfully outlined Romantic epiphany, and the entire poem – a portrayal of a brief episode that took place outdoors.

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<sup>209</sup> Yeats, “A Memory of Youth,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 174.

It is quite plausible that to make the reader's mind focus on the visual aspects of the poem and on the immediacy of the situation described in "A Memory of Youth" was Yeats's intention from the beginning: at least two different versions of the poem exist; the second, corrected version significantly changes the poem's mood. The changes introduced in the second part of the first stanza allow the reader to imagine the scene and to see it as a description of a brief episode that happened at a definite point of time in the past, while in the earlier version the line "Love's moon was withering away" has a less visual character, inviting a figurative reading of "Love" as emotional "fullness" – the feeling of fulfilment that may be affected by the passage of time. Here is the first version of this part of the first stanza:

And yet for all that I could say,  
And though I had her praise for it,  
And she seemed happy as a king,  
Love's moon was withering away.<sup>210</sup>

In the later version of the poem, the gradual "withering" of "Love's moon" is replaced by the moon's sudden disappearance. This disappearance is caused by an external agent, "A cloud blown from the cut-throat north."<sup>211</sup> It is not only the presence of this additional element of the hypothetical landscape that prepares the conditions for the epiphany by placing the couple in what can be now read as a more specific, "real" location – Yeats changes the time-frame as well. While in the first version the moon's "withering" may be associated with the changing phases of the waning moon, the process taking place over a relatively long expanse of time,<sup>212</sup> in the modified version the disappearance of the moon occurs "suddenly." This sudden disappearance behind

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<sup>210</sup> Yeats, "Love and the Bird," *Poetry*, Vol. I, No. 3, 1912, p. 69.

<sup>211</sup> Yeats, "A Memory of Youth," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 174.

<sup>212</sup> Read as a metaphor, this image probably more accurately reflects the gradual process of emotional estrangement between the couple than the sudden disappearance of the moon, but it is not necessarily more expressive.



clouds can be now easily noticed by the speaker and his companion, while the gradual “withering” of the full moon would be rather difficult to follow:

And yet for all that I could say,  
 And though I had her praise for it,  
 A cloud blown from the cut-throat north  
 Suddenly hid Love’s moon away.<sup>213</sup>

The alterations in Stanza I were, however, not the last changes introduced in “A Memory of Youth.” Yeats changed the last stanza as well; in the earlier version of the poem love merely restores the right order of things by allowing “his marvellous moon” to shine again, as if tossing it back into the air:

Were it not that love, upon the cry  
 Of a most ridiculous little bird,  
 Threw up in the air his marvellous moon.<sup>214</sup>

However, in the later version Love appears to have lost control over the moon and, apparently urged by the “most ridiculous little bird,” has to engage in a scuffle with the hostile envoys of the “cut-throat” north. The inclusion of yet another element of the material world, the clouds, in the later version makes it easier to imagine the situation as taking place in a specific place and time: to see the bird, the moon and the clouds as three elements of an actual landscape observed by the couple and as a result to read the ending as a model epiphany:

Were it not that Love upon the cry  
 Of a most ridiculous little bird  
 Tore from the clouds his marvellous moon.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Yeats, “A Memory of Youth,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 174.

<sup>214</sup> Yeats, “Love and the Bird,” p. 69.

<sup>215</sup> Yeats, “A Memory of Youth,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 174.

The crying of the bird coincides with the reappearance of the moon, which suddenly lightens the sky. This coincidence is nonetheless perceived by the observers as very significant – not accidental at all – and the “most ridiculous little bird” now appears to be assigned the role of a mysterious, maybe even supernatural agency, whose mission was to restore the lost harmony. As a result of this extraordinary intervention, a surprising transformation takes place in the minds of the lovers and the feeling of love between the two is restored.

While both suddenness and brevity are characteristic traits of virtually every epiphany, as “epiphany lasts only a moment, but leaves an enduring effect,”<sup>216</sup> the poem’s literary moment also perfectly fulfils Langbaum’s rather restrictive criterion of suddenness, which requires of epiphany not only to occur suddenly and unexpectedly, but also to be a result of “a sudden change in external conditions” which “causes a shift in sensuous perception that sensitizes the observer for epiphany.”<sup>217</sup> Simultaneously, it is one of the few Yeats epiphanies that relatively closely reproduce the conventional Romantic representation of epiphany-experience – although, not surprisingly, this Romantic convention is here in part adapted to Yeats’s new style. Overall, of all Yeats’s literary epiphanies, the literary moment in “A Memory of Youth” probably best fulfils the various criteria defining the literary epiphany, the likely reason being this epiphany relies on literary conventions more than other literary moments created by Yeats.

As for the general criteria, the literary moment in “A Memory of Youth” fulfils Morris Beja’s two basic requirements for the literary epiphany: the incongruity criterion and the criterion of insignificance, and all of the stricter criteria added later by

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<sup>216</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 44.

<sup>217</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 44.

Robert Langbaum. The criterion of incongruity<sup>218</sup> is met because there is no evident connection between the epiphany and the object that triggers it: the mysterious conjunction of the reappearance of the moon and the bird's cry is not rationally related to the sudden restoration of the long lost feelings of love between the couple. The origin of epiphany in a "trivial incident,"<sup>219</sup> the requirement of the criterion of insignificance contested by Bidney and Shallcross, can be seen in the implied "insignificance" of the bird's cry. Although the Joycean "triviality"<sup>220</sup> of the circumstances from which epiphany arises is a chiefly Modernist assumption, the Romantics often saw the origins of their epiphanies in objects that were insignificant and inconspicuous, but often beautiful, and not necessarily trivial. The bird and the sudden light of the moon could be typically Romantic "activators" of epiphany, but Yeats makes the bird indeed more trivial and less romantic by using the adjective *ridiculous*. Whether "trivial" or merely "unimportant," the insignificance of the incident that brought about the desired change is manifest, especially when the solitary bird's cry is compared to the whole arsenal of the speaker's commonsense strategies of overcoming his problem ("the wisdom love can bring," "my share of mother-wit") that proved futile.

The epiphany in "A Memory of Youth" also satisfactorily fulfils all of Langbaum's strict criteria, mainly because the poem portrays the incident that led to the transformation in its entirety and depicts the brief episode in a relatively conventional manner. Hence, quite characteristically, this epiphany is sudden, lasts only a moment and leaves the "epiphanee" transformed. Even one of the most

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<sup>218</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 16. Beja defines his criterion of incongruity as follows: "When the cause of an illumination is clearly important, there is no epiphany unless the revelation is not strictly relevant to whatever produces it."

<sup>219</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 16.

<sup>220</sup> Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, p. 211. "This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies."

debatable requirements, Langbaum's criterion of psychological association, is satisfied here: the epiphany is a result of "a real sensuous experience"<sup>221</sup> which is here described in detail, in contrast to, for example, the epiphany in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" or Yeats's visionary epiphanies, where the literary moments are not faithful, meticulous and orderly renditions of the hypothetical event, often leaving out much of the episode to the reader's imagination, but mainly aim at recreating the distinctive mood that is assumed to accompany the phenomenon of epiphany, including the feelings of astonishment, surprise or shock caused by the mystery and inexplicability that often characterize the experience.<sup>222</sup> While the first strategy of a relatively orderly, precise representation was common in Romantic poetry, especially in the poetry written by Wordsworth and Coleridge, and in Modernist prose (several of Joyce's epiphanies in *Dubliners* or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are relatively thorough portrayals of such episodes), the second tactic, one which probably allows for more experimentation and innovation, becomes more popular in the poetry written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and later. While, as we have also seen in *Responsibilities*, Yeats gradually abandons the Romantic conventions in favour of experimentation, "A Memory of Youth" is a good example of how a typical pattern of the Romantic epiphany can be consciously revived by Yeats when the poem's theme is to reflect many of the characteristically Romantic values. In "A Memory of Youth" these Romantic values are expressed in the belief that mystery is an inextricable part of romantic love and in the conviction that being reasonable often proves ineffective when one faces the loss of love. Yeats's poem also echoes the reverence for nature

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<sup>221</sup> Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," p. 44. Langbaum's criterion of psychological association requires of an epiphany to be "a psychological phenomenon arising from a real sensuous experience, either present or recollected."

<sup>222</sup> Bidney, *Patterns of Epiphany*, p. 2. "A literary epiphany, then, is a moment that is felt to be expansive, mysterious, and intense."

shared by the Romantics and their belief that even the smallest, insignificant things or incidents may be of value.

Furthermore, in “A Memory of Youth” Yeats does not only precisely depict, in the manner characteristic of the Romantic epiphanic mode, the chronological structure of the process leading to epiphany, but also borrows one of the images frequently accompanying Wordsworth’s literary moments: the image of the moon whose light or position suddenly changes. The gradually “descending” and later suddenly disappearing moon precedes the speaker’s ominous insight in Wordsworth’s “Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known”:

My horse moved on; hoof after hoof  
He raised, and never stopped:  
When down behind the cottage roof,  
At once, the bright moon dropped.

What fond and wayward thoughts will slide  
Into a lover’s head!  
“O mercy!” to myself I cried,  
“If Lucy should be dead!”<sup>223</sup>

Conversely, in “A Night-Piece” the light of the moon that unexpectedly breaks through the clouds reveals to the so far “unobserving eye” of the solitary traveller the “glory of the heavens”:

At length a pleasant instantaneous gleam  
Startles the pensive traveller while he treads  
His lonesome path, with unobserving eye  
Bent earthwards; he looks up – the clouds are split  
Asunder – and above his head he sees  
The clear Moon, and the glory of the heavens.  
There, in a black-blue vault she sails along,  
Followed by multitudes of stars, that, small  
And sharp, and bright, along the dark abyss  
Drive as she drives: how fast they wheel away,

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<sup>223</sup> Wordsworth, “Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known,” in: Wordsworth, *The Collected Poems*, p. 125.

Yet vanish not! – the wind is in the tree,  
 But they are silent; – still they roll along  
 Immeasurably distant; and the vault,  
 Built round by those white clouds, enormous clouds,  
 Still deepens its unfathomable depth.  
 At length the Vision closes; and the mind,  
 Not undisturbed by the delight it feels,  
 Which slowly settles into peaceful calm,  
 Is left to muse upon the solemn scene.<sup>224</sup>

Wordsworth's portrayal of the moment of vision reflects his belief that such moments of heightened perception frequently take place when the human mind, previously focused on an activity requiring a great deal of concentration, suddenly relaxes:

I have remarked from my earliest days that if, under any circumstances, the attention is energetically braced up to an act of steady observation, or of steady expectation, then, if this intense condition of vigilance should suddenly relax, at that moment any beautiful, any impressive visual object, or collection of objects, falling upon the eye, is carried to the heart with a power not known under other circumstances.<sup>225</sup>

Wordsworth's explanation resembles Langbaum's description of the criterion of suddenness, where the phenomenon of epiphany is attributed to a "sudden change in external conditions [which] causes a shift in sensuous perception that sensitizes the observer for epiphany."<sup>226</sup> Although Yeats may not have necessarily read the above passage in which De Quincey quotes Wordsworth's description of the mechanics of the process leading to an epiphany, a careful reading of "A Memory of Youth" reveals multiple parallels between Yeats's and Wordsworth's portrayals of the literary moment, thus suggesting that Yeats could be here inspired by Wordsworth's poetry,

<sup>224</sup> Wordsworth, "A Night-Piece," in: Wordsworth, *The Collected Poems*, p. 214.

<sup>225</sup> De Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, pp. 160-161, quoted in: Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," p. 53. Wordsworth's description has been discussed earlier, in Chapter One, in relation to Langbaum's criterion of suddenness.

<sup>226</sup> Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," p. 44.

and in “A Memory of Youth” he intentionally recreated many of the typically Wordsworthian strategies related to the creation of the epiphanic mode to give his poem a specifically Romantic ambience.

“A Memory of Youth,” despite its relatively faithful recreation of the Romantic moment, is not devoid of the Yeatsian experimentation which to a significant degree marks *Responsibilities*, making it a truly modern volume of verse. While “When You Are Old” (1893, *The Rose*) basically replicates the Romantic strategies of writing in the epiphanic mode, and “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (1893, *The Rose*) reflects a typically Romantic attitude in a poem where Yeats’s experimentation focuses for the most part on the form (the meter and rhythm that are meant to evoke a trance-like mood), “A Memory of Youth” constructs its literary moment by introducing the element that reflects the theme of the poem in the poem’s form, and does so in a very original manner, stressing the startling contrast between the ostensible insignificance of the bird’s cry and the unexpected, sudden transformation of the speaker’s state of mind. Yeats achieves this in the juxtaposition of the words *ridiculous* (“ridiculous little bird”) and *marvellous* (“marvellous moon”) in the last two lines of the poem:<sup>227</sup>

Were it not that Love upon the cry  
Of a most ridiculous little bird  
Tore from the clouds his marvellous moon.<sup>228</sup>

The strategy of accompanying the descriptions of the moments of heightened perception by certain carefully chosen words or sounds that could intensify the effect

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<sup>227</sup> This effective juxtaposition of *marvellous* and *ridiculous* is also noted by Nichols in his interpretation of the epiphanic moment in the poem (*The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 187-188). According to the critic, the poem’s epiphany is “characteristically modern”: “[t]he achievement of the poem is not an elevation into another world, but a clear vision of this world [...] The ‘ridiculous little bird’ grounds the experience completely in the world of ordinary events, while love’s ‘marvellous moon’ displays the mind’s ability to redeem the self from darkness in a revelatory illumination. The poem ends in a radiant vision of love in a mortal world, a love that is at once flawed and blessed.”

<sup>228</sup> Yeats, “A Memory of Youth,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 174.

the literary epiphany has on the reader was occasionally pursued by Romantic poets: Robert Langbaum, in his analysis of Wordsworth's literary epiphanies, comments on "A Night-Piece" noting Wordsworth's frequent choice of the word *roll*: "This is a typically Wordsworthian epiphany of the cosmic process, characterized by Wordsworth's favourite verb "roll," a word that adds the tactile to the visual and auditory senses."<sup>229</sup> However, while the verb *roll* does not deliberately stand out in the Wordsworth poem, and was not intended to become a part of a word-play, Yeats strongly accentuates the pair *ridiculous/marvellous* in "A Memory of Youth," constructing the last two lines of the poem's ending on the opposition of the two words. The contrast between the speaker's cynicism and annoyance detectable in the phrase "a most ridiculous little bird" and the startling transformation symbolized by "Love's marvellous moon" is here, paradoxically, intensified by the auditory similarity of the two adjectives. The impact of the sudden transformation that ultimately saves the affection between the couple still outweighs the largely Modernist feelings of ennui and distrust evident in the speaker's attitude, in a manner similar to how the word *marvellous* ultimately overshadows and erases the negative overtones of *ridiculous* – thus, in the end, the poem manages to retain its Romantic character. Nonetheless, the aggressive adjective *ridiculous* introduces a non-Romantic dissonance in this otherwise conventional Romantic pattern, as if prefiguring the gradual disappearance of the Romantic convention of the positively transforming epiphanies in Yeats's poetry and, at the same time, signalling, as has been already noticeable in other Yeats's poems in *Responsibilities*, a further departure from the conventions shaping the epiphanic mode in Romanticism in favour of more experimentation and novelty.

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<sup>229</sup> Langbaum, "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature," p. 53.



Yeats's style changes and evolves, yet it does not evolve in the direction of uniformity. The poet's next book of verse, *The Wild Swans at Coole*, contains poems as diverse as the title poem and, for example, "The Phases of the Moon." Reflecting the difficult period in Yeats's life, the volume is more concerned with memories and re-examination of the poet's life and achievement, and adopts the tone more personal than this heard in *Responsibilities*. The transpersonal vision of *Responsibilities* and its "cold light" or "hard light" quality hailed by Pound are in the new volume replaced by the scrupulous examination of the vicissitudes and paradoxes of life. Poems such as "The Wild Swans at Coole" or "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" are no less epiphanic than "The Magi" or "The Cold Heaven," but they achieve their poetic effects in a different way, by focusing on the specific and the personal, and by adopting the imagery, reflected in the diction of the poems, that is characterized by a melancholy balance instead of the panic-stricken, dynamic tension characteristic of Yeats's terse visionary poems.

"The Wild Swans at Coole" is a masterpiece among poems whose effect relies on creating multiple perspectives, equilibriums and frequent shifts. It allows the reader to share in the visionary moments not just at the end, where the poem's final insight is expressed in a question, but repeatedly throughout the poem. The form and themes of this regular five-stanza lyric suggest Yeats's renewed interests in the poetics of Romanticism, indicating a deliberate adherence to the Romantic convention of longer epiphanic poems, one often adopted by Wordsworth and Coleridge, and – to a certain extent – a deliberate rejection of the Modernist experimentation Yeats eagerly pursued in *Responsibilities*. Nonetheless, "The Wild Swans at Coole" renounces the faith in the curative power of the moments of profound insight that was so frequently proclaimed by the Romantics.

In “The Wild Swans at Coole” Yeats, in a characteristically Wordsworthian manner, introduces the speaker who is a solitary walker affected by the poignant beauty of autumn in the Coole woods and who, as a result of the contemplation of this autumnal scenery, is suddenly possessed with memories. The poem, moving from the visual description of Stanza I, through the recollection of the speaker’s visit to the lake in the distant past in Stanza II, and ending with the recognition of his uncertain future at the end, recreates the conventional pattern of epiphany-experience. The speaker’s solitude, the poem’s nostalgic, recollective mood, its celebration of the beauty of nature, an attempt to point at something unchanging beyond individual life – all these characteristics may also be associated with the aesthetics of the Romantic moment. What is more, in its first published version the poem to a certain extent reflected the optimistic Romantic idea that something always survives an individual’s life on earth – be it the human soul, one’s offspring, future generations, memory or art:

In its original version, “The Wild Swans at Coole” concluded with the lines that later became the poem’s penultimate, fourth stanza:<sup>230</sup>

Unwearied still, lover by lover,  
They paddle in the cold  
Companionable streams or climb the air;  
Their hearts have not grown old;  
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,  
Attend upon them still.<sup>231</sup>

The mood of this first, original ending in many respects resembles Romantic literary moments. As, for example, in Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight,” in the poem’s conclusion the speaker’s personal concerns are no longer, it appears, of the utmost importance. This shift, constituting a sudden change in perspective, helps build the

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<sup>230</sup> Albright, notes to Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 550. The original sequence of stanzas was I, II, V, III, IV.

<sup>231</sup> Yeats, “The Wild Swans at Coole,” in: *The Poems*, p. 180.

poem's epiphanic moment. The last image of the swans may symbolize a realm of the ideal, one continuing to exist "somewhere" beyond individual life. Ending the poem with an image suggesting continuity and persistence does not have to have the negative, poignant impact of the conclusion of the later version: even though this perfect realm is inaccessible to the speaker, the beauty of the restless birds can still be contemplated in this, imperfect and flawed, world. Moreover, as this image is the poem's ultimate, the vision of the ideal it presents is never dispelled. The word *still*, used twice in this stanza, only intensifies this last impression.

Yeats, however, decided to change the sequence of stanzas. While the discussed above, now penultimate stanza may still be read as a moment of vision in which the alienated speaker could momentarily transcend the limitations of his earthly existence, finding a temporary relief, the last stanza of the poem's ultimate version reintroduces the perspective focusing on the speaker's suffering "I," suggesting that the moment of vision cannot last:

But now they drift on the still water,  
Mysterious, beautiful;  
Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake's edge or pool  
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away?<sup>232</sup>

The speaker does not derive much hope from the apparent immutability of the world of swans; on the contrary, the realm of the ideal he imagines makes him all the more aware of his transience and mortality. The insight concluding this stanza constitutes the poem's ultimate literary moment, making the reverie of "The Wild Swans at Coole" much more pessimistic than the first reading (of the poem's first version) would suggest. The word twilight, repeated twice, prefigures the poem's

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<sup>232</sup> Yeats, "The Wild Swans at Coole," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 181.

ending. Although Yeats borrows a Romantic idea – it has frequently been suggested that the poem’s symbol of the swan originates in Shelley’s *Alastor*, where the swan is also seen as an embodiment of everything the speaker cannot be – the conclusion of “The Wild Swans at Coole” is conceived as a much darker, pessimistic version of the Romantic literary moment.

The still waters of the lake and the silhouettes of the swans, the symbols pervading Yeats’s both early and mature poetry, might also invite a symbolist reading inspired by Yeats’s occult ideas, but “The Wild Swans at Coole” is relatively deficient in the philosophical or esoteric reflection that may be significant in the interpretation of the related images of “Broken Dreams” or “Coole and Ballylee, 1931.” “The Wild Swans at Coole” focuses instead, in the manner characteristic of the conventional epiphanic mode, on the perception of a significant experience, making the swans and the lake the primary, sensuous sources of this experience rather than spiritual, esoteric symbols or metaphors that facilitate understanding of concepts or ideas. In “Broken Dreams” (also from *The Wild Swans at Coole*) the poem’s symbolism is closely related to Yeats’s occult ideas, and the distinctive mood is created differently:

Your small hands were not beautiful,  
 And I am afraid that you will run  
 And paddle to the wrist  
 In that mysterious, always brimming lake  
 Where those that have obeyed the holy law  
 paddle and are perfect.<sup>233</sup>

This fragment of “Broken Dreams,” one of Yeats’s remarkable and exceptional poems in its consistent choice of free verse over more traditional forms, constitutes a brief, one-image epiphany that interrupts the speaker’s reflection in the poem. Passages such

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<sup>233</sup> Yeats, “Broken Dreams,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 202.

as this share a certain affinity with symbolism and often draw on the imagery that has its source in Yeats's system of theosophical thought.

Another poem which departs from the blueprint of the Romantic moment for a more elusive and less structured pattern is "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" from the same volume, *The Wild Swans at Coole*. The reflection of the poem's subject matter in the poem's form and sounds, through multiple repetitions or pairings of words, alliteration and consonance, creates a lyric that gains its momentum through the gradual amplification of the effect of balance that is completed, and then broken, in the ominous insight of the concluding lines:

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.<sup>234</sup>

The consonance in "A lonely impulse of delight," where the repetition of the [l] sound produces the effect of stillness, balance and the "delight" described by the aviator, is one of the poetic devices that create the impression of a slow, sliding movement in the poem. Simultaneously, the alliterative accumulation of plosives in the subsequent lines *delight/drove*, *balanced/brought*, and the word *tumult* with its repeated stop consonant of [t] – breaks regularly, though in a subtle way, the uninterrupted, balanced slip of the aircraft, revealing the poignant resolve in the pilot's decision to renounce his unfulfilled past and uncertain future for the sake of the momentary "delight" of flying – and prefiguring the moment of death, already "foreseen" in the first line in the poem, when the airman's life will be terminated in the

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<sup>234</sup> Yeats, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 184.

actual “tumult” of the crashing plane. The equilibrium the poem achieves is intensified by the repetition of certain words: *balance/balanced*, *breath*, *clouds*, all of them suggestive of liberation, and of parts of lines, e.g., “Those that I fight I do not hate / Those that I guard I do not love.”<sup>235</sup> In the closing lines, the prolonged “moment” of the poem turns to a negative epiphany balancing life and death, but ultimately ending with *death*, and the effect the last lines have on the reader is intensified by the complex interplay of several phrases and words: *years*, *waste of breath* and *death*, where the repetition of the phrase *waste of breath* indicates *the* absence of freedom and joy sought by the aviator, both in his past life and in the future he imagines. Eventually, the insight of the poem’s ending is one of the most ambiguous in Yeats’s poetry: there is certainly negativity and a sense of the tragic implied by *death*, the last word in the poem, but at the same time “this life” and “this death” act as liberating forces, as if prolonging the strange balance achieved by both the poem and its tragic hero.

*The Wild Swans at Coole* was followed in 1921 by *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. Although the 1921 collection of poetry was one of the least voluminous books in Yeats’s oeuvre, it contained what is arguably Yeats’s most famous poem – “The Second Coming.” The poem was written in January 1919 and first published in November 1920 in *The Dial*. The arresting, terrifying moment of revelation it enacts is certainly one of the most unconventional and most remarkable interpretations of the poetics of epiphany in 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry. The model of the literary moment “The Second Coming” outlines remains characteristically Yeatsian in many respects; it is not inspired by any immediately recognizable Romantic or Victorian conventions. “The Second Coming” creates its own poetics of the paralyzing vision by alluding to

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<sup>235</sup> Yeats, “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 184.

Yeats's theory of the gyres of history, drawing on the imagery of the theophanic visions in the biblical Book of Revelation, and also by choosing an unusual form.

A similar scheme of the literary moment is adopted in Yeats's "Leda and the Swan." The poem was written in September 1923, first published in *The Dial* in 1924, subsequently included in *A Vision* (in Book V, "Dove or Swan") and ultimately republished in Yeats's 1928 volume, *The Tower*. Although "Leda and the Swan" is an interpretation of a Greek myth, both this poem and "The Second Coming" use resonant, graphic imagery, respectively from the Bible and from the myth, to allude to Yeats's theory of the gyres of history the poet thoroughly expounded in *A Vision*. Each new era in the history of mankind is, according to Yeats, preceded and announced by a "revelation as in a lightning flash":

The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction. At the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward, unlike that before the birth of Christ which was narrowing, and has almost reached its greatest expansion. The revelation which approaches will however take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre. All our scientific, democratic, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not the continuance of itself but the revelation as in a lightning flash, though in a flash that will strike only in one place, and will for a time be constantly repeated, of the civilization that must slowly take its place. This is too simple a statement, for much detail is possible.<sup>236</sup>

The moments of revelatory insight of Yeats's "The Second Coming," "Leda and the Swan" and "The Magi" allude to the same idea of history conceived of as a succession of antithetical ages. "The Second Coming" portrays the moment of the "revelation as in a lightning flash" itself, while according to Yeats's explanation in *A*

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<sup>236</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (Dundrum: Cuala Press, 1920), pp. 33-34. The text is a fragment of Yeats's long note on "The Second Coming."

*Vision*, “Leda and the Swan” represents the moment of the “annunciation that founded Greece.”<sup>237</sup> The travelling seers of “The Magi” anticipate the incoming revelation auguring a new, post-Christian age.

In *A Vision* Yeats begins the description of the age that preceded the Christian era by locating its origin in the events described by the Greek myth of Leda and the swan, estimating that the age began in the year 2000 BC:

I imagine the annunciation that founded Greece as made to Leda, remembering that they showed in a Spartan temple, strung up to the roof as a holy relic, an unhatched egg of hers; and that from one of her eggs came Love and from the other War.<sup>238</sup>

Daniel Albright observes that “Leda and the Swan” and “The Second Coming” are to a certain extent symmetrical, pointing out that the year 2000 BC, which is “the year in which the swan came to Leda to inaugurate the heroic age,”<sup>239</sup> and AD 2000 “rhyme with each other; and so it is to be expected that this poem [“Leda and the Swan”] bears many similarities to “The Second Coming.”<sup>240</sup> Other parallels between “Leda and the Swan” and “The Second Coming” include the poems’ literary form: in *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* Helen Vendler discusses the pair in the same chapter, noting that both poems can be conceived of as original transformations of the sonnet form, ultimately calling the new forms “monstrous” sonnets. Writing about “The Second Coming,” which Vendler sees as an extended sonnet consisting of “two successive octaves”<sup>241</sup> and a sestet, Vendler relates the poem’s form to its unsettling subject:

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<sup>237</sup> W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1962), p. 268.

<sup>238</sup> Yeats, *A Vision*, p. 268.

<sup>239</sup> Daniel Albright, notes to W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman’s Library, 1992), p. 664.

<sup>240</sup> Albright, notes to Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 664.

<sup>241</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 169.



And why must this sonnet be an expanded one? Because it foretells a monstrous birth, for one thing, and is one of Yeats's several experiments, of which "High Talk" is another, in making the sonnet monstrous. "Leda and the Swan," to which I turn after investigating "The Second Coming," is yet another "monstrous" form.<sup>242</sup>

*A Vision* provides yet another clue as to how the poems may be related. In one of the chapters of the book, "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends: An Extract from a Record Made by His Pupils," Yeats describes one of the anecdotal conversations between Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne. The friends discuss the third, supposedly unhatched Leda's egg, showing to those who witness the debate a bizarre, "hyacinthine blue"<sup>243</sup> relic. The blue egg, Robartes claims, came into his possession in the course of his journey to the East (still, Robartes is hopelessly vague on the details of the actual event) and is thought to be still capable of hatching. Robartes discusses the egg in the context of the end of the current civilization, as the friends apparently have met "to consider the terror that is to come,"<sup>244</sup> and suggests that he and his two friends, Owen Aherne and Mary Bell, are going to "return to the desert" in order for the mysterious artefact to be hatched:

Those of you who are learned in the classics will have recognised the lost egg of Leda, its miraculous life still unquenched. I return to the desert in a few days with Owen Aherne and this lady chosen by divine wisdom for its guardian and bearer. When I have found the appointed place, Owen Aherne and I will dig a shallow hole where she must lay it and leave it to be hatched by the sun's heat.<sup>245</sup>

In "The Second Coming" the recipient of the revelation sees a sphinx-like creature, "A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as

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<sup>242</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 170.

<sup>243</sup> Yeats, *A Vision*, p. 51.

<sup>244</sup> Yeats, *A Vision*, p. 50.

<sup>245</sup> Yeats, *A Vision*, p. 51.

the sun,”<sup>246</sup> heralding the age to come amid the “sands of the desert.”<sup>247</sup> The word *desert* is repeated in the phrase “shadows of the indignant desert birds”<sup>248</sup> later in the poem. If this desert is to be understood literally, as an element of the “vast” image coming from the cosmic repository of *Spiritus Mundi* and revealed to the speaker in his terrifying vision, then the monstrous herald of the new age and Leda’s unhatched egg may be parts of the same “embodied” myth that connects and organizes both poems and, simultaneously, vividly illustrates Yeats’s idea of the interlocking gyres of history.

The same theme of the “supernaturally driven historical change producing an incarnate signal of the new”<sup>249</sup> may be one of the reasons why Yeats decided to contour the epiphanic moments he envisions in “The Second Coming” and “Leda and the Swan” using the same template of a powerful image accompanied with a puzzling insight expressed in the form of a question. The visual articulacy of both images may suggest that in each poem the image itself may be part of the flash of revelation and thus the image and the insight (the question) are apprehended simultaneously by an anonymous witness. This model of the literary moment constituted by a description of a mystifying, perplexing vision whose purported source is the *Anima Mundi* has its closest equivalent in the pattern used in Yeats’s “The Magi” (from 1914 *Responsibilities*), in which the very image of the travelling seers may be considered part of the startling revelation the speaker receives, making the whole poem a description of a momentary flash constituted by an instant of visionary perception. As in “The Magi” the purpose of the travellers’ pursuit is to finally discover “the

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<sup>246</sup> Yeats, “The Second Coming,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 235.

<sup>247</sup> Yeats, “The Second Coming,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 235.

<sup>248</sup> Yeats, “The Second Coming,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 235.

<sup>249</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 171.

uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor,”<sup>250</sup> an ominous harbinger of a new age succeeding the Christian era, “The Second Coming” and “Leda and the Swan” echo the poem also in choosing the same theme.

The visionary phantasmagorias of “The Second Coming” and “Leda and the Swan” are recognizably Yeatsian literary moments. The theme the poems share is also new, without a precedent in the poetry written in the English language, as Yeats’s ideas of the *Anima Mundi* as a repository of images and of the gyres of history were to a significant degree his own, shaped by the poet’s extensive studies of the occult, both in the theosophical societies such as The Golden Dawn and in the privacy of his own study. But is the model of the moment of recognition the poems share really unique? Is it possible to identify Yeats’s inspirations or elements of earlier conventions of the literary moment in “The Second Coming” and “Leda and the Swan”? While certain elements of the Romantic convention of the literary moment can be easily spotted in those of Yeats’s poems which were to a significant degree inspired by Romanticism and introduced relatively well-characterized speakers grappling with their emotions or their personal crises, Yeats’s aesthetics of the vision exemplified by “Leda and the Swan” and “The Second Coming” is not inspired by any particular literary model of the moment of recognition, even though in the case of “The Second Coming” Yeats’s allusion to the Apocalypse is clear. While it is possible to see Yeats’s model against the background of the conventions and ideas shaping the literary moment in Modernism and earlier, and, as I will try to show, certain parallels may be discovered here, the visionary moment of Yeats’s “middle phase” probably remains Yeats’s most idiosyncratic and most inventive interpretation of the poetics of the literary moment. This does not mean, of course, that “The Second Coming” and “Leda and the Swan”

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<sup>250</sup> Yeats, “The Magi,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 177.

have been created in a strange literary vacuum. Yeats's poetic imagination was moulded in the process involving a complex and often violent interaction of the ideas important for Modernists, Symbolists, Victorians and Romantics; what is more, Yeats was also an outspoken advocate of earlier literary tradition. "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan" are among best examples of Yeats's poems in which this complex influence is most clearly visible.

An interesting reading of "Leda and the Swan" has been proposed in Charles I. Armstrong's *Reframing Yeats*. Armstrong relates the poem's representation of the visionary moment to its form of the sonnet and concludes that Yeats was probably inspired by the English Aesthetic Movement and by Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry in particular:

Yeats inherits from Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Aesthetic movement of the Victorian age a conception of the brief, concentrated form of the sonnet as a means for constructing a "moment's monument." In response to artwork that depicts the events of a particular moment, the sonnet represents an especially apt formal choice. The way in which "Leda and the Swan" almost exclusively focusses upon the brief moment of encounter between divine bird and mortal woman bears evidence of a harnessing of the lyric form to the purpose of framing a passing instant of time.<sup>251</sup>

Although Armstrong's description of the form the poem is given as "brief and concentrated" is definitely very accurate, his decision to locate the origin of the convention that shapes the sonnet's literary moment in the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his contemporaries is probably too hurried. "Leda and the Swan" is one of Yeats's experiments with the form of the sonnet and as such it simultaneously upholds and defies tradition. Although choosing the form of the sonnet Yeats emphasizes his

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<sup>251</sup> Charles I. Armstrong, *Reframing Yeats: Genre, Allusion and History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 114.

allegiance to the European tradition, he does not hesitate to change the form to accommodate his rather unorthodox ideas. Helen Vendler sees these new forms as an expression of Yeats's defiant attitude to the English tradition of sonnet writing: "They are part of his way of saying, to his English readers, 'I am not writing the English sonnet as you know it. Even though I know it more intimately than you, it is for me a site of experiment, whereas for you it is a site of cultural memory.'" <sup>252</sup> Still, even though we cannot know whether or not Yeats's experimentation was, as Vendler suggests, in part motivated by a conscious rebellion against the English literary tradition, looking for the origins of the unusual, experimental form of "Leda and the Swan" in the relatively orthodox forms of Rossetti's sonnets is not particularly convincing. Of course, Armstrong makes the connection between the Yeats poem and Rossetti's sonnets mainly because of what he sees as using the respective forms with the same intention, the intention of "harnessing of the lyric form to the purpose of framing a passing instant of time." But while Yeats's sonnet is indeed an excellent example of doing so, Rossetti's phrase "moment's monument" never finds an equally powerful embodiment in Rossetti's sonnets. Rossetti's poetry, including "The Sonnet" (from which the phrase "a moment's monument" is borrowed), though it often approaches the aesthetics of the literary moment, is, with its accumulation of formless abstractions, almost antithetical to the poetics of the visionary moment of Yeats's middle poetry.

Still, the aesthetic of the well-defined form that characterizes Yeats's most resonant and most recognizable images <sup>253</sup> did not define Yeats's poetry from the beginning. In his early essay "The Autumn of the Body" the young Yeats confesses to

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<sup>252</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 181.

<sup>253</sup> The beast in "The Second Coming," the travelling Magi, Leda and the swan, and the golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium" may serve as examples of such images.

his admiration of “those faint lights and faint colours and faint outlines and faint energies which many call ‘the decadence,’”<sup>254</sup> associating what he calls “the autumn of the body”<sup>255</sup> in literature with the poetry written by Mallarmé, Bridges or Rossetti. But while Rossetti, according to Yeats, “began it, but was too much of a painter in his poetry to follow it with a perfect devotion,”<sup>256</sup> Robert Bridges was able to follow the precepts of the new movement dutifully as he “elaborated a rhythm too delicate for any but an almost bodiless emotion.”<sup>257</sup> The equivalent of the “bodiless emotion” in the visual arts was, according to Yeats, the school of painting represented by French Symbolists:

There has been, as I think, a like change in French painting, for one sees everywhere, instead of the dramatic stories and picturesque moments of an older school, frail and tremulous bodies unfitted for the labour of life, and landscape where subtle rhythms of colour and of form have overcome the clear outline of things as we see them in the labour of life.<sup>258</sup>

Still, as soon as the essay was published in Yeats’s *Ideas of Good and Evil* in 1903, Yeats sent a copy of the book to AE and in the letter which accompanied the book explained that he was “no longer in much sympathy with an essay like ‘The Autumn of the Body.’”<sup>259</sup> Yeats renounces his faith in the “bodiless emotion” of the Decadents and is resolved to write poetry whose language obeys his new creed: “to create form, to carry the realization of beauty as far as possible”:

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<sup>254</sup> W. B. Yeats, “The Autumn of the Body,” in: W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume IV: Early Essays*, eds Richard J. Finneran and George Bornstein (New York: Scribner, 2007), p. 140.

<sup>255</sup> Yeats, “The Autumn of the Body,” p. 140.

<sup>256</sup> Yeats, “The Autumn of the Body,” p. 140.

<sup>257</sup> Yeats, “The Autumn of the Body,” p. 140.

<sup>258</sup> Yeats, “The Autumn of the Body,” p. 140.

<sup>259</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 402.

The close of the last century was full of a strange desire to get out of form, to get to some kind of disembodied beauty, and now it seems to me the contrary impulse has come. I feel about me and in me an impulse to create form, to carry the realization of beauty as far as possible.<sup>260</sup>

This impulse “to create form” manifested itself in the eccentric, unconventional images of Yeats’s middle to late poetry. The skilful use of the aesthetic of one potent image becomes the *modus operandi* of Yeats’s visionary epiphanies: “Leda and the Swan” and “The Second Coming” construct their epiphanic moments juxtaposing the material, sensuous “form” of the images they present with the intellectual, “bodiless” substance of the revelatory insights of the poems’ conclusions. “Leda and the Swan” and “The Second Coming” model their respective visionary moments on the literary moment in “The Magi,” which suggests that the juxtaposition of one expressive image with the sudden recognition accompanying the speaker’s perception of this image must have been considered by Yeats an effective strategy. If so, could Yeats be, after all, and contrary to Pound’s assumptions, inspired by Pound’s conception of *Image*? Yeats met Pound in 1911 in Paris; two years later, at the beginning of 1913, Pound published his manifesto “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” in which he defined the image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”<sup>261</sup> Yeats wrote “The Magi” a few months later, in September 1913. Winter 1913/1914 was the first winter Yeats spent in England with Pound.

Still, if Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” and Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” are seen by many as near-perfect Modernist embodiments of the Poundian *Image*, Yeats’s visionary poems such as “Leda and the Swan” may be seen as rather capricious and whimsical exponents of the Imagist principles.

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<sup>260</sup> Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, p. 402.

<sup>261</sup> Pound, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” p. 200.

Unquestionably, “Leda and the Swan” may be interpreted as an exemplary model of a poem that aspires to “present an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”<sup>262</sup>; similarly, “The Second Coming,” though it begins with a series of images rather than with one significant image, imaginatively combines the speaker’s ominous recognition with an apocalyptic image in its last fourteen lines (or, according to Helen Vendler’s interpretation of the poem’s form, in the part which may be seen as the sonnet proper, one following the introductory octave of the poem). Pound’s instruction “to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation”<sup>263</sup> seems also acknowledged in Yeats’s shorter visionary poems. In 1914 *Poetry* Harriet Monroe quotes Yeats as saying “When I returned to London from Ireland, I had a young man go over all my work with me to eliminate the abstract. This was an American poet, Ezra Pound.”<sup>264</sup> But, as has been already noted, Yeats allied himself with “form” against the “bodiless emotion” and abstraction as early as in 1903, so his approval of Pound’s dislike of “ornamentation”<sup>265</sup> is hardly surprising. What is more, Pound’s idea of an image whose perceptive or imaginative apprehension is expected to be an intuitive, involuntary act of mind does not clash with Yeats’s conviction, expressed in 1903 *Ideas of Good and Evil*, that “wisdom first speaks in images.”<sup>266</sup> Hence it appears that Yeats accepted Imagism and its Modernist precepts only insofar as they reflected the poet’s own views as to what poetry should be or should become. The author of “Leda and the Swan” and “The Second Coming” may qualifiedly approve of the Imagist veneration of one image (as Yeats supposedly did, according to Pound’s

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<sup>262</sup> Pound, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” p. 200.

<sup>263</sup> Pound, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” p. 200.

<sup>264</sup> Harriet Monroe, “Poetry’s Banquet,” *Poetry*, Vol. IV, April-September, 1914, p. 27.

<sup>265</sup> Pound, “Vorticism,” p. 89.

<sup>266</sup> W. B. Yeats, “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” in: W. B. Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London: A. H. Bullen, 1903), p. 140.



assertion in the review of Yeats's *Responsibilities* in *Poetry*<sup>267</sup>), because a well-chosen image may be an excellent vehicle of the "form" Yeats wants to achieve. The most telling symbol of this striving for perfect form is maybe the golden bird in the golden city of "Sailing to Byzantium," the poem opening the volume *The Tower*, written in roughly the same period as "Leda and the Swan" and "The Second Coming" – in 1926. But the "artifice of eternity"<sup>268</sup> the mechanical bird inhabits is also telling of a fundamental conflict between the Imagist idea of a persuasive image and Yeats's conception of such an image. Simultaneously, the first lines of Stanza IV may be read as Yeats's revealing commentary on why he would never unqualifiedly accept Modernism:

Once out of nature I shall never take  
 My bodily form from any natural thing,  
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come.<sup>269</sup>

Yeats's "out of nature" aesthetics and his mythopoeic imagination are in their origin more Romantic than Modernist. In his rejection of the immediate and the quotidian Yeats resembles Romantic poets such as Shelley, while his decision to create a quasi-religious system that becomes a point of reference of many Yeats's poems makes him a disciple of William Blake. As a matter of fact, Shelley's ghost briefly appears in "The Second Coming," as the lines "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity"<sup>270</sup> are modelled on a fragment of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. Many of Yeats's most resonant, memorable images are inspired

<sup>267</sup> Pound, "The Later Yeats. *Responsibilities*, by W. B. Yeats," p. 67.

<sup>268</sup> Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 240.

<sup>269</sup> Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 240.

<sup>270</sup> Yeats, "The Second Coming," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 235.

by Yeats's lifelong pursuit of the otherworldly and the imaginary – the Modernist aesthetics of the commonplace never appealed to the poet. In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, an anthology of poetry edited by Yeats and published in 1936, Yeats comments on the Modernist tendency to celebrate the casual in a rather sarcastic tone:

It has sometimes seemed of late years, though not in the poems I have selected for this book, as if the poet could at any moment write a poem by recording the fortuitous scene or thought, perhaps it might be enough to put into some fashionable rhythm – “I am sitting in a chair, there are three dead flies on a corner of the ceiling.”<sup>271</sup>

In his discussion of Yeats's relationship to Modernism Daniel Albright quotes another comment that aptly illustrates the poet's ambivalence towards Modernist poetry:

Technically we are in a state corresponding to the time of Dryden [...] We are developing a poetry of statement as against the old metaphor. The poetry of tomorrow will be finely articulated fact. T. S. Eliot fascinates us all because he is further on towards this consummation than any other writer.<sup>272</sup>

This “old metaphor” was still an essential part of Yeats's poetry, and the adjective *old* is here as important as *metaphor*. The visionary moments of Yeats's middle and later poetry do not have and cannot have the cinematic texture of Williams's or Pound's images; instead, they transport the reader to the realm of the imagination. Yeats's Byzantium of “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium” has the atmosphere of a dream and the aura of atemporality comparable to Coleridge's Xanadu

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<sup>271</sup> W. B. Yeats, “Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936),” in: *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Vol. V: Later Essays*, ed. William H. O'Donnell (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), pp. 194-195. Also quoted in: Daniel Albright, “Yeats and Modernism,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to WB Yeats*, eds Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), p. 63.

<sup>272</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Interviews and Recollections, Vol. II*, ed. E. H. Mikhail (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977), p. 200, quoted in: Albright, “Yeats and Modernism,” p. 63.

in *Kubla Khan*. The poet's idea of *Anima Mundi* as a repository of images entailed a certain "timeless" quality of the poetic image and regardless of whether or not Yeats really believed in the supernatural origin of powerful images in poetry, his own idea obliged him. As the Joycean epiphany typically originates in the experience of living in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century city and celebrates the significance of the trivial and the immediate, Yeats's visionary moments of "Leda and the Swan" and "The Second Coming" can be seen as almost antithetical to this most characteristic and most well-known of the Modernist models of the sudden moment of recognition. Yeats's dislike of the modern city and modern technology has been frequently noted and has been often identified as an anti-Modernist impulse in the poet's work – Daniel Albright jokily asserts that "if Modernism is defined as the art of fugitive urban junk – posters for last week's cabaret singers ungluing in the rain, orange peels flushing into the sewers – Yeats is the least Modernist of poets."<sup>273</sup>

Although "The Magi," "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan" may be read as chronological accounts in which the sudden revelation interrupts the process of steady contemplation of an image, the steely precision of Yeats's images and their extravagant pictorial quality invite a reading in which each of the poems is conceived of as an expression of a single, "epiphanic" flash of consciousness that combines perception of a potent image with one tumultuous emotion. In his discussion of "Leda and the Swan" Charles I. Armstrong aptly observes that Yeats's strategy of "framing a passing instant of time" in the poem makes it possible to see it as an example of a literary text in which "Lessing's [Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's] influential dichotomy between literature's temporality and the visual art's spatiality is occluded or set

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<sup>273</sup> Albright, "Yeats and Modernism," p. 65.

aside.”<sup>274</sup> Armstrong’s observation may be as valid in the case of the similarly structured “The Second Coming” and “The Magi.” By focusing on a perception of a single image in a poem that is devoid of unnecessary “ornamentation” (either in the form of the abstract language of the “bodiless emotion” or any redundant imagery that might hinder the perception of a single image), Yeats constructs a form that reflects the Modernist tendency to see a work of art – be it a literary text, painting or sculpture – as an autonomous, finite, perfected object; what is more, Yeats may be even suggesting that those “visionary” poems are to be read – or, rather, intuitively apprehended – as visual, three-dimensional objects.

Armstrong’s discussion of “Leda and the Swan” touches on yet another important subject that relates the poem to the visual arts – this of ekphrasis in the poem. Again, the poem’s preoccupation with one image is characteristic of the majority of Yeats’s shorter visionary poems, and ekphrasis, understood not as a description of a particular, well known artwork, but in a more general sense of describing a single persuasive image, is also to be found in “The Magi” and “The Second Coming.” Armstrong does not claim that the poem describes a particular work of art; he cites Ian Fletcher, who argues that the Yeats poem may be inspired by a number of traditional representations of the myth in painting:

As Ian Fletcher has shown, “Leda and the Swan” is ekphrastic only in a covert and idiosyncratic way. The poem draws upon a rich tradition of classical, renaissance and more modern visualizations of mythological material. In Fletcher’s analysis, the paintings by Michelangelo and Moreau come across as the most significant forbears for Yeats’s poem.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Armstrong, *Reframing Yeats*, p. 114.

<sup>275</sup> Armstrong, *Reframing Yeats*, p. 114

This ekphrastic quality of Yeats's images also distinguishes him from the majority of the practitioners of Pound's Imagism and from Pound in particular. In *Quantum Poetics* Daniel Albright estimates that "Pound tended to be fond of abstract art, not insofar as it annihilated representation. But insofar as it *almost* annihilated representation, insofar as it stylized representation, to some difficult, mind-quickenning state."<sup>276</sup> In contrast, Yeats's images rarely annihilate, or "almost annihilate" representation: with its relatively clearly delineated shape, the sphinx-like beast in "The Second Coming" may be seen as an exercise in surrealism, but not necessarily as a good equivalent of non-representational art in poetry. Similarly, "Leda and the Swan," regardless of its possible painterly inspiration or inspirations, does not try to present its object as a fluctuating resultant of the observer's perception: its succinct form strives to contain as much detail as it is possible in order to freeze the scene in one well-defined frame. This strategy is not surprising; the form reflects the subject of the poems. The purported source of the apocalyptic revelation is in each case the vast storehouse of the *Anima Mundi*, a cosmic library of fixed, unchanging images. Even though the Magi vaguely know what they are looking for and undertake the journey of their own free will, the vision defining the character of the next age is ultimately forced on those who receive it: it is even possible to read the rape of Leda in "Leda and the Swan" as a commentary on the nature of the process in which powerless human witnesses are subjected to the terrors of the startling revelation whose source is perceived as an unknown, alien force.

Yeats's template of the visionary moment is definitely one of the most interesting, novel interpretations of the poetics of the literary epiphany in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry. These relatively short poems-visions perfectly embody Ashton

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<sup>276</sup> Daniel Albright, *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 138. Emphasis original.

Nichols's belief that "epiphanies record the mind caught in the act of valuing particularly vivid images."<sup>277</sup> The novel, concise form the poems are given and the unusual force and precision of the images they contain make their moments of revelation very different both from the majority of earlier, Romantic and Victorian models of the literary moment and from the models proposed by Yeats's contemporaries: Pound and Joyce.

Yeats's notion of the visionary moment is in many respects antithetical to Wordsworth's poetics of the moment of recognition that defines the original Romantic convention of the literary moment. The Romantic moment is typically presented in a chronological perspective; it usually introduces a well-characterized observer whose psychology, including the response to the revelatory insight, is thoroughly explored. Yeats's model of the visionary epiphany is devoid of the dramatization of the episode, which in Wordsworth's poetry manifests itself in the meticulous attention to the details "setting the scene" of the events. Unlike the Wordsworthian persona, one usually equipped with a physical body vigorously moving in the material world, Yeats's speakers-narrators, frequently carefully hidden from sight, often speak as if through their disembodied minds that remain fixed in the realm of the imagination. Nonetheless, they are not demiurges or artificers able to bend reality to accommodate the wishes of their creative minds, but mere witnesses of the cosmic spectacle. Yeats's determination to transcend the natural world and adopt the aesthetic of the timeless image that characterizes much of his poetry in the 1920s clashes with the Wordsworthian concept of the literary moment; still, the aesthetic of the image Yeats adopts is, apart from its obvious inspirations in the Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought, manifestly Romantic. The short poems-visions are also different from the Victorian

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<sup>277</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 29.

portrayals of the Moment, as the Romantic model, in which the literary moment completes a chronological sequence of events, still survived in Victorian poetry. And although the Victorians popularized the sonnet as a form of “a moment’s monument” that aimed to portray a single flash of consciousness, not the whole epiphanic episode, this type of a poem usually described a single emotion; it rarely combined such an emotion with consistent imagery of one persuasive image.

Even though, as has been shown, it is not impossible that in his short visionary poems Yeats could be to a certain degree inspired by Pound’s definition of the image, this “intellectual and emotional complex” that is presented as perceived “in an instant of time,” Yeats’s presentation of the visionary moment is also radically different from the Imagist practice. This should be of no surprise, as in *A Vision* Yeats describes Pound as a poet and critic “whose art is the opposite of mine, whose criticism commends what I most condemn, a man with whom I should quarrel more than with anyone else if we were not united by affection [...]”<sup>278</sup> Yeats’s visionary epiphany never originates in the perception of the trivial and the immediate and thus Yeats’s concept stands in sharp contrast to the models of the sudden moment of recognition proposed by Joyce and Pound and to many other characteristically Modernist strategies of writing in the epiphanic mode.

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<sup>278</sup> Yeats, *A Vision*, pp. 3-4.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A VIEW FROM THE TOWER:

#### LITERARY EPIPHANY IN YEATS'S LATER POETRY (1925-1939)

In the untitled invocation opening his 1914 volume of poetry, *Responsibilities*, Yeats addressed “old fathers,” his Irish ancestors, defending his vocation as a poet and yet expressing regret at not being able to have a well-ordered, fruitful life: “Although I have come close on forty-nine / I have no child, I have nothing but a book, / Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.”<sup>279</sup> Yeats’s subsequent collection, *The Wild Swans at Coole* that was published five years later, reflected the poet’s still unfulfilled personal life and his unhappy love for Maud Gonne, portraying solitary characters, only in possession of “Vague memories, nothing but memories”<sup>280</sup> or disconsolately intimating, as in the title poem, “The Wild Swans at Coole,” that “all’s changed.” The collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* was, however, published shortly, in 1921, and echoed an important period of transition in the poet’s life: his marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees and the birth of his first child. Despite its small volume, it contained poems as famous as “Easter, 1916,” “The Second Coming” and “A Prayer for My Daughter.” Although Yeats’s marriage was relatively happy and George proved to be an excellent companion in Yeats’s exploration of the occult owing to her interest in automatic writing, the next book of poetry, *The Tower* (1928), is to a considerable degree

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<sup>279</sup> Yeats, “[Pardon, old fathers, if you still remain],” in: *The Poems*, p. 148.

<sup>280</sup> Yeats, “Broken Dreams,” in: *The Poems*, p. 203.



overshadowed by Yeats's coming to terms with old age – or, rather, as in many poems included in the volume, by raging against it. *The Tower*, for all its preoccupation with ageing, is not, however, a thematically and stylistically homogeneous collection: it contains poems focusing on political issues, chronicles the changes in Irish society, explores the mysteries of the occult, remembers dead friends and portrays a new presence in Yeats's life and poetry: the Norman tower Thoor Ballylee.

The poems written by Yeats at the end of his life, such as those included in the volumes *The Tower* or *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, are notable for their preoccupation with the visionary and the occult even greater than in the previous collections, and this predilection for the visionary paired with Yeats's lasting interest in experimentation that produced such stylistically different poems is probably the reason why Yeats's epiphanic mode of his late poetry is so diverse and unique. Poems such as "Leda and the Swan," where the vision inspired by mythology culminates in the final insight expressed in a question, show similarities to earlier poems such as "The Second Coming" or "The Magi," proving that Yeats occasionally decided to rely on the literary forms and techniques he had already tested. However, in his later poetry Yeats continuously experiments, reworking both his earlier style and the existing literary conventions.

Yeats's "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" shows many similarities to "The Wild Swans at Coole," but in his reworking of the Wordsworthian nature poem Yeats goes further than he did in "The Wild Swans," portraying an observer who is incapable of any inspirational visionary insight and concluding the poem with a negative epiphany pointing at the demise of the Romantic ideals and attitudes. "Vacillation" also plays with the idea of the Romantic moment, but not by creating a "failed" epiphany or an epiphanic denouement which is negative or pessimistic, but by placing its short and

fleeting literary moment within a structure that consists of stylistically different fragments. Consequently, the conventional epiphany is negated not by the content of the unexpected revelation, but by the Modernist, fragmented structure of the poem and by the use of the past tense to suggest that such fleeting moments of grace are not possible any more and will not be possible in the speaker's future. Conversely, in "Among School Children" the negativity and melancholy of the opening stanzas are unexpectedly transcended in the final moment of affirmative realization that verges on the paradoxical and to a certain extent appears disconnected from the poem, but the connection and unity are provided by the poem's form: eight regular stanzas, all of them following the *ottava rima* pattern.

Yeats's poetry remains very personal throughout the poet's entire life so it is not surprising that the theme of growing old and facing the losses this process entails looms large in Yeats's later work. Such negative overtones are sometimes paired with the pessimistic mind-set of a Modernist who is concerned with the loss of everything of value in the modern world and who simultaneously lost all hope for a better future. But although this disillusioned voice may be occasionally heard in Yeats's later poetry, the complex set of convictions and beliefs held by Yeats ruled out any too literal reproduction of the moods that were shaping the Modernist Era. The Yeatsian epiphany of the poet's later years is negotiated in the process of a difficult dialogue between the past and the present, between Romanticism and Modernism, and between personal hope and disenchantment. In poems such as "The Wild Swans at Coole" or "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" the relatively faithful reproduction of the structure of the Romantic epiphany is used to introduce rather Modernist insights that express feelings of doubt and disillusionment. In "Vacillation" the poetics of the Romantic epiphany is not used as a device organizing and structuring the poem: the vignette portraying a

Romantic moment is only an element of a literary jigsaw puzzle or a collage. What is more, the transforming moment itself is exposed as no longer feasible and, as such, relegated to the past.

Although Yeats's mature poetry acknowledges the losses of the twentieth century and often focuses on old age, it by no means easily accepts any of the two. Although in "Vacillation" the speaker appears to be excluding the possibility of lasting happiness, not everything is lost, as the last stanza reiterates the conviction that even in the age of uncertainty and doubt personal values are not to be compromised. In "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" the "last romantics" are aware of the demise of the revered old values, but this recognition is not tantamount to accepting the new values of the modern era.

It appears that this refusal of the acceptance of the irreversible should inevitably lead not just to rebellion and resistance, but also to bitterness. Although it is true that certain bitterness (though never paired with passivity) is often to be found in Yeats's later work, it is not necessarily the last word of the Yeatsian persona. One of the most frequently anthologized poems written by Yeats towards the end of his life, "Among School Children," a very regular poem consisting of eight stanzas and written in *ottava rima*, offers a strong counterbalance to the seemingly inevitable conclusion that "everything is changed." The paradox of the poem consists in the surprising juxtaposition of stanzas I-VII with the last stanza. Stanza VIII may at first appear strangely disconnected from the remaining part of the poem as its conclusions appear contrary to the argument presented in stanzas I-VII.

"Among School Children" begins as a dialogue between the present and the past. In the first stanza the speaker is recounting his visit to a school run by nuns and

notices the children's reaction ("a momentary wonder") to himself – "a sixty-year-old public smiling man." The first line emphasizes the speaker's attitude of "questioning":

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;  
 A kind old nun in a white hood replies;  
 The children learn to cipher and to sing,  
 To study reading-books and histories,  
 To cut and sew, be neat in everything  
 In the best modern way – the children's eyes  
 In momentary wonder stare upon  
 A sixty-year-old smiling public man.<sup>281</sup>

Although it may be initially assumed that the "questioning" refers only to the speaker asking questions about the school (the "kind old nun" "replies" and both the speaker and the reader learn what and how the children are supposed to be taught in the visited school), it soon becomes clear that the questioning is what actually takes place in the speaker's mind, a process of remembering his own life that is gradually changing focus, moving from the personal to the universal.

The children rekindle the speaker's memories for at least two reasons. Firstly, their "momentary wonder" causes the "questioning" as the visitor notices the hiatus between the superficial and the concealed – between all that constitutes the children's perception of him as "A sixty-year-old smiling public man" and what he thinks is his true self, including the way he feels about himself at the time of the visit. Yeats makes it clear that the speaker's behaviour is not natural in Stanza IV, when the speaker self-mockingly admits it is "Better to smile on all that smile, and show / There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow." Secondly, the children are not merely a relatively arbitrary excuse spurring the intellectual reflection recounted in the subsequent stanzas; there is also true gentleness and affection in the speaker's attitude to them as they remind him of an important woman figure from his past and of her childhood –

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<sup>281</sup> Yeats, "Among School Children," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 261.

she is usually identified as Maud Gonne as the speaker in the poem is often said to be Yeats himself. The speaker's sudden act of recollection forces him to explore the subject of growing old, and although he still finds Maud beautiful even in her old age, the realization of the passing of time makes him question the meaning of the "man's enterprise" (Stanza VII) and the worth of anything that could be ever considered valuable in human life. The ultimate and inevitable loss of everything that constitutes a human person is portrayed as the tragedy of a mother who gives birth to her child only to see him or her age; unfortunately, however, even those who choose to put their faith in ideas rather than living beings must face defeat: the philosophers, Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras, cannot escape this fate and end up as "Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird." Anything that becomes an object of admiration or love is either mortal or unattainable, and if it is the latter, also telling of the ultimate incompatibility between man and his "immortal" creations such as philosophy or religion:

Both nuns and mothers worship images,  
 But those the candles light are not as those  
 That animate a mother's reveries,  
 But keep a marble or a bronze repose.  
 And yet they too break hearts – O Presences  
 That passion, piety or affection knows,  
 And that all heavenly glory symbolise –  
 O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;<sup>282</sup>

"Among School Children" might become an argumentative poem questioning the meaning of life and ultimately leaning towards negativity and bitterness, but, unexpectedly, once it has methodically, almost meticulously, examined man's predicament in stanzas I-VII, it loses its structure of a persuasive, well-developed argument and suddenly confronts the reader with the relatively abstract images and statements of the next, and, simultaneously, last stanza, which initially appears

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<sup>282</sup> Yeats, "Among School Children," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 262.

disconnected from both the sustained argument and the comparatively realistic images of the preceding stanzas. The sense of unity and harmony produced by the imagery of blossoming and dancing contradicts the apparently inescapable conclusions of stanzas I-VII, while in the question posed in the last line, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” the poem’s rhetoric decidedly and finally shifts from the logical and reasonable to the paradoxical and arcane:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
 O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?<sup>283</sup>

The affirmative overtones of the concluding lines might suggest a return to the Romantic roots of the literary epiphany, but at the same time the poem’s unanticipated, surprising ending suggests that this is not merely a relatively safe rewriting of the Romantic pattern, but something more. How is it possible, we might ask, that despite this sudden leap into atemporality and abstraction that characterizes the last stanza the poem does not break in two and is able to sustain the epiphanic climax of the last lines? What makes this epiphany really significant, believable and convincing for the reader if the argument in the first seven stanzas appears to contradict the buoyancy and optimism of the concluding lines, as if initially preparing the reader for conclusions quite contrary to what is disclosed at the end? Finally, does the ultimate disclosure of “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” become epiphanic precisely because of the play of the paradoxes and incongruities within the poem (thus possibly suggesting that “Among School Children” intentionally defies any too-consistent and

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<sup>283</sup> Yeats, “Among School Children,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 262.

unambiguous interpretation and builds its ultimate “meaning” on the premise that such a meaning is out of reach, as the poem persistently eludes interpretation)? Or is the poem’s epiphany after all constructed in a traditional way, where the absence of the logical link between the events leading to the epiphanic insight and the revelatory moment itself is only apparent, outwardly appearing as such, when actually such a link exists, but is to be comprehended subconsciously in order to create this unusual sense of a sudden discovery, a sense of revelation which is the essence of every epiphany?

It has often been noted that the concluding verses of “Among School Children” may illustrate Yeats’s concept of the Unity of Being, as the similarities between the poet’s formulations of this idea and the ideas expressed in the poem are striking. What is particularly important in the context of the literary epiphany discussed here is Yeats’s conviction that the Unity of Being cannot be “intellectually understandable”:

I was born into this faith, have lived in it, and shall die in it; my Christ, a legitimate deduction from the Creed of St. Patrick as I think, is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, Blake’s “Imagination”, what the Upanishads have named “Self”: nor is this unity distant and therefore intellectually understandable, but imminent, differing from man to man and age to age, taking upon itself pain and ugliness, “eye of newt, and toe of frog.”<sup>284</sup>

If what Yeats’s attempted to do in “Among School Children” was indeed to express his life creed, the Unity of Being, the method he chose to describe the concept, or an idea of the concept is very appropriate. In the last stanza of “Among School Children” the reader is almost forced to abandon the attempts to find meaning by means of purely logical reasoning, the “questioning” suggested by the speaker in Stanza I, and focus on

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<sup>284</sup> W. B. Yeats, “Introduction for the never published Charles Scribner’s Sons ‘Dublin Edition’ of W. B. Yeats; published in *Essays and Introductions* (1961) as a ‘General Introduction for My Work,’” in: W. B. Yeats *Collected Works of W. B. Yeats Vol. V: Later Essays*, ed. William H. O’Donnell (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994), p. 210.

the intuitive, spontaneous comprehension of the images concluding the poem and on the poem's music.

While "Among School Children" dazzles the reader with its paradoxes and apparent discontinuities, a careful reading of the poem may demonstrate that the epiphany in the poem does not necessarily depart much from its Romantic roots, although it is also clear that "Among School Children" presents a novel transformation of the Romantic pattern. The absence of the conventional, external "trigger" may be explained by Yeats's decision not to structure the event leading to the epiphany in the traditional way (the stimulus, associating/reminiscing, epiphany). Is it, however, possible that the poem suggests what the trigger is, but in a very oblique and indirect way and not necessarily in the section directly leading to the insight concluding the poem? Could "the brightening glance" of Stanza VIII constitute the "missing link" that may help identify the original stimulus? In the first stanza the reader witnesses how "the children's eyes / In momentary wonder stare upon / A sixty-year-old smiling public man," and although the "momentary wonder" and the "brightening glance" are different facial expressions, it is not impossible that the similarities (the act of looking and perceiving, the fleeting nature of both gazes suggested by the words "momentary" and "glance," the implied innocence of both) are not accidental, also because the children appear to have spurred the gentleness which characterizes the speaker's attitude throughout the poem, to a certain extent unifying the poem as if against and despite the clash between the exposition and the conclusion. Whether the poem's epiphany originates in the seemingly unimportant "momentary wonder" read in the children's faces or not, the speaker's reflection that precedes the epiphany occurs as a direct result of his interaction with the children and of their curious glances. Seen in this way, the epiphany acquires a conventional pattern: it begins in a description of



something perceived by the speaker to focus on the speaker's state of mind a moment later.

“Among School Children” presents a few major challenges for the reader who is not quite ready to be carried away by the poem's apparent flow toward the paradoxical and the irrational. It is in particular the last line, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” that resonates the most and appears to cause a certain cognitive shock by comparing and equalling (if the question is to be read as a rhetorical question) an agent performing an activity with this activity itself. The theme of unity and perfection invites the interpretation of the first question in Stanza VIII, “O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?” as a rhetorical question, as in this case there is nothing unusual in the suggestion that the “great-rooted blossomer” – the chestnut tree – cannot and should not be conceived of as consisting of separate parts, as it constitutes a perfectly formed unity of its diverse manifestations. If so, it would be reasonable to assume that the second question, echoing the first on several levels, is also intended to be read as a rhetorical question expressing a similar idea of unity and harmony. While, however, the verb *know* in the question “How can we know the dancer from the dance” may signal a concern related to that of the first question, “Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?,” suggesting the ultimate impossibility or absurdity of seeing what essentially is a whole exclusively in terms of its constituents, components or different manifestations, it also adds an additional dimension of the inquiry about the cognitive abilities of the human mind, implying the supremacy of human experience, art and imagination over rationality and logic. The juxtaposition of the two questions that are to a certain extent parallel, but different in terms of the complexity, density and the level of abstraction of the ideas they present – one of them is more challenging than the other – is also significant.

Such a juxtaposition may suggest a slightly teacherly attitude of the speaker (not out of place here, seeing as the poem is about children learning in school), whose ambition is to show how a seemingly complicated idea that may be difficult to grasp (or even initially appears to be beyond comprehension) may be apprehended intuitively when accompanied by a less abstract or less intricate example. This brings us to the second, this time only vaguely implied analogy: the relation of the idea of unity represented by the chestnut tree to the idea of unity represented by the dancer is in terms of its structure (less complex idea anticipating and explaining one more complex) similar to the relation existing between the representation of the concept of the Unity of Being in the form of the image of the dancer and this concept itself.

Although “Among School Children,” despite its praise of intuitive knowledge and imagination, is not devoid of internal logic, the reader is ultimately confronted with a question so figurative and paradoxical that looking for unavoidably simplified, logical interpretations borders on indecency. In *The Poetics of Epiphany* Ashton Nichols stresses that in the literary epiphany the perceived significance of the “moment” is usually presented as more important than any meaning implied by the content of the epiphanic insight.<sup>285</sup> While there may be no escaping the speculative questions about the identity of the dancer and the meaning of the dance, the impact of the ending is achieved by the visionary character of the images concluding the poem and the mantra-like resonance of the last line, whose impact on the reader is increased also by reason of the interpretative resistance this line presents (What is the dance? How is it possible for the dancer and the dance to be indistinguishable? What does this puzzling unity imply?). Although it may not be easy to find any satisfactory meaning of the concluding lines, it is not difficult to see the implied significance.

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<sup>285</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 33.

The poem's praise of unity against fragmentation and the belief, implied in the poem's conclusion, that the harmonious unity "Among School Children" describes is attainable "here and now" reveals Yeats's determined resistance to some Modernist ideas. While in 1922 in "The Waste Land" Eliot sees the modern world as a chaotic place emptied of meaning and hope, and portrays the modern man as daring to say no more than "These fragments I have shored against my ruins,"<sup>286</sup> six years later in "Among School Children" Yeats tramples on the Modernist doubts and uncertainties with a few lines of extraordinary beauty that offer a radical, affirmative response to the questions asked by many Modernist writers. Yeats challenges Modernism choosing the traditional *ottava rima* stanza and constructing the poem's epiphanic moment as a positive, radiant Romantic image, but "Among School Children" is by no means a rebellious return to the safe refuge of Romanticism: Yeats offers a perceptive diagnosis of the predicament of the modern man, but manages to transcend the scepticism heard in his own voice in the lines that owe their impressive articulacy to the type of experimentation more characteristic of Modernism than Romanticism.

One of the poem's most convincing and visible Modernist aspects is also its implied veneration of the organic unity between the form and the content of a work of art. "Among School Children" manages to sustain its affirmative epiphany not because of the sheer power and appeal of the ideas it presents in the last stanza (those ideas could easily be dismissed as unconvincing due to the pessimism that suffuses stanzas I-VII), but because the form of the poem imitates the poem's subject matter. The reader may be convinced by the poem's assumptions about the concepts of unity and harmony and their relation to the reality of human affairs because the unity and harmony offered by the form of the poem, often perceived subconsciously by the

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<sup>286</sup> Eliot, "The Waste Land," in: Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, p. 79.

reader at the time of reading, provide one of the most credible “arguments” in favour of the ideas presented in the poem’s conclusion. The poem *is* what it *says* or, maybe, to be more precise: it *is* what it *does*, like the dancer and the dance – a perfect embodiment of the idea it presents. And although the idea of such a perfect embodiment was also important to the Romantics, “Among School Children,” with its paradoxes and ambiguities, constitutes a poem that is as much Modernist as it is Romantic, testifying to Yeats’s exceptional ability of uniting both traditions.

In Yeats’s next volume of verse, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), the tone suggesting vigour and confidence which characterized many poems included in *The Tower* is restrained. The poems frequently explore the subjects of memory and mourning, often contrasting the images of the beauty and happiness experienced in the distant past with the speaker’s current feelings of loss, grief and disenchantment. The poem that announces this heightened interest in the past in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* is the elegy “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz” opening the volume. Written shortly after the death of the Gore-Booth sisters, who were Yeats’s close friends and whom the young poet often visited in Lissadell House while on his holidays in Sligo, the elegy is a poignant portrayal of the sisters as remembered by the speaker in their youth, accompanied by a bitter reflection on how the sisters’ and speaker’s lives changed:

The light of evening, Lissadell,  
Great windows open to the south,  
Two girls in silk kimonos, both  
Beautiful, one a gazelle.  
But a raving autumn shears  
Blossom from the summer’s wreath;  
The older is condemned to death,

Pardoned, drags out lonely years  
 Conspiring among the ignorant.<sup>287</sup>

The four lines that constitute the beginning of the poem and are simultaneously the first lines in the volume form a part of the first stanza, and yet both formally and thematically differ from the majority of the remaining part of this stanza. Although Stanza I repeats four times the rhyme pattern *abba*, thus making the four-line beginning its integral part, this “frozen in time” image is in many respects autonomous and independent, separated from the more dynamic and much less visually oriented speaker’s reflections that soon follow. The radiant image of the past approximates a vision, because the world of harmony and beauty it sketchily portrays appears inaccessible and almost unearthly, and yet, despite its brevity, the image contains enough detail (“Lissadell,” “girls in silk kimonos”) to substantiate its origin in the speaker’s memory rather than imagination. The sense of harmony and stillness is intensified by the unhindered flow of syllables in the first four lines: there are few plosives and many laterals; the phoneme [l] appears in, for example, *light*, *Lissadell*, *gazelle*, *beautiful*. Although the two lines immediately following the brief vignette also bring to mind certain images (But a raving autumn shears / Blossom from the summer’s wreath), these new images function primarily as metaphors – they portray a dynamic and destructive force of time (*raving*, *shear*) and intentionally dispel the carefully wrought vision of the beginning, the destruction of which is also visible in reducing the number of sounds that contributed to the sense of harmony, especially the [l] sounds. However, the memorized scene returns at the end of the first stanza, this time cut to two lines, thus becoming the poem’s leitmotif:

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<sup>287</sup> Yeats, “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 283.

Many a time I think to seek  
 One or the other out and speak  
 Of that old Georgian mansion, mix  
 pictures of the mind, recall  
 That table and the talk of youth,  
 Two girls in silk kimonos, both  
 Beautiful, one a gazelle.<sup>288</sup>

Yeats was not the first poet who used sounds to create a desired effect: reading the poem and realizing how its sounds contribute to the effect of the harmony and beauty that existed in the past, it is difficult to avoid associations with the poetry written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Edgar Allan Poe, for whom the relation between the poem's sounds and the poem's meaning was very important. Poe used a similar technique in his poem "Annabel Lee," where the mood portraying the beauty and innocence of the speaker's lost love is also emphasized by [l] sounds. And yet, whereas Poe gives his poem a relatively uncomplicated song-like structure, with regular stanzas and rhymes, and uses traditional, chronological narration, Yeats's strategy is strikingly different. Yeats differentiates between certain parts of his elegy in terms of sounds and prosody, emphasizing the disparity between these subsequent parts, and constructs a form that may be in many respects compared to a Modernist narrative that avoids chronology and uses flashbacks and leitmotifs to create a greater sense of significance. Discussing epiphanies that function as literary leitmotifs in Modernist literature, Wim Tigges quotes Clive Hart, who notes that leitmotif is not merely a reiteration of a scene or event:

[Leitmotif] entails a use of statement and restatement in such a way as to impel the reader to relate part to part; each recurrence of such a motif derives in some necessary way from all its previous appearances and leads on to future resurgences,

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<sup>288</sup> Yeats, "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 283.

pointing to correspondences and relationships far beyond those that hold between the individual motif and its immediate context.<sup>289</sup>

The flashback bringing back the memories of the Lissadell House becomes an epiphany that brings new meaning to the speaker's current situation and later persists in his mind as a photographic image, the details of which will stay unchanged. Although the image itself remains the same, the speaker is not able to re-enact the sense of immediacy exemplified in the first experience, portrayed in the four-line mental image at the beginning of the elegy, hence, possibly, when the image returns and thus becomes a leitmotif, the description consists of only two repeated lines incorporated into the speaker's more general reflection on the sisters' fate – the clarity of the vision opening the poem is lost.

In *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* Morris Beja describes the functions of literary epiphanies that have their source in such vividly recollected memories and notes how frequently they were used as a tool structuring prose narratives in Modernism. While the medium of poetry usually requires more brevity and makes use of different techniques than prose, Yeats's method in many respects resembles this Modernist approach:

One of the most important [functions of epiphany] is its use as a structural device. It may, for example, mark climaxes in a narrative, as it especially does in the novels of Joyce, and Virginia Woolf. Or, through the sudden recapture or recollection of the past, it may introduce a flashback that reveals some necessary background or even becomes a lengthy and almost independent episode, as, say, in Faulkner, Mrs. Woolf, and Alain Robbe-Grillet.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Clive Hart, *Structure and Motif in Finnegans Wake* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1962), p. 165, quoted in: Tigges, "Towards a Typology of Literary Epiphanies," p. 25.

<sup>290</sup> Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 22.

In this context it is also significant that Yeats chooses literary techniques that aptly reflect the discontinuities of his “narration.” The lines describing the epiphanic recollection of the past, although visually well integrated with the remaining part of Stanza I, differ, subtly yet perceptibly, from the subsequent lines in terms of form. Firstly, as we have seen, the four-line flashback is different from the remaining part of the poem in terms of its sounds: the laterals intensify the stillness and harmony of the image that persists in the speaker’s memory, while in the remaining part of Stanza I and in Stanza II the laterals are replaced by numerous plosives that reflect the forces of destruction referred to in Stanza I and the speaker’s resolve to act in Stanza II. Secondly, as has already been noted by Helen Vendler, Yeats uses a variety of active verbs throughout the whole poem, for example in Stanza I “we see the peaking of Yeatsian enjambment [...] as line after line ends in an active verb propelling desire,”<sup>291</sup> yet the “stilled verbless tableau”<sup>292</sup> at the beginning is here a noteworthy exception: this four-line description is not merely devoid of verbs that connote action or movement; it is devoid of any verbs. Finally, as Helen Vendler notes, and maybe most importantly, the elegy’s four-line beginning does not introduce any significant changes to the traditional pattern of the relatively harmonious iambic tetrameter used in Tennyson’s elegy “In Memoriam,” written in four-line *abba* stanzas, while the remaining part of the Yeats poem is marked the poet’s more radical treatment of syntax and enjambment, which results in a form that is felt to be more dynamic.<sup>293</sup> This remarkable transformation of the form used by Tennyson in “In Memoriam” is discussed by Helen Vendler in *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form*:

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<sup>291</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 226.

<sup>292</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 226.

<sup>293</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 231.



Yeats thus redefines the *In Memoriam* quatrain, and its tetrameter line, as something continuous and agitated rather than (as it is in Tennyson) stanzaic and reflective, something disturbing rather than consoling. The quatrain is so intensely at cross-purposes with the sentence throughout most of this sequence, and the lines are so frequently enjambed rather than end-stopped, that each part becomes a current of wreath-continuity rather than a composition of perceived recurrent line-length and felt quatrain-form.<sup>294</sup>

Vendler also notes the exception constituted by the first *abba* “stanza” of Yeats’s “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz”:

We see that all the [four-line] stanzas of this poem, *except the first* [emphasis mine], violate the usual Yeatsian desideratum of matching sentence to rhyme-unit. The last stanza, although Yeats makes it possible to read it as syntactically complete, actually begins in the middle of a sentence.<sup>295</sup>

Although Vendler sees Yeats’s strategy mainly in terms of the poem’s gradual progression from “its initial iambic harmony to trochaic anger; from anger to sympathy; from sympathy to instruction; and from instruction to a martial energy,”<sup>296</sup> the first four lines of the elegy stand out from the remaining part of Yeats’s composition more, it appears, than its other relatively unified parts. The form is in agreement with the meaning embodied by the image and, when seen against the background of the speaker’s current situation and his reflections, the recollection becomes an autonomous, separate element, juxtaposed rather than integrated. In a manner similar to the strategy of portraying the moment of past happiness in Yeats’s “Vacillation,” this image from the past is to a certain extent isolated in the text and, simultaneously, it is complete in itself – like a framed photograph – which

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<sup>294</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 231.

<sup>295</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 231.

<sup>296</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 230. Examples of particular lines omitted from the quotation.

symbolically accentuates the finality of the passing of time and the inability to bring back what has been long lost.

In Stanza II, where the reader might expect the leitmotif to return once again, especially at the end of the poem, Yeats avoids such a nostalgic symmetry, rejecting the possibility of the passive contemplation of the past, and is more concerned with whatever action might be taken in the present time, ending the stanza by addressing his now dead friends:

Arise and bid me strike a match  
And strike another till time catch;  
Should the conflagration climb,  
Run till all the sages know.  
We the great gazebo built,  
They convicted us of guilt;  
Bid me strike a match and blow.<sup>297</sup>

The first literary moment created by Yeats in the elegy is remarkable and unique in terms of its placement in the sequence of the poem: at the beginning rather than at the end or in the middle. Surprisingly, this new strategy proves very effective, possibly because the suddenness and clarity of the vision opening the poem, with its evocative imagery (a “gazelle”-girl, “windows open to the south,” “the light of evening”) force the reader to visualize the recollected scene, and Yeats’s skilful usage of sounds and prosody makes this process effortless and natural. While the reader realizes the full significance and poignancy of the recollected scene not until he or she has finished reading the first stanza (hence the decision to repeat lines 3 and 4 at the very end of Stanza I may be partly explained by Yeats’s resolve to re-paint the recollected scene, this time revealing its emotional significance to the reader), the vision has a considerable impact on him or her from the very beginning.

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<sup>297</sup> Yeats, “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 283.

The type of epiphany that describes a vividly recollected moment Yeats creates in the poem has been known since Romanticism: according to Ashton Nichols, the proleptic epiphany is “characteristically Wordsworthian.”<sup>298</sup> Yeats’s epiphany remains Romantic inasmuch as it idealizes the past, making it as dazzling as the images revived by Wordsworth’s vision of the daffodils. Nonetheless, memories usually brought consolation to the Wordsworthian persona, which is clearly not the case with Yeats’s epiphany in “In Memory.” When almost 39 years earlier Yeats wrote “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” he accentuated, in a Romantic style, the value of the re-creative potential of memory. Memories, Yeats suggests in 1888, may transport the epiphanees to the time of his youth or childhood and make him suddenly realize that nothing can ever be lost. But in his 1927 elegy the only image vividly recollected by the speaker is in its motionlessness and finiteness suggestive of exactly the opposite: that the past cannot be relived. The two poems defend their different verdicts choosing appropriate literary forms: the harmonious progression of “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” sharply contrasts with the tense, probing and simultaneously rebellious voice that can be heard in the cadences of “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz.”

One of Yeats’s later poems acknowledging the importance of the poet’s Romantic heritage is “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*. “Coole and Ballylee” is remarkable not only because of its surreal, esoteric beauty and the melancholy mood it conveys: it is also one of Yeats’s poems in which the poet to a very substantial degree relies on conventions, mixing them, playing Romanticism against Modernism not only by rebelling against the absence of Romantic ideas in the modern time in the poem’s subject matter (“We were the last romantics”), but also by sticking to pre-Modernist literary conventions and by

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<sup>298</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, pp. 74-75.

choosing the form which best suits the poet's intention of positioning himself as a defender of the last strongholds of Romanticism and tradition.

In her article "‘Another Emblem There’: Theme and Convention in Yeats's ‘Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931’" Marjorie Perloff argues that the poem harks back to the genre of estate poems which was popular in England in the seventeenth century, pointing to numerous similarities between "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" and Marvell's "Upon Appleton House." Referring to the opening lines of the last stanza of the poem ("We were the last romantics"), Perloff notes that "it was, of course, not the Romantics who celebrated ‘the traditional sanctity and loveliness’ of great houses but the great seventeenth-century poets from Jonson to Pope."<sup>299</sup> Perloff goes on to cite Richard Ellmann who argues that Yeats "is writing ironically, equating the word [romantic] with all the defenders of ‘traditional sanctity and loveliness,’ and would no doubt have said that the first romantics were Homer and Sophocles."<sup>300</sup> Still, unlike Ellman, Perloff does not see Yeats's "last romantics" as only generally, "ironically" referring to the tradition of the past and not to Romanticism itself: the Yeats poem, according to Perloff, clearly posits the superiority of the spiritual, firmly pledging its allegiance to Romanticism despite the speaker's tragic inability to "transcend the painful facts of existence."<sup>301</sup>

Although certain elements of the convention of the seventeenth-century estate poem should not be overlooked in "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," especially in the fragments which celebrate aristocratic heritage and explicitly refer to Lady Augusta Gregory and her property (speaker's reflections in Stanza IV and V), it should be of no

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<sup>299</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "‘Another Emblem There’: Theme and Convention in Yeats's ‘Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931,’” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (Apr., 1970), p. 233.

<sup>300</sup> Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 239-240, quoted in: Perloff, "Another Emblem There," p. 233.

<sup>301</sup> Perloff, "Another Emblem There," p. 233.

surprise that a poem which openly states “We were the last romantics” might also, and rather purposefully, follow certain conventions characteristic of Romanticism. The style that ultimately dominates “Coole and Ballylee, 1931,” framing the elements of the convention of the country estate poem, is Romantic in its origin. In “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” Yeats deliberately chooses the form that best addresses both his ideological concerns and literary sympathies, the Romantic form of a longer meditative poem in which the speaker’s contemplation is spurred, mediated and shaped by the particularities of a place (usually landscape). M. H. Abrams discusses this Romantic convention in the essay “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric.” Abrams suggests that the most important practitioners of the greater Romantic lyric were Coleridge and Wordsworth, also Keats and one of Yeats’s favourites among Romantic poets – Shelley, and outlines the structure those poems are usually given:

They present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.<sup>302</sup>

Yeats interest in the greater Romantic lyric form has been frequently noted. In “Yeats and Romanticism” George Bornstein suggests that part of “The Tower” constitutes a

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<sup>302</sup> M. H. Abrams, “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric,” in: *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (Norton: New York 1984), pp. 76-77.

variation on such a lyric, noticing that “remaking Romanticism by fastening it to Irish earth operates in both form and content throughout the great lyric that forms Part ii of “The Tower.”<sup>303</sup> In *Reading Modernist Poetry* Michael H. Whitworth singles out “A Prayer for My Daughter” as an example of such a lyric and finds similarities between “A Prayer for My Daughter” and Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight.”<sup>304</sup>

The paradigm of the greater Romantic lyric, which, according to Abrams, often, though not always, portrays the speaker as one ultimately “achieving an insight,” is related to the subject of the epiphanic mode in Romantic literature. The Romantic moment, especially in Wordsworth and Coleridge, is usually enacted in a strictly delineated geographical setting and typically originates in the speaker’s contemplation of certain elements of this setting. Those elements have an effect on the speaker, rekindling memories, triggering associations or provoking meditation. Bornstein’s reformulation of Abrams’s definition portrays the basic modalities of the Romantic moment in a longer poem as follows: “The Romantics invented the format of the Greater Romantic Lyric, in which an individual speaker in a definite setting confronts the landscape, and the interplay between mind and setting constitutes the poem.”<sup>305</sup> Still, not every poem belonging to this convention concludes in an epiphany, and, conversely, the greater Romantic lyric is certainly not the only form that may be used as a vehicle of epiphanic enlightenment. Yeats’s “A Prayer for My Daughter,” despite its uncanny resemblance to “Frost at Midnight,” does not conclude in a premonition about a transcendent reality that is portrayed in the Coleridge poem – it focuses on meditation exclusively. Conversely, such poems as “Paudeen” or “The Cold Heaven,” short and rather loosely attached to the particularities of the setting,

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<sup>303</sup> George Bornstein, “Yeats and Romanticism,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to WB Yeats*, eds Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), p. 29.

<sup>304</sup> Michael H. Whitworth, *Reading Modernist Poetry* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 199.

<sup>305</sup> Bornstein, “Yeats and Romanticism,” p. 29.

prove that in his “middle period” Yeats chose to construct some of his most compelling epiphanies without heavily relying on earlier conventions. Starting from 1919, however, the poet on several occasions appears to deliberately adhere to the form of the greater Romantic lyric, though his decision to do so in his later poetry should ultimately be analyzed not exclusively in terms of what he chose to reproduce, but also by looking at the elements of the convention he evidently rejected or chose to transform.

With the important exception of “A Prayer for My Daughter,” Yeats’s well-known longer poems that follow the convention of the greater Romantic lyric usually portray brief moments of sudden insight. Such insights often imply disillusionment and lack of hope, and are usually expressed as negative, non-transforming (thus in this particular aspect rather anti-Romantic) epiphanies. Such poems are “The Wild Swans at Coole,” from *The Wild Swans at Coole*, “The Tower” (from *The Tower*) and “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” (from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*). With its regular stanzas and the theme that strictly corresponds to what the greater Romantic lyric should typically include, “The Wild Swans at Coole” reproduces this Romantic convention quite accurately, although the poem is relatively short and voices deep pessimism relatively uncommon in the poetry of English Romanticism. Yeats’s voice is even more pessimistic, if forceful and rebellious, in “The Tower,” exploring in depth the themes of memory, growing old and death in three differently structured parts of the poem. Part II, the most regular of the three, begins with the words describing Yeats’s tower of Thoor Ballylee – the vantage point where the observation begins and where the meditation of the past takes place: “I pace upon the battlements and stare / On the foundations of the house, or where / Tree like a sooty finger, starts from the

earth; / And send imagination forth.”<sup>306</sup> The only literary moment in the poem is to be found at the end of Part III, when the speaker envisions the gradual loss of perception preceding death: “When the horizon fades, / Or a bird’s sleepy cry / Among the deepening shades.”<sup>307</sup>

Yeats’s most interesting transformation of the form of the greater Romantic lyric in the context of the literary epiphany is “Coole and Ballylee, 1931.” Unlike “The Wild Swans at Coole,” in which Yeats’s symbolism, though perceptible, is only secondary, not necessarily crucial for a consistent interpretation of the poem, and in which, apart from the non-transformative nature of the final insight, Yeats does not seem to significantly alter the Romantic convention, certain passages of “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” appear to intentionally disrupt such a convention by openly alluding to Yeats’s philosophy of the occult. Still, “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” is given a form that bears a striking resemblance to the form of the greater Romantic lyric. Yeats’s use of this form is consistent; the Romantic convention frames and directs the whole poem.

An interesting analysis of the relationship between the natural and the symbolic in Yeats’s “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” and, at the same time, of the degree in which Yeats decides to be bound by the Romantic convention of the Wordsworthian landscape poem was undertaken by Paul de Man in the essay “Symbolic Landscape in Wordsworth and Yeats.” De Man compares “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” with Wordsworth’s sonnet “Composed by the Side of Grasmere Lake” and comes up with two different interpretations of the Yeats poem. The first reading traces the parallels between the two poems and shows how both Yeats and Wordsworth primarily focus on the perception of a specific landscape. Summarizing the main points of such a reading, de Man finally concludes: “We assumed the stream to be a description of an

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<sup>306</sup> Yeats, “The Tower,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 241.

<sup>307</sup> Yeats, “The Tower,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 245.



actual scene in nature; it gains symbolical significance later in the poem by analogy with other events, but it was a natural fact prior to becoming symbolic. This was certainly also the case for Wordsworth's landscape."<sup>308</sup> The second reading, which the critic prefers as, according to de Man, this reading gives the poem more consistency ("the only weakness of this [first] reading is that "it makes 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931' into a rather recondite and not very tightly organized poem,"<sup>309</sup> says de Man) highlights the differences and shows how the symbolic takes precedence over the natural in the poem. The second interpretation also shows that Yeats's use of the convention is much less predictable than one might assume on the first reading of the poem. If so, is the visionary insight at the end of the poem still a conventional insight of the greater Romantic lyric?

The first two stanzas of "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" do not depart much from the Romantic convention. There is a speaker placed in a definite geographical location, closely akin to Wordsworth's speakers, making his way from one point to another (this physical presence of the speaker becomes obvious in the second stanza, when he says "I turned about and looked..."). The speaker's thoughts are directly inspired by what he sees during his walk:

Under my window-ledge the waters race,  
 Otters below and moor-hens on the top,  
 Run for a mile undimmed in Heaven's face  
 Then darkening through 'dark' Raftery's 'cellar' drop,  
 Run underground, rise in a rocky place  
 In Coole demesne, and there to finish up  
 Spread to a lake and drop into a hole.  
 What's water but the generated soul?

Upon the border of that lake's a wood  
 Now all dry sticks under a wintry sun,

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<sup>308</sup> Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 138.

<sup>309</sup> De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p. 137.

And in a copse of beeches there I stood,  
 For Nature's pulled her tragic buskin on  
 And all the rant's a mirror of my mood:  
 At sudden thunder of the mounting swan  
 I turned about and looked where branches break  
 The glittering reaches of the flooded lake.

Another emblem there! That stormy white  
 But seems a concentration of the sky<sup>310</sup>

In the greater Romantic lyric this complex interplay between perception, meditation and memory is part of the convention and may often lead to a moment of sudden insight. De Man concedes that giving the poem such a precise geographical location makes it easier to look for certain affinities between Yeats and Wordsworth:

Several of Yeats's poems, at all periods, contain or sometimes begin with landscapes, and it has often been observed that, as the style gains in maturity and control, they become more and more concrete and specific. The river at the beginning of "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931," certainly seems as "real" as can be, its course described in circumstantial and matter-of-fact detail, with almost geographical precision.<sup>311</sup>

What makes such easy analogies a bit too far-reaching, according to de Man, is the presence of certain phrases that appear to disrupt the flow of the poem. The first intrusion of this kind is the rhetorical question in the last line of Stanza I, "What's water but the generated soul?," the second is the exclamation "Another emblem there!" in the first line of Stanza III. But are they really "intrusions" directed against the convention of the Romantic meditative poem? That the speaker becomes gradually less involved in the process of observation and focuses on the play of thoughts in his or her mind is part of the convention of the greater Romantic lyric. Hence, on the one hand, the swiftly moving water and the immaculately white "mounting swan" have a very

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<sup>310</sup> Yeats, "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 293.

<sup>311</sup> De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p. 135.

conventional function: they trigger the chain of associations that is necessary for the poem's development. On the other hand, however, it would be very difficult to disagree with de Man and not to notice the unusual significance certain objects are given in the Yeats poem. The phrases "What's water but the generated soul?" and "Another emblem there!" are not only meant to portray the complex process of reminiscing and associating; their function in the poem is also to ask questions about the symbolic meaning of the perceived elements of the landscape.

De Man does not argue that the difference between Wordsworth's and Yeats's approaches lies in Yeats's use of symbols. Rather than that, he points out that the uniqueness of Yeats's approach consists in the specific, non-conventional use of those symbols in "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," as they appear to constitute an intricate system which reveals the complex philosophical ideas that underlie the poem. "One therefore has to go outside the poem to find the 'key' to such symbols,"<sup>312</sup> says de Man. Read in this way, the poem could be seen as a sophisticated exercise in philosophy expounding Yeats's system.

Thus interpreted, the poem, according to de Man, is less of an elegy mourning the Romantic values; it is rather a celebration of the soul's journey towards perfection:

If one grants identity of the river scene with the Cave of the Nymphs, a new dimension is introduced to the poem. For it marks Yeats's allegiance [...] to a body of doctrine that considers the incarnate state of the soul as a relative degradation and looks upon death as a return to its divine origin, and, consequently, as a positive act. The allusion to the *Phaedo*, one of the main sources of esoteric Neo-Platonism, now becomes perfectly understandable. In opposition to the generated "water," the swan "But seems a concentration of the sky" – air being an element closer to the divine than water – joyously "mounting" from the decaying word of matter toward its true abode. Its purity and its loveliness are due to the desire for the eternal that inhabits the swan's breast and make it

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<sup>312</sup> De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p. 139.

impervious to those who think that divine essence can be found on this natural earth.<sup>313</sup>

Read in this manner, in the light of Neo-Platonism and Yeats's symbolism, the swan becomes a symbol of the soul. However, it has been frequently noted that Yeats is far from being consistent here. Perloff observes, quoting Thomas Parkinson, "If the water of Stanza I and the swan of Stanzas II and III are both symbols of the soul, Parkinson argues, then the last line of the poem, "Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood" makes no sense: '... if we examine the last line in terms of the associative web of the poem, we have the soul drifting upon the darkening generated soul when the generated soul is at its highest point.'"<sup>314</sup> De Man argues that his first reading of "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" (the reading that looks for similarities between Wordsworth's and Yeats's approach and interprets the landscape as "natural") shows that the poem is far from perfect, claiming that apart from "somewhat embarrassing comparison between Lady Gregory and Homer" such an interpretation makes "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" into "a poem of rather grim despair,"<sup>315</sup> but it seems that both readings have their limitations.

If so, why should we not conceive of "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" as a lyric purposefully devised to inspire both "readings" or "interpretations" from the very beginning, or, to put it in a different way, as a Romantic nature poem mourning the demise of the Romantic ideals in the modern world but, simultaneously, alluding to certain philosophical concepts through its use of specific symbols? The poem's allusions to such ideas do not have to constitute a consistent encoded system underlying the poem's portrayal of the world of nature. The physical, material world

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<sup>313</sup> De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p. 140.

<sup>314</sup> Perloff, "Another Emblem There," p. 224.

<sup>315</sup> De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p. 137.

may be figuratively seen by the speaker in the poem as an emanation of the world of spirit – yet it is still a *material* world. Yeats alludes to certain philosophical ideas and to his vocation as a poet by “illustrating” the familiar landscape with many of his favourite symbols, but his ultimate goal may be to show how the speaker in the poem may indeed be one of the last who are capable of doing so. Perhaps this is the reason why the disappearing swans are here not only symbols of the soul, but they also acquire a far more conventional and manifestly Romantic meaning, becoming symbols of poetic inspiration that is about to depart as well – in one of his letters discussing “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” Yeats explicitly remarked that the swan “is a symbol of inspiration I think.”<sup>316</sup>

The water and the swan offer, according to de Man, “a welcome relief to the eye among the tragically barren trees of the wood.”<sup>317</sup> But they offer this relief, it appears, only insofar as it is possible to see them as pointing at something beyond them and as long as it is possible to keep one’s gaze firmly on them. Such immutability of all things is, however, rendered impossible in the poem and replaced by the recognition of inevitable change: the water soon disappears from the surface of earth dipping into its underground channels and the swan vanishes from sight as well. Nevertheless, the sudden appearance of the swan in Stanza II constitutes a very carefully constructed moment in the poem: it leads the reader to believe that it is not only “a welcome relief” that might be offered here, but something more: a transformative, powerful insight of the type frequently seen in Romantic poetry:

And in a copse of beeches there I stood,  
For Nature’s pulled her tragic buskin on  
And all the rant’s a mirror of my mood:

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<sup>316</sup> De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p. 138.

<sup>317</sup> Thomas Parkinson, *W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 143.

At sudden thunder of the mounting swan  
 I turned about and looked where branches break  
 The glittering reaches of the flooded lake.<sup>318</sup>

The poem plays with the usual modalities of the literary moment: apart from the speaker, who is conventionally portrayed as a loner traversing a landscape and meditating, there are also other conventional heralds of the Romantic moment. The speaker hears the “sudden thunder” of the swan’s wings that sharply interrupts his grim musings: this constitutes a perfect “setting the scene” moment preparing for epiphany, one fulfilling Robert Langbaum’s criterion of suddenness defined as “a sudden change in external conditions [that] causes a shift in sensuous perception that sensitizes the observer for epiphany”<sup>319</sup> “Thunder,” on the other hand, imbues such a potential moment of grace with the urgency and weight of the Greek *theophaneia*, a revelation that is coming directly from gods. The next line contains a much more subtle indication acknowledging the possibility of such a transformative event in the phrase “glittering reaches of the flooded lake.” Lights, glitterings, reflections were, as we have seen, conventionally used as portents of epiphanic transformations, especially in Romantic poetry, and Yeats’s usage of the word *reaches* may be also suggestive of striving for something beyond the physical world. However, while the immaculately white swan does provide a momentary relief, it fails to fulfil its other promise. The next stanza does not bring an epiphany, as the swan becomes an element of the landscape that is pondered upon and then read symbolically, finally becoming yet another excuse for the speaker’s musings on the inevitability of change and the passing of time:

Another emblem there! That stormy white

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<sup>318</sup> Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 293.

<sup>319</sup> Langbaum, “The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature,” p. 44.

But seems a concentration of the sky;  
 And, like the soul, it sails into the sight  
 And in the morning's gone, no man knows why;  
 And is so lovely that it sets to right  
 What knowledge or its lack had set awry,  
 So arrogantly pure, a child might think  
 It can be murdered with a spot of ink.<sup>320</sup>

There is no sense of a sudden, transformative insight characteristic of Romantic epiphanic moments here; the swan undoubtedly manages to evoke a momentary feeling of delight and awe, but the speaker is left with nothing really transformative or substantial, and Stanza III resumes the poem's tone of a reasonably rational debate, even though the tone of this case against modernity is frequently emotional.

It would then appear that "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" purposefully uses the convention of the Romantic moment to construct a situation which promises a Wordsworthian moment of recognition and yet eventually, almost mockingly, leaves the reader (and the poem's speaker as well) with almost nothing. Ultimately, however, the poem does not seem to be focused exclusively on the failed epiphany of Stanzas II and III. Like the undercurrents of the Cloon River, vanishing from sight and then reappearing "in Coole demesne" in Stanza I, the subconscious mind of the speaker manages to preserve an afterimage of the swan. This second, purely imaginary swan appears at the end of the poem and once again interrupts the meditation, giving the poem an ending constituted by what may be seen as a delayed epiphany:

We were the last romantics – chose for theme  
 Traditional sanctity and loveliness;  
 Whatever's written in what poet's name  
 The book of the people; whatever most can bless  
 The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;  
 But all is changed, that high horse riderless,  
 Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode  
 Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Yeats, "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 294.

Although the last line may be read merely as a metaphor that accentuates the speaker's conclusions by giving a bleak visual counterpart to the idea of loss ("We were the last romantics"), the full impact of this image is achieved when it is juxtaposed with the unexpected appearance of the real bird in Stanza III, and, consequently, when this final image is not merely analyzed in the context of the last stanza, but rather seen as the final and most complete expression of the speaker's part-subliminal, part-conscious mind processes that are activated by the "interaction" between the speaker and the landscape. Seen in this way, the image of the swan that "drifts upon a darkening flood" constitutes an epiphany that is accomplished through following the convention of the Romantic moment, which appears reasonable in the context of what the poem says: the speaker identified himself with "the last romantics," the bards of a bygone era, so the rejection of avant-garde, modern forms in favour of earlier conventions and techniques (mainly Romantic in their origin, with the exception of the convention of the estate poem mentioned earlier) is perfectly reasonable. Obviously, Yeats does not simply imitate Romantic and pre-Romantic poets here; rather than that, by addressing and mixing those earlier conventions in a traditionally regular poem that "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" is, and by introducing elements of Neo-Platonism in the symbolic stratum of the poem, he constructs a lyrical form that is unmistakably Yeatsian: very novel and original, yet at the same time demonstrating Yeats's respect for tradition.

It would appear that the last image becomes a negative epiphany emphasizing the sense of loss expressed earlier in the poem. Nonetheless, seeing how Yeats's symbols in the poem may take on different meanings, what can be seen at first as

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<sup>321</sup> Yeats, "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, pp. 294-295.



negative overtones of the darkness in “darkening flood” may turn out to be more ambiguous. While the poem, as has been said, may be read as contradictory and, consequently, flawed when it is interpreted as an expression of Yeats’s esoteric system “encoded” in its text through the poet’s use of symbols, it is possible to read “Coole and Ballylee, 1931,” as a greater Romantic lyric which focuses primarily on the speaker’s reflections, yet, simultaneously, is not devoid of specifically functioning symbols and metaphors.

To understand this accumulation of symbols and literary references, the reader may turn to Yeats’s essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” published in *Ideas of Good and Evil*. Although “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” was written, according to the note accompanying the poem, in February 1931 and “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” – more than thirty years earlier, in 1900, it is possible to identify certain symbols used in the poem with the ideas and symbols referred to in the essay. In “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” Yeats’s mentions authors such as Porphyry, Plato and Homer and analyzes, in the context of their philosophy or their ideas, the symbols, he believes, Shelley frequently used in his poetry. “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” may not use the symbols expounded in “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” to construct an arcane, all-encompassing system in the poem – the idea that Yeats, at the age of 65, wanted his 1931 poem to preach every single Neo-Platonic idea he alluded to in one of his essays thirty years earlier does not sound convincing – but Yeats’s “reuse” of one of the symbols is nevertheless noticeable: it is the Shelleyan symbolism of the river, or water in general, important in the context of the whole poem. Shelley, according to Yeats, associates the river with thought:

Water is his great symbol of existence, and he continually meditates over its mysterious source. In his prose he tells how “thought can with difficulty visit the intricate and winding

chambers which it inhabits. It is like a river, whose rapid and perpetual stream flows outward...<sup>322</sup>

The poem's theme of the demise of the traditional, also Romantic, values makes it possible to read "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" as a meditative dialogue with the past, or even as a tribute to Shelley: those mourned voices of the past may include Yeats's past Romantic self, Shelley and other Romantic poets beloved by Yeats, and the authors revered in the past, but forgotten in the heyday of Modernism: classics such as Homer or Plato. The speaker in the poem is no longer capable of looking at the landscape through the lens of the ideas embraced by his former self: he says, "We *were* the last Romantics," not "We *are* the last Romantics." Ultimately, he does not focus on the symbolic meaning of the landscape he sees and the ideas such a symbolic reading would entail, including any ideas of the supernatural this landscape might embody, but contemplates the mind in the process of observing, remembering and forming associations. Thus when he exclaims, "What's water but the generated soul?" and later "Another emblem there!," the poem does not break; it still sustains and confirms its inner, Wordsworthian logic of a lyric portraying a mind that is sounding the meaning of the things it sees and reflecting on this process. In Stanza II the speaker observes how his thoughts may only be a reflection of his emotional state, which is in turn mediated by the wintry landscape: "all the rant's a mirror of my mood." And while such an unfocused observation of the mind is characteristic of the Wordsworthian template of the lonely walker, many parallels drawn between the image of the river and the workings of the creative mind again bring to mind Yeats's admiration for Shelley:

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<sup>322</sup> W. B. Yeats, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," p. 123.

Alastor calls the river that he follows an image of his mind, and thinks that it will be as hard to say where his thought will be when he is dead as where its waters will be in ocean or cloud in a little while. In *Mont Blanc*, a poem so overladen with descriptions in parentheses that one loses sight of its logic, Shelley compares the flowing through our mind of “the universe of things,” which are, he has explained elsewhere, but thoughts, to the flowing of the Arne through the ravine, and compares the unknown sources of our thoughts in some “remoter world” whose “gleams” “visit the soul in sleep,” to Arne’s sources among the glaciers on the mountain heights.<sup>323</sup>

Harold Bloom notes the similarities between Yeats’s vision and Shelley’s vision, writing in his monograph *Yeats* that “a superb reverie” is “as central to Yeats as to Shelley.”<sup>324</sup> Bloom also points out the importance of Shelley’s *Alastor* for Yeats’s development as a poet:

Not merely the origins of much that was permanent in the Yeatsian vision, but its teleology as well, is established in *Alastor*, and established in a way congenial to Yeats, as an antithetical rebellion against Wordsworthian naturalism.<sup>325</sup>

It is, it appears, the impossibility to retrieve any “superb reverie” that contributes to the poem’s melancholy tone, and thus the poem stays rather within the range of Wordsworth’s more “naturalist” vision than Shelley’s “reverie.”

“Coole and Ballylee, 1931” progresses, as does its model, the greater Romantic lyric, from the observation of the outside world to the inner world of the human mind and may still end in an insight or an epiphany in the last lines. While the last lines present such a sudden and significant insight, the overall tone of the poem’s conclusion depends on how we read the image accompanying this insight. Is the swan “drifting” upon a “darkening flood” a negative portent, or does it become negative

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<sup>323</sup> Yeats, “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” p. 124.

<sup>324</sup> Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 90.

<sup>325</sup> Bloom, *Yeats*, p. 90.

only in the context of “all is changed?” While the drifting bird may be read as negative omen on its own, because both “darkening” and “drifting” may have negative connotations, suggestive of chaos and coming to an end (the proverbial context of the swan singing its “swan song” may only strengthen this impression), in the context of Yeats’s Shelleyan symbolism this image – at least, the image of the “darkening flood” – is not as negative as it initially appears. Yeats’s mention of Homer makes it plausible that the “darkening flood” is a river flowing through a cave, as this image may be related to the portrayal of the Cave of the Nymphs in Porphyry’s interpretation of one of the passages in *The Odyssey* – and Porphyry’s interpretation of the Cave was extensively discussed by Yeats in “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry”:

The ancients, he [Porphyry] says, “consecrated a cave to the world” and held “the flowing waters” and the “obscurity of the cavern” “apt symbols of what the world contains,” and he calls to witness Zoroaster’s cave with fountains; and often caves are, he says, symbols of “all invisible power; because as caves are obscure and dark, so the essence of all these powers is occult,” and quotes a lost hymn to Apollo to prove that nymphs living in caves fed men “from intellectual fountains”[...].<sup>326</sup>

Nevertheless, in “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” Yeats’s explores the symbolism of the cave not only in the light of Porphyry’s plausible interpretation of the symbol, but of Shelley’s as well:

Again and again one finds some passing allusion to the cave of man’s mind, or to the caves of his youth, or to the cave of mysteries we enter at death, for to Shelley as to Porphyry it is more than an image of life in the world. It may mean any enclosed life, as when it is the dwelling-place of Asia and Prometheus, or when it is “the still cave of poetry,” [...]<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Yeats, “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” p. 119.

<sup>327</sup> Yeats, “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” p. 125.

In the context of the symbolism of the river (thought, the mind) attributed to Shelley by Yeats, it is also Yeats's reading of the cave as "the mind looking inward upon itself" that may be important in the context of "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," especially if we accept that the river in the Yeats poem may function as an extended metaphor that refers to the mind:

The contrast between it [the tower] and the cave in *Laon and Cythna* suggests a contrast between the mind looking outward upon men and things and the mind looking inward upon itself, which may or may not have been in Shelley's mind, but certainly helps, with one knows not how many other dim meanings, to give the poem mystery and shadow.<sup>328</sup>

Read in this way, the cavern portrayed in the concluding lines in "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" may be an image of the thinking, speculating mind of the poet portrayed in the poem; this time, in the end, the mind is "looking inward upon itself." Such a reading makes "Coole and Ballylee" relatively consistent both in terms of its organizing system of figurative meaning, if Yeats intended to include any such system, and in terms of the poem's theme of an end of an era. The last image reverberates with many possible senses and ideas, and it was probably Yeats's intention to construct it in this way. Seen in the light of Yeats's exploration of the multiple symbolism of the cave, "the darkening flood" does not have to be interpreted as a negative, depressing image in itself, especially when it is seen as a place where "Homer rode." It may be suggestive of the limitless creative potential of poetry and language and of the mystery and unexplained sources of poetic inspiration.

In the end, however, the poem ends on an authentically "dark note," as the sudden realization with which it closes – the cave and the swan are about to disappear – suggests an absence, or prefigures an absence, of the mystery and alchemy poetry

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<sup>328</sup> Yeats, "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," p. 127.

once necessitated. This final insight portrays a void and in this may even be more characteristic of Modernism than of nineteenth-century Romantic poetry. Perloff comments that the poem “records the experience of a man who tries to read spiritual meanings into the landscape but fails and must accordingly come to terms with the temporal reality of human loss.”<sup>329</sup> The image of the swan could be romantically vital, but in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” the swan announces the demise of the spiritually transforming Romantic moments.

The theme of coming to terms with a loss returns in “Vacillation,” another poem from the volume *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*. The irregular form of the poem, which consists of eight differently paced, numbered parts, reflects the poem’s subject of the existential crisis that has to be faced with dignity and resolution. While there is no escape from the disintegration and fragmentation portrayed in “Vacillation,” as the consolations of art and poetry cannot triumph over the circumstances of life, it is, nevertheless, art, personified by Homer, which ultimately becomes the only idol worthy of following.

The sense of crisis faced by the speaker in the poem cannot be relieved even by the cathartic moment of joy described in part IV, as, it is suggested, such moments are no longer feasible. Yet what is clearly unattainable now appears to have been within the speaker’s reach in the past. The brief epiphany is portrayed here in the manner characteristic of the Romantic epiphanic mode:

My fiftieth year had come and gone,  
I sat, a solitary man,  
In a crowded London shop,  
An open book and empty cup  
On the marble table-top.

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<sup>329</sup> Perloff, “Another Emblem There,” p. 234.

While on the shop and street I gazed  
 My body of a sudden blazed;  
 And twenty minutes more or less  
 It seemed, so great my happiness,  
 That I was blessed and could bless.<sup>330</sup>

This short moment of elation and joy from the middle part of “Vacillation” is contrasted with the remaining part of the poem, where, among other concerns, the speaker voices his disbelief in the possibility of re-enacting such momentary, fleeting moments of unalloyed happiness:

Although the summer sunlight gild  
 Cloudy leafage of the sky,  
 Or wintry moonlight sink the field  
 In storm-scattered intricacy,  
 I cannot look thereon,  
 Responsibility so weighs me down.<sup>331</sup>

The short fragment depicting the Romantic moment of illumination may be seen as “a poem within a poem” constituting one of several elements of a Modernist collage. The lucidity and implied innocence of the “blessed moment” is emphasized by the language used in this part of “Vacillation.” The relative simplicity of expression characterizing this part brings to mind the “middle Yeats” period and poems such as “Paudeen” or “The Cold Heaven,” while the remaining part of the poem, with its complex, extravagant imagery and formal diction, belongs to the stylistics of Yeats’s late phase. The Romantic moment in “Vacillation” remains only a vignette, a “copy-and-paste” element of past experience and therefore it cannot overcome the predominantly sombre mood of the poem.

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<sup>330</sup> Yeats, “Vacillation,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 301.

<sup>331</sup> Yeats, “Vacillation,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 301.

“Stream and Sun at Glendalough” is another Yeats poem from the collection *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* which discusses the recurring feelings of “repentance” or “remorse” that make lasting happiness impossible. Written in June 1932, only one month after the death of Lady Gregory, this short, evocative lyric describes a brief moment of elation experienced by the speaker in Glendalough, a valley in the Wicklow Mountains, and juxtaposes the momentary joy made possible by the “intricate motions” of “stream and gliding sun” with the speaker’s more permanent state of mind that seems to habitually exclude such feelings of liberation or joy:

Through intricate motions ran  
Stream and gliding sun  
And all my heart seemed gay:  
Some stupid thing that I had done  
Made my attention stray.<sup>332</sup>

This brief moment of intense perception initially appears to portend a positive change and is similar to the brief moment of joy remembered by the speaker in “Vacillation.” “All my heart seemed gay,” confesses the speaker, but this moment of bliss, triggered by something external and seemingly unremarkable – here the “motions” of the sun and the stream – is destroyed by what also seems only a trifle, a remembrance of “some stupid thing that I had done.” The disappointment is evident: there is no transformative force the moment initially promised, so even the momentary joy that was felt before the epiphany failed is denied its import by the speaker when he says that the heart only “*seemed* gay.” However, unlike “Vacillation,” where the lucidity of the remembered moment of joy is accentuated by the effortless flow of language that is halted in the subsequent stanzas, here the transparency of language and precision of the image sustains the epiphany after the vision apparently fails, in

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<sup>332</sup> Yeats, “Stream and Sun at Glendalough,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 305.



Stanzas II and III, and, not surprisingly, the seemingly inconclusive moment produces an important insight in the form of a question:

Repentance keeps my heart impure;  
 But what am I that dare  
 Fancy that I can  
 Better conduct myself or have more  
 Sense than a common man?<sup>333</sup>

The image of the sun and stream returns in the last, third stanza, although it is not clear whether it now figuratively refers to a different event or phase in the speaker's past, or is the same "motion" whose significance was intuitively apprehended, although only for a moment, in the first stanza:

What motion of the sun or stream  
 Or eyelid shot the gleam  
 That pierced my body through?  
 What made me live like these that seem  
 Self-born, born anew?<sup>334</sup>

Nature is portrayed here as being in a constant state of flux. This sense of uninterrupted movement is emphasized by the words chosen to describe the agency of nature and contrasted with the passivity and inertia of the speaker's mind. The stream and the sun *ran* "through intricate motions"; the sun is described as *gliding*. In the last, third stanza the "motion of the sun or stream" (or "eyelid") is seen as supposedly *shooting* the "gleam" that later *pierces* the speaker's body – even the word *gleam* is here suggestive, to a certain extent, of movement and change. In contrast, the speaker is seen as one immobilized by his deep feelings of repentance that *keep* his heart "impure," and the only word suggesting movement, *stray* ("Some stupid thing that I had done / Made my attention stray"), has negative undertones, suggesting being lost,

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<sup>333</sup> Yeats, "Stream and Sun at Glendalough," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 305.

<sup>334</sup> Yeats, "Stream and Sun at Glendalough," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 305.

while the world of nature surrounding the speaker seems to have an uncannily sharp sense of direction, and all its actions, seen here as deliberate or almost deliberate, are marked by a sense of effortlessness and ease.

The poem, although short and concise, manages to squeeze as many as three questions in its three terse stanzas. The first question is most likely rhetorical, while the two questions of the last stanza are speculative. The rhetorical question “But what am I that dare / Fancy that I can / Better conduct myself or have more / Sense than a common man?” echoes the words of the Self in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” from the same volume of poetry, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*. The Self, who wins the debate with the Soul, is in favour of self-forgiveness, but for the Soul such an attitude is tantamount to heresy: “Only the dead can be forgiven, / But when I think of that my tongue’s a stone” says the Soul. The Self disagrees in the last stanza:

When such as I cast out remorse  
So great a sweetness flows into the breast  
We must laugh and we must sing,  
We are blest by everything,  
Everything we look upon is blest.<sup>335</sup>

In “Stream and Sun at Glendalough” the transitory feeling of joy is described in the manner reminiscent of the depiction of the moment of unspoiled happiness in “Vacillation”: the moment is sketched rather than painstakingly recreated. Still, in “Vacillation” the speaker presents the moment of joy as something not feasible in the present time because of his present state of mind (“responsibility so weighs me on”); in “Stream and Sun at Glendalough” the moment, although initially dismissed as not authentic (“my heart *seemed* gay”) forces the speaker to ask questions that have metaphysical overtones and are presented as intuitive insights themselves. The vision

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<sup>335</sup> Yeats, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 286.

the speaker experiences at Glendalough may not guarantee a spiritual rebirth, but it opens up future possibilities.

In its theme, “Stream and Sun at Glendalough” resembles the poem “Paudeen” from the volume *Responsibilities*, although the 1932 poem is much more ambiguous and speculative than “Paudeen;” it is also less dramatic. Although the tone of the poem is very personal, which may suggest that the speaker’s ultimate goal is merely to become as joyful and untroubled as he once was, it is also possible that both poems, “Paudeen” and “Stream and Sun at Glendalough,” express on some level Yeats’s idea that art requires detachment that could be compared to the detachment looked for by those who want to be closer to the Divine. Thus, it is, possibly, not only personal happiness which is sought by the speaker, but a state of mind that allows the artist to accurately and effortlessly express himself and his ideas. As Glendalough is famous as the place where St. Kevin lived in seclusion in Glendalough monastery, the poem’s insights, expressed in the form of the last two questions, may be examining the nature, source and preconditions of artistic inspiration:

The religious life has created for itself monasteries and convents where men and women may forget in prayer and contemplation everything that seems necessary to the most useful and busy citizens of their towns and villages, and one imagines that even in the monastery and the convent there are passing things, the twitter of a sparrow in the window, the memory of some old quarrel, things lighter than air, that keep the soul from its joy. How many of those old religious sayings can one not apply to the life of art? “The Holy Spirit,” wrote S. Thomas à Kempis, “has liberated me from a multitude of opinions.” When one sets out to cast into some mould so much of life merely for life’s sake, one is tempted at every moment to twist it from its eternal shape to help some friend or harm some enemy. Alas! all men, we in Ireland more than others, are fighters, and it is a hard law that compels us to cast away our

swords when we enter the house of the Muses, as men cast them away at the doors of the banqueting-hall at Tara.<sup>336</sup>

“Stream and Sun at Glendalough” is probably Yeats’s last poem which presents a short moment of elation, one potentially transformative, in a relatively traditional manner in a poem free from obvious allusions to Yeats’s system of esoteric thought. As in many Romantic interpretations of the Moment, the epiphany occurs as a result of the observation of the natural world and the experience is presented as having a profound, though very short-lived, effect. Despite the speaker’s suggestion that the transformation resulting from the experience could not last, or even did not occur at all, the epiphany is not negative: it leaves the speaker in a meditative state, making him probe possibilities and ask questions. The poem’s lucid language and its harmonious progression mirror its subject matter, allowing the reader to participate in this brief act of contemplation.

The poetry written in the last years of Yeats’s life and published after 1933, mainly in the volume *Last Poems*, rarely approaches in its tone the lyricism and sense of immediacy that was characteristic of much of Yeats’s earlier poetry and was still noticeable in poems such as the 1932 “Stream and Sun at Glendalough.” The uncompromising tone of *Last Poems* verges on the prophetic; the past is often invoked and celebrated in visions of dead masters, erstwhile heroes and ancient gods. While this marching procession of apparitions certainly imbues many of those poems with an aura of the unreal and the visionary, the poetics of the delicately and suggestively outlined moment of vision is largely gone, and so is the Romantic epiphany. Nonetheless, the volume *Last Poems* is not devoid of convincing portrayals of

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<sup>336</sup> W. B. Yeats, “Samhain: 1905” in: W. B. Yeats *The Collected Works of W.B Yeats Volume. VIII: The Irish Dramatic Movement*, eds Mary FitzGerald and Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 2003), p. 92-93.

moments of revelation that are deliberately constructed as to allow the reader to participate in the privileged moment. These visions-images tend to be more enigmatic, ambiguous, puzzling and surreal than Yeats's earlier depictions of the moment of epiphany – in this, surprisingly, Yeats's epiphanic mode of the late 1930s has much in common with the modern-day, late 20<sup>th</sup>- and early 21<sup>st</sup>-century aesthetic of the literary moment. Still, although the literary moments in Yeats's *Last Poems* are remarkably novel and innovative interpretations of the convention, Yeats's experimental style often goes against the grain of Modernism as this new poetry rebels against the modern world both in its content and form. For example, "High Talk" uses the form of the sonnet to caricature modern culture and its values, while in the visionary moment concluding the poem "Hound Voice" Yeats draws extensively on the symbolism that defined much of his poetry in the 1890s.

While in earlier volumes of Yeats's poetry a specific, intensified mood was usually evoked in the lines concluding the poems, in "Last Poems" this mood is often shaped by repetitions of phrases or lines. For example, in "Long-legged Fly" the meditative moment that evokes absence and silence is created and intensified by a repetition of two lines throughout the poem. These lines form a couplet following each of the poem's three stanzas. The repeated part of "Long-legged Fly" is a simile that suggests similarity between the process of imaginative thinking and the movements of an insect on a stream, and this uncanny imagery accompanied by the trance-inducing melodiousness of the poem's song-like structure becomes epiphanic in itself:

With no more sound than the mice make  
His hand moves to and fro.

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream  
His mind moves upon silence.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Yeats, "Long-legged Fly," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 387. Emphasis original.

Albright notes that the simile Yeats uses in the poem is closely related to the passage in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* in which Coleridge compares "the mind's self experience in the act of thinking" to the movements of "a small water insect" which "wins its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to it."<sup>338</sup> While the repeated phrase does not constitute a description of a conventional sudden insight, the original, creative usage of figurative language, intensified by the poem's literary form (repetitions) conveys the sense of a sudden discovery characteristic of many literary moments that aim at the creation of a particular mood affecting the reader. Simultaneously, the simile itself is remarkable in the context of the epiphanic mode because it constitutes a literary commentary on the intellectual capability of the human mind "moving" in its environment.

The poetry included in Yeats's last collections of verse advances reflection on history and attempts a further assessment of the past. Simultaneously, in *Last Poems* Yeats frequently discusses his attitude to tradition in art and presents his views as conflicting with the views of his contemporaries. One of the poems that pursue this theme is Yeats's last sonnet, "High Talk." In "High Talk" Yeats plays with the poem's form while presenting a grotesque figure of Malachi Stilt-Jack, who expounds his views in a somewhat comical, brusque and unceremonious manner and becomes the poet's alter-ego. "High Talk," which is, according to Helen Vendler, despite its traditional form of the sonnet, "anomalously composed in rough hexameters"<sup>339</sup> and by

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<sup>338</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. I (London: Rest Fenner, 23, Paternoster Row, 1817), p. 124, quoted in: Albright, notes to Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 831. Albright quotes as his source W.E. Rogers, who in 1975 *Concerning Poetry* noted the similarity between Yeats's comparison and the passage in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*.

<sup>339</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 149.

undermining its own traditional form adds yet another claim to the Malachi Stilt-Jack tirade, suggesting that “the ‘high’ rhetoric of the sonnet tradition had collapsed with the rest of European culture in the interwar period,”<sup>340</sup> conveys its message by introducing and balancing the grotesque, the ironical and the humorous to the degree rarely seen in Yeats’s earlier poetry. It also introduces a perplexing ending that may be seen as a very interesting, uncharacteristic example of the aesthetics of the literary moment in Yeats’s work.

To see how significantly Yeats’s rendering of the literary moment revealing the speaker’s state of mind changed over the years, let us compare “High Talk” and “The Song of Wandering Aengus” – two poems that are poles apart in terms of the moods they evoke, but have, on closer inspection, surprisingly similar themes. Both “The Song of Wandering Aengus” and “High Talk” introduce speakers who may be seen as figurative representations of a poet. In “The Song of Wandering Angus” the speaker becomes a madman, vagrant and seer, while Malachi Stilt-Jack, a failed prophet (“Malachi”), also portrayed as a madman, this time resolved on tirelessly moving on his stilts, admits to being an entertainer and clown. Both tell stories of their lives which end in two insights vividly illustrating the current situation of the two. Given the similar development of the narration and comparable themes in the two poems, the differences are even more conspicuous. Aengus, the Irish god of poetry and youth, is constructed as a romantic hero whose endless quest for inspiration – or love – apparently never finds its fulfilment, yet is never presented as absurd or meaningless. Aengus’s story is inspired by myth and Irish folk tales and reverberates with symbolism that intensifies the atmosphere of mystery and magic in the poem. These symbols are frequently used, familiar tropes, such as the imagery of the sun and the

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<sup>340</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 152.

moon whose significance and impact Yeats analyzed in his essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” in the context of Romantic poetry.<sup>341</sup> Finally, the insight concluding the poem owes much to the Romantic convention of the literary moment: the story that initially concentrated on the isolated individual and was presented chronologically is suddenly taken to the level suggestive of timelessness and transcendence. And while the rift between the past and the present time, and, simultaneously, between the story and the epiphany is in “The Song of Wandering Aengus” comparable to the shift separating Malachi’s ironic presentation of himself in the first part of “High Talk” (in the octave) from the insight constituting the literary moment (in the concluding lines of the sestet), the Romantic diction of Aengus’s story in “The Song of Wandering Aengus” is in “High Talk” replaced by a very different rhetoric: a slightly resentful and somewhat clownish tirade characterized by the frequent and often humorous use of idiom and everyday language, spoken by a dissatisfied, albeit still not entirely disheartened and discouraged artist-entertainer:

Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches the eye.  
 What if my great-granddad had a pair that were twenty foot high,  
 And mine were but fifteen foot, no modern stalks upon higher,  
 Some rogue of the world stole them to patch up a fence or a fire.

Because piebald ponies, led bears, caged lions, make but poor shows,  
 Because children demand Daddy-long-legs upon his timber toes,  
 Because women in the upper stories demand a face at the pane  
 That patching old heels they may shriek, I take to chisel and plane.<sup>342</sup>

When we last see Malachi here, he is determined to replace his old “stolen” stilts with a new pair he is going to construct himself. The reason for this reconstruction, we are told, is not Malachi’s need for self-elevation, but pleasing the audience by putting an end to the “poor shows” in which this audience is forced to take

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<sup>341</sup> Yeats, “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” p. 70.

<sup>342</sup> Yeats, “High Talk,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 390.



part. Aside from the robust portrayal of Malachi, Yeats's defensive irony and self-mockery is visible in the imagery of the circus with its rather plebeian admirers and in the choice of the word *stilts* that may have negative connotations by its associations with *stilted*. It is difficult to ascertain, however, whether Malachi Stilt-Jack of the octave – whom Yeats deconstructs as a “metaphor” later in the sonnet – is this jovial performer he purports himself to be, one not yet aware of his fate, or an embittered individual wearing a mask, using irony to conceal his feelings of inadequacy and a sense of loss. Although this ambiguity may prompt the reader to suspect that the chatty clown, with all his jokes and catch-phrases, may only be a disguise, Malachi's true personality remains in this part of the sonnet an enigma to be only partly solved in the final sestet:

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has run wild,  
From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from father to child.  
All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all. A barnacle goose

Far up in the stretches of night; night splits and the dawn breaks loose;  
I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on;  
Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn.<sup>343</sup>

The sestet initially appears to be a continuation of Malachi's confession; the speaker finally introduces himself and the reader notices for the first time the clearly plaintive undertones of his confession (“whatever I learned has run wild”). However, in the third line Malachi and his stilts are exposed as metaphors, which may force the reader to go back to the first line of the sestet and to question the identity of the speaker. If Malachi and his story are to be read as metaphors – because the author of the sonnet apparently urges us to do so – then who is the “I” of line one and line five? If we agree to see Malachi Stilt-Jack as a device, then the person who takes place of

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<sup>343</sup> Yeats, “High Talk,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 391.

the construct is probably the writer of the sonnet and it is not only the well-sketched, vivid silhouette of Malachi Stilt-Jack that suddenly melts into thin air – the sonnet itself transforms between its octave and its sestet, exposing its own nature of a trick. In *Notes* to one of the editions of Yeats's *Collected Poems* Daniel Albright argues that this strategy is characteristic of many poems written at the end of Yeats's life: "In 'High Talk,' 'A Nativity,' and 'The Circus Animals' Desertion,' Yeats seems to go backstage to the poet's workshop, where the elements of his craft are too plainly visible. [...] In these last poems the genius shows himself as a clown, the magus shows himself as a magician, eager to expose the mirrors, wires, and smoke-bombs that enable his conjuring."<sup>344</sup> Not surprisingly, Yeats, who in "High Talk" defends tradition, does his conjuring *within* this tradition: in her discussion of Yeats's handling of the form of the sonnet in "High Talk," Helen Vendler notes that "Yeats follows sonnet tradition in 'baring the device.'"<sup>345</sup>

The transformed Malachi Stilt-Jack suddenly finds himself in a location that is very different from the imaginary place that teemed with so much life in the octave. Although the poem has been de-constructed, it is slowly regaining its literary momentum by introducing new metaphors – this process parallels Malachi's reconstruction of his stilts in the poem. The only connection between the images in the octave and the visionary "mood" conjured up at the end of the sonnet is the presence of the "I" of the speaker who "stalks on" – probably on his stilts or in a manner similar to walking on stilts.

Unlike the relatively coherent images illustrating Malachi's story in the octave, the new images appear to be intentionally opaque, lacking explanations, thus outlining a landscape – or, ultimately, a state of mind – that has elements of the surreal and the

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<sup>344</sup> Albright, notes to Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 835.

<sup>345</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 152.

grotesque. The barnacle goose, suddenly emerging from the “stretches of night,” is not only a mysterious bird whose meaning is difficult to decipher and which initially appears to be much better suited to the company of bizarre creatures in Lewis Carroll’s novels – it is also not clear whether the goose, famous for its alleged ability to transform from a crustacean to a bird, might be yet another disguise of the metamorphosing “I” of the speaker-author, or is a separate entity that is intentionally as baffling as the “great sea horses” appearing in the poem’s conclusion. Daniel Albright comments on this jumbled imagery in the last part of the sonnet by noting how the poem’s images become meaningless: “‘High Talk’ ends with a circus-parade of images, an impressive incoherence: the poet’s figures of speech have become so elevated that they seem to have lost their referents, to mean nothing at all.”<sup>346</sup> Despite the ambiguity of the new images, however, the last lines of the sonnet retain a considerable emotional impact and Yeats succeeds in the creation of a very distinctive, albeit confusing mood closing the poem. We can still recognize Malachi’s determination in progressing on his stilts through a place very different from what Malachi initially envisaged in his speech. The absence of the audience that was supposed to be entertained by Malachi’s craft is telling, and the stubborn “stalking” takes place amid “the *terrible* [emphasis mine] novelty of light.” This landscape is not only enigmatic but also unpredictable and very dynamic – the dawn “breaks loose,” the sea horses “bare their teeth,” laughing; it “has run wild,” too. Light, which in poetry often announces the moment when the speaker experiences a constructive insight or undergoes a positive transformation, is in “High Talk” as oppressive as the light in Yeats’s “The Cold Heaven,” in which the speaker is “riddled with light”<sup>347</sup> and faces a hostile, unfamiliar reality. In “High Talk,” however, the light is not exactly the source

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<sup>346</sup> Albright, notes to Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 836.

<sup>347</sup> Yeats, “The Cold Heaven,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 176.

of excessive suffering, and even if it is, Malachi's exaggeration, his irony and the grotesque images accompanying his marching effectively conceal his affliction. The "novelty of light" that suddenly replaces of the "stretches of night" becomes oppressive because it mercilessly exposes Malachi's trudging on his stilts as devoid, in Malachi's view, of its intended utility, as it takes place amid the desolate, unknown landscape and without the human spectators he hoped to entertain.

Although both the "stretches of night" and the "novelty of light" that replaces them are vague, unclear symbols, they may be interpreted in the context of the multiple meanings of the sonnet's title and the poem's metaphor of the stilts. According to Helen Vendler, "Yeats draws its ironic title from Shelley's 'hopes of high talk with the departed dead' in 'Ode to Intellectual Beauty'; Malachi has lost such hopes since, as he says, "whatever I learned has run wild."<sup>348</sup> The "high talk" may therefore imply the speaker's resolve to remain on his figurative stilts, his preference to follow the tradition exemplified in many Yeats's poems in the image of Homer, and simultaneously expresses Malachi's desire for the company of old masters, who are no longer to be found in the modern world. In "Ode to Intellectual Beauty," to which the title of the sonnet probably alludes, Shelley portrays a childhood wish to find ghosts and to talk to the "departed dead" as follows:

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped  
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin  
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing  
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.<sup>349</sup>

Malachi's solitude portrayed in the poem's conclusion may thus indicate that the "high talk" with his predecessors, Malachi's "great-granddads," is not possible.

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<sup>348</sup> Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 150.

<sup>349</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 114.

Yeats appears to be saying “We were the last romantics”<sup>350</sup> once again, still grieving over the loss of the “high talk” of tradition in the modern world. In “Coole and Ballylee, 1931,” however, this idea of a loss was expressed by framing it in the imagery and diction that belonged to the lost era: “But all is changed, that high horse riderless, / Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode / Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood,”<sup>351</sup> which suggested that the speaker may, after all, still *be* “the last romantic.” Although the image concluding “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” implies the end of an era, this insight is presented in the manner characteristic of the Romantic model of the literary moment which in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” is embedded in the convention of the greater Romantic lyric. But Malachi Stilt-Jack curtly announces that the loss is irreparable, as the speaker’s persistent “stalking” can neither revive the dead, nor recreate the lost appeal of “high talk” in the audience. The images of the “darkening flood” and the swan in “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” are not nearly as alienating and confounding as the “terrible novelty of light” and the laughing sea creatures in “High Talk.” These last opaque, almost hallucinatory images complement Malachi’s pose and exaggeration with their obscurity and surreal ambience, and symbolize, it appears, the end of the tradition of “high” art. Simultaneously, they constitute a remarkable symbolic background that exposes Malachi’s alienation and his awkward rebellion, and therefore help create the poem’s half-surreal, half-grotesque epiphanic moment: a telling insight into Malachi’s predicament.

The poem’s literary moment significantly departs from the conventional template of the transformative and affirmative epiphany – the insight in “High Talk” radically changes the poem’s seemingly light-hearted mood. The bizarre, ambiguous imagery of the poem’s conclusion and the poem’s maze of literary ploys are

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<sup>350</sup> Yeats, “Coole and Ballylee, 1931,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 294.

<sup>351</sup> Yeats, “Coole and Ballylee, 1931,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, pp. 294-295.

reminiscent of many literary moments both in avant-garde Modernist poetry and in the poetry written today, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, Yeats's rejection of Romantic diction in favour of experimentation, irony and parody does not make "High Talk" a typically Modernist poem: one has to remember that "High Talk" is a sonnet, and that its allegedly "modern" rhetoric may be intended to be Malachi's last ploy. In its irony and parody the poem is ultimately a spirited defence of literary tradition.

## CONCLUSION

It is certainly not a coincidence that Yeats's poems have always been admired and highly appreciated by both the "common reader" and the professionals who study poetry in the broader context of a culture or a historic period. Those who read Yeats and who come to appreciate his poetry are often confronted with what may be deemed an impossibility: the unusual quality when lucidity and obscurity do not seem mutually exclusive. While Yeats's exuberant imagination, his interest in the occult and his many-sided, eccentric personality certainly contributed to what is often perceived as a streak of impenetrability in his work, his technique reveals an outstanding ability of a poet who mastered communication in the highest degree. In "Adam's Curse" one of the characters states that the sense of immediacy and effortlessness poetry sometimes conveys is often a result of hours of considerable intellectual exertion: "A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught."<sup>352</sup> Yeats's use of the epiphanic mode is a perfect example of how an intentionally brief poetic effect is, on closer inspection, dependent on a multiplicity of skilfully used strategies and techniques.

Yeats's use of the epiphanic mode is also illustrative of the poet's exceptional ability to merge literary tradition and experimentation. Yeats never renounced tradition, often describing himself as a follower of Homer, and never dissociated himself from the influence of Romanticism and his beloved Romantic poets. This

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<sup>352</sup> Yeats, "Adam's Curse," in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 106.

tendency to make use of long-established forms and conventions, but also to modify them and to introduce new ideas is exemplified in a rich variety of different adaptations of the aesthetics of the literary moment in Yeats's work. While one can definitely observe that Yeats's literary moments evolve, as his early poetry usually presents the Moment by making use of Romantic patterns, and in his later work the poet often chooses experimentation and innovation, creating new, characteristically "Yeatsian" models of the literary moment, Yeats's awareness of tradition, form and convention frequently finds expression in an intentional, although often indirect, return to the well-known patterns even later in his life. Especially in his middle to late poetry such a differentiation of method is traceable, and longer narrative poems that are to a considerable degree influenced by Romanticism and by the aesthetics of the Romantic epiphany, such as "The Wild Swans at Coole" and "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," or shorter meditations such as "Stream and Sun in Glendalough," are placed alongside the more "prophetic" and impersonal poems-visions such as "The Second Coming," "Leda and the Swan" or "The Magi." Still, although those of Yeats's poems which are enactments of apocalyptic visions are usually identified with the poetics of Modernism, mainly on account of the novel literary form they are given, the visionary insights they portray do not reflect the Modernist aesthetics of epiphany popularized by Joyce, in which the moment of recognition usually originates in a trivial, seemingly meaningless or accidental event. Yeats's poetics of the literary moment is in a considerable degree constituted by the poet's escape from the "here and now" – the impulse which is, in its nature, Romantic, not Modernist.

While the poet's use of the epiphanic mode involves diverse strategies and approaches, certain strategies are preferred more than others: to create the sense of significance that is one of the most important hallmarks of the literary moment, Yeats



often chooses to illustrate the moment of recognition he presents with a vivid, unusual image and he often accompanies this image with a “revelation” that is announced in a more direct, verbal manner: in the form of a statement or – even more characteristically – question. As the Yeatsian epiphany changed and evolved for about 50 years, and the remarkable variety of the different strategies the poet pursued in his presentation of the moment of sudden recognition can be better appreciated when we analyze and compare particular instances of such presentations, let us briefly look again at the most characteristic incarnations of *the Moment* in Yeats’s work.

Yeats’s earliest poetry was relatively conventional and traditional, and in a very significant degree influenced by the poetry of the Romantic period, so it is not surprising that the epiphanic mode of this time is also shaped by the conventions established by Romantic poets and that such conventions were relatively closely observed by Yeats. Since the Romantic moment comprises a variety of related practices and techniques and was never given a uniform name at the time (to talk about what is today generally referred to as the literary epiphany poets invented their own terms such as *spots of time* or *the Moment*), Yeats, not surprisingly, never discusses “epiphanies” or “literary moments” in his essays or letters, but certain patterns reflecting what is today seen as the aesthetic of the Romantic literary moment are observable in his early poems. The closest equivalent of the Romantic “moments” and “spots of time” appears to be Yeats’s notion of the “mood” – the poet’s self-confessed tendency “to close so short a poem with a single unbroken mood.”<sup>353</sup> The two early poems that re-enact the Romantic moment and may be at the same time seen as embodying the philosophy of “a single unbroken mood” are “When You Are Old” and “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” “When You Are Old” is based on Pierre de Ronsard’s

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<sup>353</sup> Yeats, *Collected Letters*, p. 101, quoted in: Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 155.

sonnet, but Yeats's interpretation lacks the drama of the original version, offering a Romantic perspective instead and replacing the somewhat macabre, grotesque ending of the original poem with a melancholy epiphany. This epiphany resembles the understated epiphany in Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," as the trivial "trigger" (faintly glimmering light) allows the speaker to momentarily achieve a state of mind that creates an illusion of transcending the boundaries of time and place and allows for contemplation of one's life from a different perspective.

In "When You Are Old" Yeats skilfully uses another literary convention, the aesthetic of the sublime (in the image of the mountains and the multitude of stars). The aesthetic of the sublime, although it originated in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, written as early as in 1756, was often used by Romantic poets, especially William Wordsworth, to describe the specific, mostly natural, conditions by which the state of mind that precedes epiphany is mediated. Another Yeats's early poem, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," is marked by Yeats's experimentation in rhythm and meter, but it expresses the Romantic, Thoreauvian yearning for the joyful solitude that can only be attained by finding a place unspoiled by civilization, and the epiphany closing the poem also assumes a Romantic character, resembling Wordsworth's *spots of time* in the rejuvenating, transforming effect it has on the epiphanees and in the reverence for nature and for childhood memories it expresses.

The Romantic model of the literary moment returns in a later poem, "A Memory of Youth" from the 1914 volume *Responsibilities*, but the characteristically Wordsworthian template is here changed to accommodate Yeats's more Modernist aesthetic of the period. Although the sudden light of the moon and a bird's cry miraculously salvage the speaker's faith in love, and the structure of the epiphanic

episode relatively closely reproduces the conventional Romantic portrayals of the literary moment, the bird is here de-romanticized, described as “ridiculous,” which allows the reader to sound the post-Romantic (and even post-Victorian) set of mind of the speaker whose feelings of disenchantment, scepticism and *ennui* nearly thwart the unexpected epiphany closing the poem. Still, those three relatively early poems are quite characteristic in their portrayals of Romantic sensibility. The literary moments they present are also relatively conventional and are fashioned according to the conventions developed by English Romantic poets such as Coleridge and Wordsworth: Nature is usually portrayed here as a catalyst for the positive transformation that occurs as a result of the momentary insight. Even if there is no transformation, the Romantic epiphany is rarely an insight into the abyss: it may frequently invoke the Romantic feelings of *Sehnsucht* that combine melancholy or joy with yearning, but rarely renounces faith in the existence of a harmonious, meaningful and ordered world, even if the Ideal is temporarily out of reach.

Yeats often, even later in his life, revisits the conventions of the Romantic literary moment, but starting from *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899) he gradually becomes less dependent on such ready-made templates and well-established patterns and, experimenting with forms that are meant to have a profound emotional effect on the reader, creates his own, in many respects unique models of the epiphanic mode. It is Yeats's fascination with the new literary movements, especially with French Symbolism, combined with the still surviving affection for his favourite poets-seers such as Blake, Keats, Shelley and Burns that makes him look for new ways of poetic expression. Simultaneously, the poet becomes one of the main proponents of the ideas of the Celtic Twilight, and his poems come alive with Irish mythological figures, gods, goddesses, heroes and fairy-tale creatures. What emerges as a result of this literary

quest is not so much (or, at least, not only) a coherent pattern directly related to the “conventional” poetics of a sudden and transformative insight, but rather a cluster of literary practices whose focal point becomes the strongly emphasized “act of valuing especially vivid images.”<sup>354</sup>

This tendency to ground the literary epiphanies in the visual becomes one of the hallmarks of Yeats’s mature epiphanic mode and will be further developed in the volume *Responsibilities*. The Yeatsian symbolism of *The Wind among the Reeds* makes his images doubly successful: they are, as symbols, rich in potential meanings that may form part of the poem’s epiphany, yet, simultaneously, the distinctiveness of the composition and the pictorial quality they often acquire combined with the atmosphere of mystery and impenetrability that at the time permeates Yeats’s poems strongly appeal to the reader’s imagination. On the other hand, the distinctive quality these epiphanies often have results from Yeats’s intentional use of rhythm and repetition. In “The Song of Wandering Aengus” the epiphany that closes the poem owes its trancelike quality to the poem’s rhythm, including the use of the technique of repetition in the last two lines, whose purpose is, according to Yeats, “to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake.”<sup>355</sup> While, however, “The Song of Wandering Aengus” acquires a relatively conventional structure, as the impact of the poem’s literary moment is to be felt at the end of the poem, and this effect is produced by the movement of the poem’s narration from the sequence characterized by the language of storytelling to the section in which the chronological order is suddenly replaced by the order of the symbolic and the timeless (a mechanism not uncommon in Romanticism), other poems from this period, for example “The Rose” are conceived as visions-meditations.

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<sup>354</sup> Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p. 29.

<sup>355</sup> Yeats, “The Symbolism of Poetry,” p. 117.

Yeats's interest in Symbolism and his admiration of poets such as Robert Burns make him appreciate the significance of a specific emotional impact a poem can have on its reader even more than before; this impact is, according to Yeats, often tantamount to "evoking an emotion which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms."<sup>356</sup> Although Yeats chooses to call this technique "symbolical writing" at the time, the tactic he describes has much in common with the aesthetics of the literary moment and reflects similar forms of literary experimentation undertaken by Modernists such as Eliot and Pound, who also sought literary techniques aiming at "recording," "reproducing" or approximating a specific emotion. Yeats, writing about "symbolical writing," stresses that the relations between certain objects-symbols that are vehicles of the "emotion" that is to be evoked in a poem should be "subtle," not direct, which may also suggest that such a poem should be apprehended to a significant degree subconsciously.

In Yeats's middle poetry one can easily notice a tendency to be less dependent on the conventional patterns. Yeats works towards a more unique style, including the more "Yeatsian" aesthetic of the literary moment. *Responsibilities*, changing earlier language and vocabulary with the intention of getting rid of "all that overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement"<sup>357</sup> and thus making the language of the new poems more transparent and expressive, provokes Pounds's question whether or not Yeats became an Imagist poet. Although the answer is negative, the "Modernist turn" exemplified in the language of Yeats's poetry changes the substance of the poet's images-epiphanies as well: although they often remain elaborate, pictorial and obscure (which is quite typical of Yeats's images both in his middle- and late poetry), they are also, mainly because of the new language used by Yeats, very succinct and expressive.

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<sup>356</sup> Yeats, "The Symbolism of Poetry," pp. 114-115.

<sup>357</sup> Yeats, "Reveries over Childhood and Youth," p. 86.

The language used by Yeats, including a very careful choice of vocabulary, is one of the most important aspects of the literary moment in the poem “Paudeen.” Although the mechanism of the poem’s epiphany still remains very Romantic, the poem’s language creates very modern ambience. “The Magi” and “The Cold Heaven” from the same volume construct their respective literary moments by envisioning an essentially indifferent or even hostile world in which the human subject is misplaced, has no importance, and cannot function in a harmonious way. By portraying literary moments characterized by the absence of the transformative, restorative force that is usually carried by the Romantic moment, Yeats allies himself with other Modernist writers who begin to use the aesthetic of the literary moment to convey a sense of loss or portray negative feelings such as alienation or despair.

“The Cold Heaven” and “The Magi” anticipate similarly constructed poems from the later volumes: the well known “The Second Coming” from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) and “Leda and the Swan” from *The Tower* (1928). With the exception of “The Cold Heaven,” the speakers in these terse visionary poems are not immediately recognizable to the reader and appear to be hiding in the background (in “Leda and the Swan” there is no visible observer whatsoever as the poem is not narrated in the first person). All four poems are relatively short, characterized by irregular, unconventional forms and irregular rhythm and approach the aesthetic of vision, since the parts where “setting the scene” for an epiphany conventionally takes place in a poem are missing or are significantly shorter, and the speakers remain unidentified – it is even impossible to determine whether they are meant to be anonymous Everymen or privileged prophets or seers. However, those short poems-visions still vividly depict the thinking, perceiving human mind that processes the visual data it receives or creates – and in each poem this process culminates in an

insight that at the same time constitutes the poem's literary moment. Therefore, they can be classified as poems written in the epiphanic mode. Such visionary epiphanies are presumably the most recognizable of Yeats's epiphanies; they do not rely heavily on earlier conventions of the epiphanic mode and they to a significant extent constitute a new, typically Yeatsian model. Unlike other Yeats's poems, which often make use of Romantic forms and conventions to a considerable degree and are usually characterized by less dramatic portrayals of the subject matter, Yeats's epiphanies-visions are very rich in the imagery that has its source in the poet's interest in the occult. They depict a universe conceived of as an arena on which forces beyond human control determine the course of events. The insights those epiphanies portray are often baffling and mysterious, and, which is very typical of Yeats, are often expressed as questions that are placed at the end of a poem.

The creation of this new model of writing in the epiphanic mode is, however, not the only strategy of using the aesthetic of the literary moment in Yeats's middle-period poetry. The avant-garde "The Second Coming" and "The Magi" are Modernist works of art, yet, simultaneously, Yeats was never afraid to return to traditional forms and earlier conventions and to creatively reuse them. Unlike his earlier poems that relied on the Romantic conventions of the literary moment to a considerable degree, both the middle-period poetry and the poetry written at the end of Yeats's life reuse the aesthetic of the Romantic literary moment by changing and adapting earlier conventions. For example, "The Wild Swans at Coole" and "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" are longer poems that in some degree reuse the relatively well-known template of the greater Romantic lyric. The form of the greater Romantic lyric, first described by M. H. Abrams, is a perfect vehicle for the Romantic literary moment. This form of a longer narrative poem conventionally describes the chain of thoughts and

associations of the speaker who is placed in a definite location, often outdoors. The speaker's surroundings are the source of inspiration for the associations and thoughts that often lead to an insight closing the poem. The pensive, brooding speakers who narrate the two poems, "The Wild Swans at Coole" and "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," can be seen as mirror images of the Wordsworthian wanderer, and the traditional regular forms of the poems are also strong indications of the poet's intention to temporarily abandon modern innovation. In the earlier poem, "The Wild Swans at Coole," the Romantic convention is changed by the character of the poem's epiphany, whose negative overtones better reflect the Modernist feelings of loss and emptiness than any type of Romantic angst. "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" expresses similar feelings of pessimism and lack of hope, directly announcing the end of an era by declaring "We were the last Romantics." The epiphany concluding the poem lacks the restorative energy of the Romantic moments and concentrates on an image suggestive of a sense of loss that is ultimately felt to be more Modernist than Romantic.

The mid-life volumes of Yeats's poetry, such as *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* and *The Wild Swans at Coole*, still contain numerous poems whose lyrical beauty results from Yeats's skilful creation of what he earlier called the aesthetics of "a single, unbroken mood." Unlike Yeats's visionary epiphanies, which usually do not focus on an individual, these poems are relatively devoid of the symbolism that had its source in Yeats's studies of the occult and they often explore complex human emotions. Poems such as "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" adopt their own different strategies of the creation of lyrical mood using diverse literary techniques. In "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" the mood, which at the end of the poem culminates in an epiphany, is gradually intensified by careful choice of sounds and



repetitions, whose function is also to reflect the subject matter of the poem in the poem's form.

Yeats's later poetry brings more austerity, distance and irony. The aura of pessimism that surrounds many poems in the 1928 volume *The Tower* might initially suggest that the literary moments in this volume – if any – may lack the vitality and ability to transform characteristic of the majority of Romantic epiphanies. The declaration “That is no country for old men”<sup>358</sup> – the first line in the first poem in *The Tower* – anticipates a difficult rebellion against old age and the denouncement of the modern era that will often become subjects of Yeats's late work. The epiphany in the title poem, “The Tower,” ends on a very dark note, acknowledging the actuality of death, while “Leda and the Swan,” with its impersonal tone, austere intonation, prophetic atmosphere and references to Yeats's esoteric system of beliefs develops the pattern of Yeats's visionary epiphanies and, at the same time, is far removed from the world of ordinary human affairs. Simultaneously, however, *The Tower* contains “Among School Children,” a poem that manages to masterfully transcend negativity, although it acknowledges and confronts mortality and transience.

Yeats's ability to mix tradition and innovation is remarkable in “Among School Children.” The children visited by the poem's speaker become an excuse for the reflections and recollections that gradually change focus, moving away from strictly personal concerns in the direction of more general and wide-ranging enquiry that has philosophical undertones. Although the form of the poem is also traditional, following the *ottava rima* stanza pattern, the insight concluding the speaker's reflections, with its striking visual imagery and the accumulation of questioning and paradoxes squeezed in the final, very harmonious and surprisingly concise lines, gives the poem a very

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<sup>358</sup> Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium,” in: Yeats, *The Poems*, p. 239.

novel ambience. Maybe most importantly, however, the literary moment concluding the poem owes its enduring effect to the manner in which the poem's form and the poem's subject matter are intertwined. The eight regular *ottava rima* stanzas, each of them consisting of eight lines, constitute a perfect medium for the poem's themes: beauty, harmony and perfection. Despite its modern originality and inventiveness, the poem resorts to the rhetoric of the Romantic image. It follows Romanticism not only by echoing the tone of Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality," but also by creating a literary moment that is unambiguously affirmative and swiftly overcomes the disheartening mood of the preceding stanzas. The epiphany in "Among School Children" is, however, the last non-negated, distinctly positive epiphany in Yeats's oeuvre. Its vitality evokes the spirit of the Romantic epiphany – the literary moments in Yeats's later poetry are darker or more ambiguous.

In *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) one of the emerging central themes is the dialogue between the present and the past. The present is evaluated by looking at past events: reminiscing about the past and reviewing one's current situation become very important. In "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" the speaker's veneration for the past and tradition cannot be transformed into anything that would shape a better future, and the images of a solitary swan and the "darkening flood" block the poem's progression towards what otherwise could become an invigorating, Romantic epiphany. Unlike "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," which uses conventional, traditional forms (estate poem, the greater Romantic lyric) and regular rhyming, many poems in the volume are characterized by fragmented structures in which literary moments become parts of Modernist collages and juxtapositions. The restorative value of such momentary insights or moods is usually undermined by relegating them to the past and framing them by a voice-over that belongs to the present. "Vacillation" is a typical

example of this strategy: a description of a moment of elation that occurred with no apparent reason in the past is framed by the speaker's reflections suggesting that such momentary joys are not feasible any more. Although the fragment describing this past event could be self-sufficient, constituting a miniature, convincing Romantic epiphany on its own, other sections of the poem, often changing stanza patterns from regular to irregular, introduce the reader to the world of Modernist fragmentation in which this small section becomes one of several juxtaposed images-tableaux.

A slightly different tactic is chosen for "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz," the poem opening the volume *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*. Here Yeats changes his more typical strategy of ending a poem with a "mood" that gradually develops in the poem and places an image-vignette at the beginning. The four short lines that outline this sensual, poignant image reinforce the impression of elusiveness and fragility by the repetition of the sound /l/ which is much less frequently used in the remaining part of the poem. The image that returns later in the poem, cut to a two-line repetition, constitutes a flashback which structures the composition, contrasting the idealized beauty and innocence associated with the past with the destruction brought about by experience and time.

"Stream and Sun at Glendalough," although structurally homogeneous, also portrays a moment of sudden joy by looking at it from a distance and speculating about the source of the unexpected emotion. While the impact of the past moment of joy described in the poem is initially weakened by this act of meditative speculation, the insight that takes the form of a question closes the poem creating a structurally complete pattern of a relatively conventional literary epiphany.

The poetry written in the last years of Yeats's life, after the publication of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, is characterized by considerable diversity, and

although the number of poems written in the epiphanic mode is small, the poems that adopt this literary convention are good examples of how the literary moment can be creatively transformed. One of the most mystifying and puzzling literary moments can be found in the concluding lines of “High Talk.” The unusual images that push the sonnet in the direction of the absurd, thus creating the bizarre epiphany concluding the poem, are framed by a literary form which, although traditional, is here consciously undermining itself by its eccentric metering, everyday idiom, self-reflexive comments and unusual metaphors. Paradoxically, contrary to the poem’s non-ironic dictum of the legitimacy of the persona’s lasting attachment to the “stilts” of tradition, including the literary “high talk,” the poem’s puzzling but innovative literary moment emerges as one of the most unconventional in Yeats’s oeuvre and is, simultaneously, most reminiscent of a number of strategies of writing in epiphanic mode that become popular much later – in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry and today.

Although more than 55 years of writing poetry may to a certain extent explain the unusual variety that characterizes Yeats’s work, this variety was to a significant degree a result of the poet’s willingness and extraordinary ability to merge tradition and innovation. Yeats was never afraid of tradition and his reliance on earlier conventions can be seen particularly clearly in his creative reuse of numerous conventional patterns of the Romantic Moment, not only in the first years of his poetic career, when his fascination with Romanticism could be easily understood and explained, but also much later in his life, in the midst of the Modernist avant-garde. Simultaneously, in his later years the Irish poet created his own, highly original aesthetics of the visionary moment. Thus Yeats’s literary moments range from the passages evocative of the time when the tool of the literary moment was being shaped – Wordsworth’s Romanticism – to those that appear to point beyond their time into the

future, reminding the modern-day reader of the Moment as it is often portrayed in contemporary poetry.

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## SUMMARY (ENGLISH)

### LITERARY EPIPHANY IN THE POETRY OF W. B. YEATS

The term *epiphany* is today often associated with James Joyce's early aesthetic. The Irish writer was not only one of the most well-known practitioners of epiphany in literature; he was also the first to have given the term its literary connotations. In *Stephen Hero*, the early version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the young Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's literary alter-ego, defines epiphany as a "sudden spiritual manifestation" and simultaneously affirms that it is an artist's responsibility to "record" those memorable incidents "with extreme care."<sup>1</sup> But although Joyce invented the term that has since become a commonplace in literary studies, the technique that seeks to persuasively describe moments of sudden realization and flashes of heightened perception is much older than Joyce's use of *epiphany*. Critics M. H. Abrams, Morris Beja, Robert Langbaum and Ashton Nichols identify the Romantic moment of recognition or *the Moment* as an important predecessor of the Modernist epiphany. The aesthetic of the literary moment, whose origins can be traced back to William Wordsworth's poetry and to Wordsworth's moments of consciousness and spots of time in particular, developed over time, inspiring numerous Romantic, Victorian and Modernist writers, and is still in use today. Although the post-Wordsworthian incarnations of the literary moment have been given many different

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<sup>1</sup> James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 211.

names (including Joyce's *epiphany*), it is frequently possible to identify the influence of earlier conventions and models associated with the use of the aesthetic of the literary moment on later reinterpretations of this literary mode.

In this thesis I look at the use and development of the aesthetic of the literary epiphany in the poetry of William Butler Yeats. Although the Irish poet is often identified as one of the most influential Modernists, he was born in 1865, much earlier than the majority of other Modernist authors writing in English and his formative literary influences included the poetry of English Romanticism, French Symbolism and Victorian poetry. Simultaneously, Yeats promoted Irish literature and Irish cultural legacy and was an ardent student of the occult. The wide range of literary interests and non-literary inspirations profoundly influenced Yeats's own work; this impressive variety of influences is also visible in Yeats's remarkably diverse portrayals of the privileged moment. A close examination of the literary moment in Yeats's poetry makes it possible to identify to what degree the poet was inspired by the models he must have known very well, including the characteristically Romantic conventions of presenting the sudden moment of recognition, and how, when and to what degree he decided to transform them. It also helps discover and characterize certain preferred, recurring patterns of the literary moment in Yeats's work and, since the chapters in which Yeats's poetry is examined are arranged chronologically, to see how Yeats's strategies of writing in the epiphanic mode changed and evolved.

The dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter examines several theoretical aspects of the literary moment. This includes an overview of the development of the concept in literary studies, a discussion of a number of aspects and categories of the literary moment, and an overview of the existing definitions of the notion, including a short discussion of several characteristics conventionally attributed

to the phenomenon of the sudden moment of recognition in literary texts. The second chapter presents the epiphanic mode in literature in its historical development, surveying selected well-known, characteristic literary conventions and models of presenting the Moment in poetry and prose, and relating various aspects of those diverse interpretations to the cultural and literary contexts that shaped writing in the epiphanic mode in a particular time. As the main purpose of this brief survey is to help locate Yeats's distinctive voice against the background constituted by such different practices of writing in the epiphanic mode, the primary focus of this section is on literary texts published between 1798 (the year in which the first edition of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* was published) and the 1930s. Chapters III, IV and V are devoted to the analysis of the literary moment in Yeats's poetry. As the epiphanic mode is frequently used with the intention of raising the level of the reader's engagement with the text, this section examines aspects of the literary moment in a particular poem by taking into account a variety of the poem's characteristics: its language, imagery, sounds, prosody, lyrical form, theme, setting, sequential arrangement and narrative modes. The changes introduced by Yeats to an earlier version of a particular poem are analyzed in those cases in which such alterations significantly changed the character and impact of the poem's literary moment.

The discussion of the different models of the Yeatsian epiphany in chapters III-V permits the conclusion that Yeats's strategies of constructing the Moment were frequently inspired by earlier approaches to writing in the epiphanic mode, but, simultaneously, these existing conventions and models were usually challenged, changed and purposefully adapted. The most recognizable inspirations are of Romantic origin: numerous aspects of Yeats's epiphanic mode are modelled on the Romantic



literary moment both in Yeats's earlier and later poetry. In Yeats's early poetry the sudden moment of recognition acquires several Romantic characteristics: this includes identifying nature as the source of the beautiful and the sublime (two important "triggers" of the Romantic epiphany) and modelling the poems' speakers on the figure of the Romantic visionary who firmly believes in the curative potential of memory and the transformative power of imagination. Typically, these poems are structurally unified and relatively short, arranged in such a way as to evoke a particular mood in the poem's concluding lines. This mood usually reveals the epiphanees' state of mind and portrays emotional responses whose range corresponds to the character of emotions or reactions accompanying the Romantic moments of heightened awareness.

The subsequent portrayals of the privileged moment in Yeats's work are marked by stylistic experimentation that was to a significant extent inspired by the poet's interest in symbolism and, later, in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Modernist poetry. The economy of language and the precision of the image that characterize many poems included in the volume *Responsibilities* indicate Yeats's Modernist inspirations; simultaneously, however, the presentation of the revelatory moment in poems such as "The Cold Heaven" or "The Magi" suggests that in Yeats's poetry of the middle period the preferred vehicle of the epiphanic significance was the imaginary and the visionary. Since the Modernist notion of epiphany usually emphasizes the significance of the commonplace and the trivial, the tendency to prefer the imaginary to the immediate and the unusual to the quotidian may be seen as an anti-Modernist impulse in Yeats's reinterpretation of the aesthetic of the literary moment. This tendency is further exemplified by highly unconventional epiphanies-visions of "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan," two poems inspired by Yeats's eccentric concept of the interlocked gyres of history.

The conventions that came to be associated with the aesthetics of the Romantic moment return in Yeats's middle and late poetry, most frequently in the poems which introduce a well-defined speaker and discuss this speaker's complex relationship to his past. Although Yeats's later adaptations of the conventions of writing in the epiphanic mode are extremely varied, in the poems written after 1915 the privileged moment is usually denied the restorative function that defines the majority of its Romantic equivalents. When Yeats skilfully re-creates the paradigm of the luminous, redemptive moment of heightened perception, he often does so in order for the speaker to conclude that such moments of blessing cannot be experienced in the present time. The fragments describing past experience are occasionally given a slightly different literary form and may thus be identified by the reader as snapshots of memory – tableaux or vignettes which function as unchanging elements of Modernist collages. Another strategy of alluding to the Romantic concept of the sudden moment of recognition consists in reproducing the blueprint of what M. H. Abrams labelled the greater Romantic lyric, a longer poem whose speaker contemplates his surroundings and thus initiates a chain of associations that leads him to experience an important insight. Although in this case the conventional Romantic outline within which the poem's literary moment must be contained is preserved, the moment of insight itself is usually devoid of any transformative, redemptive force and its impact is often presented as devastating. After the publication of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* in 1933 Yeats rarely revisits the literary conventions related to the use of the epiphanic mode; when the literary moment returns, we can see Yeats at his most idiosyncratic, imbuing the poems with an aura of the grotesque and the surreal and drawing on imagery that can often be perceived as puzzling or obscure.

## SUMMARY (POLISH)

### EPIFANIA LITERACKA W POEZJI WILLIAMA BUTLERA YEATSA

Pojęcie *epifanii* jest dzisiaj często odnoszone do wczesnej estetyki Jamesa Joyce'a. Dzieje się tak nie bez przyczyny – Joyce nie tylko w mistrzowski sposób stosował poetykę epifanii w swoich powieściach, opowiadaniach i utworach poetyckich; to właśnie on pierwszy nadał angielskiemu słowu *epiphany* znaczenie, w jakim jest ono dzisiaj powszechnie używane przez literaturoznawców. W powieści *Stefan bohater* (*Stephen Hero*), pierwszej wersji późniejszego *Portretu artysty z czasów młodości*, tytułowy bohater powieści podkreśla związek epifanii z literaturą, sugerując, że sporządzenie starannego zapisu literackiego utrwalającego każde „duchowe” doświadczenie epifanii („*spiritual* manifestation”) jest powinnością każdego artysty – pisarza bądź poety.

Mimo że to właśnie Joyce spopularyzował termin *epifania* w literaturze, konwencja literacka polegająca na sugestywnym przedstawieniu momentu intuicyjnego wglądu lub momentu postrzegania, któremu towarzyszy szczególnie wyostrożona percepcja, istniała i była popularna dużo wcześniej. Krytycy M. H. Abrams, Morris Beja, Robert Langbaum czy Ashton Nichols podzielają pogląd, że ważnym poprzednikiem modernistycznej epifanii literackiej była dobrze znana w epoce romantyzmu poetyka „Momentu”. Za jej twórcę jest zwykle uważany William Wordsworth, ale nie był on jedynym poetą stosującym tę estetykę w swojej twórczości

w okresie romantyzmu. Do poetyki epifanii wracają później, chociaż nieco rzadziej niż w romantyzmie, poeci epoki wiktoriańskiej. W okresie modernizmu epifania literacka dość szybko ewoluuje, jednocześnie zyskując na popularności – stosuje się ją niemal powszechnie w modernistycznej prozie jako narzędzie nadające jej strukturę. Jednakże dwudziesty wiek to nie tylko wyraźna obecność epifanii literackiej w prozie – jest ona w dalszym ciągu stosowana w poezji, a wcześniej obowiązujące modele i konwencje ulegają dynamicznym zmianom również tutaj.

Pośród poetów, którzy często stosowali poetykę epifanii w swojej twórczości, jednym ze szczególnie godnych uwagi jest Irlandczyk William Butler Yeats. Yeats, wizjoner i okultysta, który uważał się w młodości za duchowego spadkobiercę Blake'a i Shelleya, a u schyłku życia wciąż twierdził, że był jednym z „ostatnich romantyków”, jest dzisiaj często uważany za jednego z najważniejszych i najbardziej interesujących anglojęzycznych modernistów. Jego poezja początkowo powstawała pod wyraźnym wpływem literatury anglosaskiego romantyzmu, później widoczne są w niej wpływy symbolizmu i poezji wiktoriańskiej, a w dojrzałym wieku i pod koniec życia poety – wpływy poezji powstającej w czasie najbardziej dynamicznego rozwoju brytyjskiej literatury doby modernizmu. Ta różnorodność wpływów i wielość inspiracji znajduje swój wyraz w wyjątkowo zróżnicowanych przedstawieniach momentu-epifanii w poezji Yeatsa. Celem pracy doktorskiej *Epifania literacka w poezji Williama Butlera Yeatsa (Literary Epiphany in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats)* jest zbadanie tych różnorodnych przedstawień oraz odpowiedź na pytanie czy, a jeśli tak, to w jaki sposób i w jakim stopniu, Yeats przekształcał i adaptował istniejące, znane modele i konwencje charakterystyczne dla poetyki epifanii.

Opracowanie liczy pięć rozdziałów. W rozdziale pierwszym omawiane są teoretyczne aspekty epifanii w literaturze. Drugi rozdział analizuje w kontekście

kulturowym charakterystyczne dla literatury danego okresu użycia poetyki „momentu”, towarzyszące im konwencje oraz wybrane przedstawienia epifanii. Przegląd ten ma ułatwić przyjrzenie się specyfice poetyki epifanii literackiej w poezji Yeatsa w kolejnych rozdziałach i z tego względu omawiana jest tu przede wszystkim literatura powstała między rokiem 1798 (rok publikacji *Ballad lirycznych* Wordswortha i Coleridge’a) a latami trzydziestymi dwudziestego wieku. W rozdziałach trzecim, czwartym i piątym analizowane są wybrane wiersze Irlandczyka; zachowany jest tu porządek chronologiczny pozwalający na zbadanie, w jaki sposób jego strategie użycia poetyki epifanii zmieniały się na przestrzeni lat.

Przeprowadzone analizy pozwalają stwierdzić, że Yeats niejednokrotnie wykorzystywał znane strategie przedstawiania epifanii-momentu, a jednocześnie w istotny sposób je przekształcał i adaptował, tworząc nowe, charakterystyczne dla siebie modele i wzorce. W początkowym okresie twórczości poeta posługuje się konwencjami znanymi w okresie romantyzmu, w tym towarzyszącymi często w tym okresie poetyce epifanii kategoriami wzniosłości i piękna, by konstruować utwory, w których epifaniczny „moment” często pod wieloma względami upodabnia się do swojego pierwowzoru z epoki romantyzmu. W tym czasie Yeats często pisze krótsze wiersze, których zwykle przejrzysta, spójna struktura ma na celu stworzenie określonej atmosfery emocjonalnej („mood”) w końcowej części utworu. Już wówczas w poezji Irlandczyka widoczne są wpływy symbolizmu, a w nieco późniejszym okresie – modernizmu. Ten proces stopniowej zmiany stylu spowoduje odejście od ściśle romantycznych konwencji przedstawiania epifanii, a ilustrują go przywoływane w rozdziale trzecim przemyślenia poety. W poezji opublikowanej w tomiku *Responsibilities* (1914) wpływy modernizmu są już bardzo wyraźne, a sam moment wglądu ma w wielu przypadkach stosunkowo rzadko spotykaną w poezji romantyków

negatywną, pesymistyczną wymowę (np. w „The Cold Heaven” i „The Magi”). W wierszach tego okresu tak język jak i obrazowanie cechuje dalsze odejście od romantycznych wzorców. Jednocześnie Yeats stopniowo odchodzi od wielu stosowanych w romantyzmie konwencji przedstawiania epifanii, wybierając modernistyczny minimalizm i ekspresję pojedynczego obrazu w miejsce bardziej typowej dla romantycznej „chwili” dłuższej formuły opisowej, w której istotna jest dokładnie scharakteryzowana postać podmiotu lirycznego, sceneria i dramaturgia wydarzeń poprzedzających moment wglądu. Ówczesna koncepcja wyrazistego obrazu i pozbawionego abstrakcji języka, którą Yeats przeciwstawia „bezcieleśnej emocji” poezji niektórych symbolistów i poetów wiktoriańskich, pod wieloma względami współbrzmi z założeniami imagizmu Pounda. Z drugiej strony charakterystyczna dla poezji Yeatsa w tym okresie tendencja do upatrywania źródła epifanii w tym, co nierealne, wyobrażone, wizyjne jest w dużym stopniu antymodernistyczna – archetypowy modernistyczny „moment” związany jest przecież z estetyzacją tego, co pospolite, codzienne czy banalne. Yeats pozostaje przez dłuższy czas pod wpływem poetyki wizji: w nieco późniejszych wierszach “The Second Coming” i “Leda and the Swan” ta tendencja jest jeszcze wyraźniejsza, a wizyjny charakter epifanii jest zaakcentowany poprzez kontekst, który stanowią ekscentryczne teorie tworzone w tym okresie przez poetę i szczegółowo opisane w *A Vision*.

Irlandczyk wkrótce powraca do niektórych form i konwencji charakterystycznych dla poetyki epifanii w romantyzmie – estetyka ta jest obecna w tomikach *The Wild Swans at Coole*, *The Tower* i *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*. W tym późniejszym okresie twórczości Yeatsa przeżywany „moment” jest jednak w kontekście wymowy całości utworu zwykle pozbawiony wiary i optymizmu, które są zwykle dobrze uchwytnymi cechami jego romantycznego pierwowzoru. Utwory

wykorzystujące niektóre konwencje popularne w romantyzmie mają zazwyczaj charakter dialogu terażniejszości z przeszłością. W przeciwieństwie do wspomnianych wcześniej epifanii-wizji, w których osoba relacjonująca wydarzenia pozostaje często anonimowa, a niekiedy jest całkowicie ukryta, podmiot liryczny jest tu na ogół postacią pierwszoplanową. W tym okresie jako model, który pozwala na wykorzystanie konwencji epifanii, pojawia się niekiedy *the greater Romantic lyric* – opisana przez M. H. Abramsa, często stosowana w epoce romantyzmu forma dłuższego wiersza, w którym przemyślenia podmiotu lirycznego pozostają w ścisłym związku z obserwowanymi przez ów podmiot elementami określonego miejsca lub krajobrazu i niejednokrotnie prowadzą do doświadczenia wglądu. Inną strategią pozwalającą Yeatsowi na posłużenie się konwencjami jest przywołanie epifanii ukazywanej w sposób typowy dla romantyzmu – jako przeżywany przez podmiot liryczny ulotny moment intuicyjnego poznania, który umożliwia głęboką przemianę. W tym okresie poeta na ogół przekształca tę konwencję: umieszcza tak przedstawiony moment w przeszłości, sugerując, że taki sposób przeżywania jest niemożliwy dla podmiotu lirycznego w jego obecnej sytuacji. Kontrast między „tu i teraz” a „tam i wtedy” jest często dodatkowo podkreślony poprzez formę utworu: spójność i harmonia zwykle krótkiego fragmentu zwięźle opisującego moment krótkotrwałego olśnienia-epifanii jest przeciwstawiana modernistycznemu kolażowi lub brakowi harmonii charakteryzującymi całą kompozycję; tym samym wymowa całości utworu zazwyczaj zaprzecza pozytywnej wymowie krótkiego fragmentu. W poezji napisanej po roku 1933 (rok publikacji tomiku *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*) epifania literacka pojawia się rzadko, kiedy jednak Yeats decyduje się na jej użycie, przybiera ona formy mało konwencjonalne i mało charakterystyczne, a jej sposób prezentacji zawiera niekiedy elementy groteski i surrealizmu.