

January 2022

Syntax as Experience: On Yeats's "The Fisherman"

Yuki Tanaka
Hosei University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys>

Recommended Citation

Tanaka, Yuki (2022) "Syntax as Experience: On Yeats's "The Fisherman"," *International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34068/IYS.6.1.4>

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol6/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Yeats Studies by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

SYNTAX AS EXPERIENCE: ON YEATS'S "THE FISHERMAN"

Yuki Tanaka

In "A General Introduction for My Work" (1937), W. B. Yeats writes that he needed "not as Wordsworth thought, words in common use, but a powerful and passionate syntax" to match "passionate subject-matter" (*E&I* 521–22). Critical accounts of "passionate syntax" have often rehearsed Yeats's own description: his distorted syntax is meant to convey intense subjectivity and feelings that cannot be expressed in normative sentence structures.¹ But reading Yeats's syntax can be simply confusing, as it requires constant negotiation with what he means. Think of the fifth stanza of "Among School Children," where Yeats maintains a sentence throughout a whole stanza to create what he calls "a complete coincidence between period and stanza" (*E&I* 522):

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
Honey of generation had betrayed,
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
As recollection or the drug decide,
Would think her son, did she but see that shape
With sixty or more winters on its head,
A compensation for the pang of his birth,
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth? (*CWI* 220–21)

Reading this stanza, we cannot grasp the structure of the whole sentence at once. The grammatical subject of this interrogative sentence is "what youthful mother." But the predicate "Would think her son [. . .] a compensation" is delayed until four lines later, while Yeats piles up an apposition and three relative clauses. Moreover, as soon as the sentence finds the predicate, it is interrupted by another clause: "Would think her son, did she but see that shape."

Although there has been renewed interest in formalist studies of Yeats's poetry, syntax has played a minor role, overshadowed by considerations of his rhymes, prosody, and stanzaic forms.² But more than other formal devices, syntax makes us conscious of reading as a temporal process and could help us arrive at a subtler understanding of Yeats's poetry. Reading syntax is experiential: to make sense of a sentence, we read one word at a time, then move on to the next sentence, in the order the author created. This process is amplified in poetry, where a sentence is broken up into lines, giving us more time to ponder

how one syntactic unit connects to the next. As Derek Attridge has argued in a recent book, a poem is “a *formal* event, involving [. . .] shifts in register, allusions to other discourses (literary and non-literary), rhythmic patterning, linking rhymes, movements of syntax, echoing of sounds: all operating in a temporal medium to surprise, lull, intrigue, satisfy.”³ Yeats’s passionate syntax creates these modulations of meaning, staging a mind constantly thinking, rethinking, and qualifying thoughts.

By attending to the experience of reading Yeats’s syntax word by word, line by line, I will offer a nuanced reading of a poem that has often been read as a straightforward *ars poetica*. Completed in 1914, “The Fisherman” voices Yeats’s disillusionment with the Dublin middle-class audience who failed to appreciate the genius of John Synge and rioted at a premier performance of Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907. Yeats drafted the first version in 1913. During the time of the poem’s composition, Sir Hugh Lane, the nephew of Lady Gregory, was under severe public criticism for his campaign to give his collection of French impressionist paintings to Dublin if the city would build a proper gallery to host them. Accordingly, in the poem the speaker turns from this real, unappreciative audience—whom Yeats often called “the mob”—to an ideal audience represented by the fisherman, a symbol of native Irish culture. The poem ends with, in Roy Foster’s words, “one of WBY’s most magnificently assertive signatures” (*Life* 2 13): “Before I am old / I shall have written him one / Poem maybe as cold / And passionate as the dawn” (*CW1* 149).

When read with attention to its syntax, “The Fisherman” becomes more than a straightforward repudiation of the mass audience. The poem has two stanzas: in the first stanza, the speaker tells us that he first conceived of the fisherman twelve months ago; in the second, he remembers that original moment in one long sentence. Within that single sentence, tense shifts quickly, from present to past, from past to present, and then back to past and to future perfect. These tense shifts complicate and extend Yeats’s sentence, creating a temporal drama in which the speaker looks back on his past self in a struggle to revive the original vision of the fisherman. In “The Fisherman,” Yeats’s syntax is not just a sign of an assertive self whose strong feelings distort his language; rather, it enacts a mind thinking, as the speaker tries to recapture his vision of an ideal audience but cannot fully believe in the possibility of realizing it.

A. Walton Litz argues that in the second stanza, the fisherman is transformed into “a vision of a possible future.”⁴ But Litz’s characterization of the poem is more applicable to a version of the poem Yeats wrote the previous year. In May 1913 Yeats wrote “subject for a poem” into his notebook:

Who is this by the edge of the stream
That walking in a good homespun coat

And carries fishing in his hand
 We singers have nothing of our own
 All our hopes, our loves, our dreams
 Are for the young for those whom
 We sing in [?to] life. But is one
 That I can see always though he is not yet born
 He walks by the edge of the stream
 In a good homespun coat
 And carries a fishing rod in his hand.⁵

“Though he is not yet born” implies that although the fisherman is not born at present, he will be eventually. Yeats sounded this hopeful note more forcefully in the same month in a speech after a special Abbey performance: “I have no doubt that all we here in Ireland to-day are living more or less in the eyes of an unborn public, that we are more or less playing our part before an audience, not like this small audience, but a great audience of the unborn.”⁶ He went on to say: “The present generation was the one in which they saw Irishmen learning to love the arts for their own sake. It would be remembered as the generation in which the Irish people became a modern people.”⁷ In both the 1913 passage and the speech, the birth of an ideal audience who is appreciative of art seems to be possible. As suggested by “I can see always though he is not yet born,” the audience does not exist yet but is always available to the imagination as a future vision to be realized. Imaginative time is continuous with real, historical time.

The 1914 version is not as idealistic, and the difference is apparent in the handling of syntax in the poem’s second stanza. But first, I would like to analyze the opening stanza to demonstrate how shifts in syntax and thinking occur across the stanza break. The syntax of the first stanza is not as complex as that of the second, but a sense of disillusionment with the real Dublin audience is already present. The opening line immediately qualifies the optimism of the earlier version:

Although I can see him still,
 The freckled man who goes
 To a grey place on a hill
 In grey Connemara clothes
 At dawn to cast his flies,
 It’s long since I began
 To call up to the eyes
 This wise and simple man.
 All day I’d looked in the face
 What I had hoped ’twould be
 To write for my own race
 And the reality; (CW1 148)

“I can see always” is replaced by “Although I can see him still,” which suggests that the fisherman he started imagining a year earlier might not be as vivid as he used to be. Rather than the idealized world of the continuous present in the draft, “The Fisherman” inhabits what the speaker calls “the reality.” It is crowded with “[t]he living men that I hate”—those who scorn Yeats’s and the Abbey’s effort to create avant-garde art and to bring Lane’s collection of paintings to Ireland. Through his involvement with the Abbey Theatre, Yeats wanted to create “an Irish literature which, though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind.”⁸ As Marjorie Howes argues, “between about 1899 and 1910, Yeats’s Irish theatre represented, in part, an effort to forge and simultaneously theorize about the nation as a collectivity.”⁹ For him, the theater was “a potential means of mobilizing and ‘nationalizing’ the masses, something he recognized any successful nationalism in the age of mass politics must do.”¹⁰

The first stanza uses paratactic syntax to emphasize the increasing pressure of a mass audience that resists being unified into what Howes calls a national “collectivity.” “The dead man that I loved” refers to John Synge, but his presence is quickly drowned by a list of philistine audiences:

The living men that I hate,
 The dead man that I loved,
 The craven man in his seat,
 The insolent unreprieved,
 And no knave brought to book
 Who has won a drunken cheer,
 The witty man and his joke
 Aimed at the commonest ear,
 The clever man who cries
 The catch-cries of the clown,
 The beating down of the wise
 And great Art beaten down. (*CWI* 148)

Instead of describing the audience as a group, Yeats lists them in a paratactic sentence as discrete singulars: “the craven man,” “the insolent,” “no knave,” “the witty man,” “the clever man.” There is no unity among these figures. In the face of this reality, art is powerless, and its defeat is rendered with an air of finality in a chiasmus: “The beating down of the wise / And great Art beaten down.”

So far, Yeats’s sentence is long but simple—a list of nouns that needs no parsing. Accordingly, the speaker’s attitude toward the audience can be read as an unqualified snub. But the syntax twists and turns in the second stanza, when the speaker tries to push aside this repugnant reality by remembering how he originally conceived of the fisherman. Here, the speaker looks back to the past

and reenacts the moment of his imaginative conception as if it is happening in the present moment of narration:

Maybe a twelvemonth since
 Suddenly I began,
 In scorn of this audience,
 Imagining a man,
 And his sun-freckled face,
 And grey Connemara cloth,
 Climbing up to a place
 Where stone is dark under froth,
 And the down-turn of his wrist
 When the flies drop in the stream; (CW1 149)

Although the second stanza repeats many images from the first stanza, the shift from “It’s long since” to “*Maybe* a twelvemonth since” immediately signals a change: in the second stanza, the speaker is trying harder to remember the fisherman, specifying the time that has passed, and bringing the past vision back into the present.

This imaginative effort is felt in Yeats’s increasingly complex sentence structure. As the speaker remembers, the memory of the fisherman grows more intense; accordingly, the main clause is quickly left behind, and the subordinate clause dominates the rest of the stanza. The subordinate status of “since” is almost unnoticeable, because its main clause is abbreviated and grammatically incomplete (“*Maybe* a twelvemonth since” instead of “It has been a twelvemonth”). In other words, although the vision is remembered, it feels vivid as if it is happening in the present moment. The dactylic opening of the next line, “Suddenly,” reinforces the intensity of the vision. The same word opens two of Yeats’s famous visionary poems: “The Cold Heaven” (“Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven” [CW1 124]) and “Leda and the Swan” (“A sudden blow” [CW1 218]). In both poems, the sudden intensity of a visionary moment coincides with the beginning of a poem. Similarly, “Suddenly” in “The Fisherman” announces that this second stanza is not a mere continuation of the first stanza, but a new beginning. The pastness of the “since” clause is further diminished by the fact that the slant rhyme of “since” and “audience” is drowned by the triple *a* rhyme of “I began [. . .] / Imagining a man,” which emphasizes the present intensity of the reenacted vision. As Helen Vendler points out, there is a metrical shift, too, from the “simple iambic predominance” of the first stanza (“It’s long since I began / To call up to the eyes / This wise and simple man”) to the more “rhythmically alive” second stanza in the description of the fisherman,¹¹ with a trochee (“Climbing”) and spondees (“down-turn,” “flies drop”).

The poem's focus on reviving the original moment of the fisherman's birth can also be seen in Yeats's revisions. He made two important changes. First, in the draft of "The Fisherman" in the Cornell manuscript edition of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, the second stanza begins: "In scorn of this audience / Suddenly I began."¹² The original opening of the second stanza puts more emphasis on the causal progression from the first stanza to the next: his rejection of the mass audience led him to imagine the fisherman. In the final version, Yeats obscures this transition by starting the stanza with "Maybe a twelve month since." This change makes the second stanza not just a continuation of the first stanza, but a fresh start on what has been said before, this time with more imaginative intensity. Second, in the draft version "Imagining a man" reads "Imagining *this* man."¹³ The change from the demonstrative to the indefinite article suggests that the speaker is recalling his vision as if he is imagining the fisherman for the first time.

Reflecting this growing intensity, Yeats's sentence becomes longer and longer until it frees itself from the subordinate status of "since" as well as its pastness. After a series of tenseless present participles and noun phrases, the narrative past completely disappears:

Imagining a man,
And his sun-freckled face
And grey Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth,
And the down-turn of his wrist
When the flies drop in the stream; (CW1 149)

Matthew Campbell comments on this passage: "There is a pointed simplicity and no little prosodic artfulness in the mimicry of the simple skills of the fisherman."¹⁴ While the meter is simple, however, the syntax is not. By the time we get to the last line of this passage, the grammatical kernel of this clause, "I began," is so far behind that the fisherman seems to be freed from the past tense that opened the stanza. As Joseph Adams has argued, Yeats often subverts "the normal hierarchical structure of language."¹⁵ In this passage, Yeats unmoors the sentence from "I began" by piling up phrase after phrase until the sentence drifts into the present tense.

Here Yeats is loosening up his syntax to recapture the intense experience of seeing the fisherman for the first time. Compare the spontaneous syntax of the above passage with the neat syntax of the first stanza, in which prepositions spatially orient the reader and make it clear where the fisherman is:

Although I can see him still,

The freckled man who goes
 To a grey place on a hill
 In grey Connemara clothes
 At dawn to cast his flies, (CWI 148)

The second stanza repeats many of these images but in a more fragmentary sentence, as if the speaker is trying to grasp his vision for the first time, perceiving body parts first (“his sun-freckled face,” “cloth,” “the down-turn of his wrist”) before grasping the whole picture. This initial fragmentariness testifies to the intensity of the vision. Similarly, the opening lines of “Leda and the Swan” suggest the rawness of the vision in fragmentary syntax:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast. (CWI 218)

The perception of the scene is taking place at the present moment of speaking: the speaker lists a swarm of local perceptions (“wings,” “thighs,” “dark webs,” “nape,” “bill”) before organizing them into the whole scene in a complete clause: “He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.”

But this idealistic recuperation of the original intensity is subject to the speaker’s awareness that he lives in a fallen present. While the vision of the fisherman in the 1913 version stays in the simple present of “always,” it starts to diminish toward the end of the final version. The speaker admits that the fisherman is “[a] man who does not exist, / A man who is but a dream” (CWI 149). In the 1913 draft, the word “dream” meant the hope for a new audience: “All our hopes, our loves, our dreams / Are for the young.” In the final poem, “dream” means “fictional.” “A man who does not exist” also recalls “though he is not yet born” in the 1913 draft. The difference is that here the fisherman exists only in the speaker’s imagination, but not in real, historical time.

This gap between imaginative time and real time becomes even starker when Yeats’s sentence becomes as difficult as the stanza quoted at the beginning of this essay. Here, after a long detour into the present tense, the poem suddenly returns to the past tense:

A man who does not exist,
 A man who is but a dream;
 And cried, “Before I am old
 I shall have written him one
 Poem maybe as cold
 And passionate as the dawn.” (CWI 149)

Up to this point, the sentence has moved away from the narrative past and has been hovering in the present tense. Now it is suddenly pulled back to the narrative past as if the spell has been broken. This abrupt shift is created by the oddity of “and cried.” The verb “cried” takes “I” as the grammatical subject, but this subject last appeared eleven lines earlier in “I began.” This distance makes us pause and wonder who is doing the crying. This jarring shift is also metrical. The poem is written in the fast-moving tempo of iambic trimeter. But this sudden return to the narrative past coincides with the first internal punctuation in the poem, the comma that follows “cried,” which arrests this metrical momentum. In Yeats’s terms, this abrupt alteration of rhythm may be read as the breaking of a trance, as he suggests in “The Symbolism of Poetry”:

The purpose of rhythm [. . .] 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. (*Ec&I* 159)

The “alluring monotony” of the poem’s trimeter creates a dreamscape in which the past vision of the fisherman is brought back into the present with its original intensity. This rhythm-induced trance is interrupted by the jolting syntactic punctuation of “and cried,” waking the speaker up to reality.

It is true that if we accept Yeats’s own account of his syntax, perhaps we are meant to take this syntactic distortion as a manifestation of his powerful feeling that cannot be expressed in ordinary syntax. The strong pause at “cried” could be there to emphasize a defiant note against the imaginative diminution happening in the previous two lines. The speaker has admitted that the fisherman is imaginary, but by crying out his resolution to write for the fisherman, he tries to maintain his hope for realizing an ideal audience in the future. The final lines are made particularly assertive by the future perfect tense. While the simple future “will write” suggests the speaker’s wish to write such a poem, “shall have written” sounds more like a prophecy and takes the completion of the poem for granted.

Moreover, “Before I am old” is another defiant move that is rather uncharacteristic of Yeats. In his early poetry, Yeats often casts his speakers as prematurely old. The ending of “The Song of Wandering Aengus” is a good example, also because its language anticipates the closing lines of “The Fisherman”: “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” (*CW1* 56). The speaker of “The Fisherman” does not claim that he is already old, despite the fact that in the earlier version the speaker already

groups himself with the old: “We singers have nothing of our own / All our hopes, our loves, our dreams / Are for the young.” In the final version Yeats’s speaker presents himself as not yet old, perhaps to reserve for himself the imaginative power to compose a poem before he yields to the young. To cite Foster again, this is indeed an “assertive” gesture.

But Yeats’s confident note is qualified by the very forcedness of syntax and the abrupt shift from present to past tense. These features make it difficult to read the sentence with the ease that the coordinating conjunction “*and* cried” promises. This forced transition exposes the difficulty of reconciling imaginative time with real time, of locating the imaginary fisherman in the future. Even when the speaker seems to have broken away from the reality of mass audience into his imaginative vision, he must come back to the unfavorable time to which he belongs. “Cried” also recalls “the catch cries of the clown” in the first stanza, thus bringing the clamor of the mass audience back into a lyric space seemingly insulated from this “reality.” Even in the poem’s final lines, we hear an echo of uncertainty in “*maybe* as cold / And passionate as the dawn.”

In “The Fisherman,” the speaker looks back to the previous year, escaping from the mass audience and retrieving his vision of an ideal audience. As the sentence gets longer and longer, however, the speaker’s thought process becomes more and more complex. Discussing Yeats’s habit of extending a sentence with semicolons where a simple period would do, Michael Wood argues that Yeats “is trying to stave off an ending, even of sentences [. . .] as if every thought is tracked by another thought, a new qualification or additional sense or instance.”¹⁶ “The Fisherman” does not enact such qualification overtly, but the complex extension of Yeats’s final sentence calls the dream of a timeless vision into question.

Once we are immersed in Yeats’s “passionate syntax” and read it in time, we start to notice a less-than-confident tone. Attention to the poem’s syntax reveals a speaker who is trying to envision an ideal audience for his art but feels uncertain about the possibility of realizing that audience. We share the speaker’s uncertainty as we read on word by word, looking for syntactic coherence. In other words, syntax enacts a lived time in which the speaker—just like us—thinks, feels, and doubts, and we participate in that process. Read this way, the poet’s passionate syntax is no longer a site of struggle where we must submit to his distorted sentence structure on his own terms and be often confused by it. Rather, it becomes an affective common ground where poet and reader meet.

NOTES

- 1 John Holloway argues that Yeats's syntax is "always in the direction of speech in the sense of the poet's own most personal voice and presence: of an engagement of his own subjectivity and energy as the continuing focus of the poems and everything in them"; "Style and World in *The Tower*," in *An Honoured Guest: New Essays on W. B. Yeats*, ed. Denis Donoghue and J. R. Mulryne (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), 91. Bernard O'Donoghue agrees, identifying in Yeats's poetry "the force of feeling" that expresses itself through the distortion of syntax; "Dispassionate Syntax: Irish Poetry at the End of Yeats's Century," *Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies* 11 (2000): 171.
- 2 Joseph Valente, "Formal (Re)Introductions: New Criticism of Yeats," *Éire-Ireland* 47, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2012): 269. Valente discusses renewed interest in formalism in Yeats studies as he considers three books: Nicholas Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Michael Wood, *Yeats and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 3 Derek Attridge, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 29. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in reexamining the process of reading from scholars of different dispensations. These scholars include Attridge and Rita Felski, who has emphasized the reader's affective relationship to texts, exploring how we are constantly "intertwined and entangled with texts." See Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 84.
- 4 A. Walton Litz, "Yeats at Fifty," *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies* 12 (1994): 138.
- 5 W. B. Yeats, *The Wild Swans at Coole: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 431.
- 6 "Municipal Art Gallery," *Irish Times*, May 10, 1913, 7.
- 7 *Irish Times*, May 10, 1913, 7–8.
- 8 W. B. Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 170.
- 9 Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 67.
- 10 Howes, *Yeats's Nations*, 67.
- 11 Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 190, 191.
- 12 Yeats, *The Wild Swans at Coole*, 141.
- 13 Yeats, *The Wild Swans at Coole*, 141, my emphasis.
- 14 Matthew Campbell, *Irish Poetry under the Union, 1801–1924* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 194.
- 15 Joseph Adams, *Yeats and the Masks of Syntax* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 57. Adams's book is the most extensive study of Yeats's syntax to date. In it, Adams locates many places in Yeats's poetry where syntactic ambiguities are "more or less irresolvable" (4), revealing not a unified consciousness but a dispersed subjectivity. While Adams's approach is spatial, in that he tabulates local syntactical ambiguities in Yeats's work, I read Yeats's syntax as a temporal process, with an eye to the way an individual sentence unfolds as we read a poem.
- 16 Wood, *Yeats and Violence*, 121.