

Yeats and Eliot: A Hidden Debt and Its Repercussions

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Undoubtedly, two figures loom largest in twentieth-century poetry -- W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot. As fathers, respectively, of the Irish Renaissance and of Modernism, every modern or contemporary poet must address them, even if only to reject their theories and practices. So pervasive was their influence that these two men also had to reckon with one another. The ambivalence of Eliot's portrayal of Yeats in lines 36-50 of section II of *Little Gidding* show Eliot tempering respect with the knowledge that he must do something different.

Eliot confesses a debt to Yeats, and yet he knows that he has moved beyond the man. Eliot does not use the words of last year or next year but speaks the language of the present. Yeats, at least here, speaks the language of the past. In a linear conception of history, the past necessarily influences the present, and the present moves beyond the past. Yeats' cyclic view of history is ironically appropriate in this context, for this paper will show how the present may influence the past in Eliot's and Yeats' works. The gyres of history, whether upward or downward spirals, do have levels of overlapping contingencies. It is in just such a contingency that these two men found themselves.

The bulk of scholarship pertaining to the influence of these men upon one another has concentrated upon Yeats' influence on Eliot.¹ However, points of correlation also reverse this apparently one-sided influence, where Eliot's poetry undeniably affects Yeats' work. Perhaps this unadmitted borrowing on Yeats' part colored his public attitude toward Eliot's poetry.

Given this unacknowledged correlation between the two men, an analysis of their public writings about one another uncovers some unexpected findings. Richard Ellmann's succinct summation of their

verbal sparring documents their life-long public battle and shows Eliot's changing opinion in the face of Yeats' intransigence.

Ellmann posits that Eliot's first stance towards Yeats was one of distaste. Not satisfied with merely disparaging the man's poetry, he even goes so far as to mock Yeats' membership in the Theosophical Society in "The Cooking Egg." But as their careers progressed, Eliot softened his opinion of Yeats' poetry. He attributed this tempering to various things, among them attendance at *At The Hawk's Well* in 1916 and the publication of *The Wild Swans At Coole* in 1919. In 1923, his review of *Ulysses* mentions Yeats favorably for his use of the mythical method. Eliot even backed away from his final negative comments on Yeats, found in *After Strange Gods*, which was published in 1933. Later in his life, he would not allow this collection to be republished (Ellmann, 53-54). But it was not until 1935, in the *Criterion*, that Eliot presents unalloyed praise for the man. Indeed, Eliot here calls Yeats, "the greatest poet of his time" ("A Commentary" 612). He continued to praise Yeats in his private and public lectures at University College in Dublin in 1936, and, after Yeats' death, in the first annual Yeats lecture to the Friends of the Irish Academy in 1940 ("Tradition" 887, 884).

We cannot so easily summarize Yeats' views on Eliot. He makes no references, disparaging or otherwise, to the man in his poetry. His published letters are almost completely quiet on this matter. Michael Butler Yeats, in his recent essay about his father's relationship with Eliot, neatly summarizes his father's feelings on Eliot's poetry. However, he misses the mark in describing Yeats' feeling for Eliot as an individual.

From the first, he disliked the poetry of Eliot; it was, he claimed, grey, cold, flat, bare. In time he came to accept Eliot as a major poet, and he commented in particular on his great influence on the young. But on Eliot as a person, he seems to have had nothing to say. (170)

A letter, sent to Olivia Shakespear shortly after March 4, 1935, details Yeats' struggle with the influence of Eliot on Modern poetry. At

the time, he was just about to begin editing *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*.

I can never do any kind of work (apart from verse) unless I have a clear problem to solve. My problem this time will be: ‘How far do I like the Ezra, Eliot, Auden school and if I do not, why not?’ Then this further problem ‘Why do the younger generation like it so much? What do they see or hope?’ I am to write a long introduction. (Wade 833)

Here we can see Yeats wrestling not only with Eliot’s influence on himself, but on Modern poetry as a whole. By the time of this book’s publication in 1936, both men had already produced the vast majority of their poetic work, although Eliot would produce some of his most hopeful and moving verse in the next six years. Yeats was working at editing this book while Eliot was working on *Four Quartets*. *Burnt Norton*, the first of the four, was published in 1935, while Yeats was involved in making selections for his compendium. It is in the Introduction to this book that we see Yeats’ commentary on Eliot the man and Eliot the poet.

Yeats begins his critique of Eliot’s poetry by focusing on the mechanics of his verse, rather than dealing with the alienated stance behind the text. For Yeats, Eliot,

works without apparent imagination, producing his effects by a rejection of all rhythms and metaphors used by the more popular romantics rather than by the discovery of his own, this rejection giving his work an unexaggerated plainness that has the effect of novelty. (Yeats, *Oxford*, xxi. Further references to this book will be to page numbers.)

With one hand Yeats gives backhanded credit for a break from Romanticism, but with the other he damns Eliot, claiming that he found nothing new to take Romanticism's place. He sees no imagination in the art, just a sense of artlessness that others mistake for a new kind of art.

This art itself describes the unthinking habits of the human condition, and, in its "rhythmical flatness," appears "grey, cold, [and] dry" (xxi). In short, the monotony of the verse parallels the monotony of the life Eliot seeks to describe. Yeats likens Eliot's verse to the first time he ever saw a painting by Manet. It gave him an "incomplete pleasure," for he "longed for the vivid colour and light of Rousseau and Courbet" (xxii). Something is lacking in Eliot's verse, just as in the "grey middle-tint" of Manet's paintings (xxii).

Yeats goes so far as to say that Eliot does not even belong in the Western tradition of poetry. He has "left the procession," stepped out of the historical sequence. Surely he cannot be placed among "those that descend from Shakespeare and the translators of the Bible" (xxii). In fact, Yeats thinks of him "as satirist rather than poet" (xxii). He is diminished to the level of a fashioner of unimaginative verses who can lampoon the modern world but not produce art about it.

Even Eliot's personal life is not spared in this attack. Yeats finally does admit that Eliot, in *The Hollow Men* and *Ash Wednesday*, "helped by the short lines," arrives at "rhythmical animation" (xxii). In his dramatic poems, his "remarkable sense of actor, chanter, [and] scene," invests a new life into his rhythm. (xxii). But this new sense of rhythm cannot be attributed, as others have claimed, to Eliot's enrichment from finding religion. Rather, his religious commitment "lacks all strong emotion" (xxiii). In fact, "there is little self-surrender in his personal relation to God and the soul" (xxiii). Eliot's pity for the modern world "tempers the prayer book with the results of mathematical philosophy" (xxiii). We must remember, of course, that this introduction was published before *Four Quartets*, but after the *Ariel Poems*, *Ash Wednesday*, and *The Waste Land*.

Michael Butler Yeats mentions this scathing personal attack in his essay, yet does not accord it the weight it deserves as Yeats' final published thoughts on Eliot. Informed by the same passages, he merely "wonders how Yeats came to be so well-informed about Eliot's 'personal relation to God and the soul,'" (183). Perhaps he feels that the insubstantiality of a few pages of derision within the huge corpus that W.B. Yeats left us does not merit such close scrutiny.

Nevertheless, these pages do exist, and within them Yeats leaves many unanswered questions. What is it that places Eliot outside of the historical sequence of Western poetry? Is it that his work does not usually speak in Yeats' nebulous "great manner"? Is it color, accent, variation, or all three, that is lacking in Eliot's verse? Is not Eliot's depiction of a grey universe justified by the world around him? Is this not a more realistic stance than the one Yeats implicitly advocates? While it is true that the personality of the poet must inform the poetry, why is Eliot condemned for the poetry that he did not write, rather than assessed for the poetry that he did produce?

Almost every inclusion Yeats makes of Eliot's poetry serves to justify a point that he has made about Eliot in his introduction. As Edward O'Shea simply understates, "it is not a selection critics more attuned with Eliot would agree with" (66). Yeats' insistence that Eliot writes about people who keep on living only out of habit is supported by "Preludes," "The Hippopotamus," "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," and *The Hollow Men* all show Eliot's satirical abilities. "Ash Wednesday," even though it receives most of what scant praise Yeats can muster up in his Introduction, is not included, because of its religious sense. "Journey of the Magi" is included, but this could be for its rhythms rather than for its religion (O'Shea, 66).

This rough treatment, coming hard upon *After Strange Gods*, is obviously, as Kristian Smidt says, "an eye for an eye and no mistake" (Smidt, 86). We may grant this point, but then we must posit that Yeats

chose to ignore Eliot's 1935 *Criterion* essay, which is filled with praise for the man. There must be a deeper reason, one which takes into consideration Yeats' unstinting negative reaction to Eliot throughout his life.

If we turn to the beginning of Eliot's career, to his first published poem, we may arrive at some ironic justification for Yeats' position. In 1915, Yeats was already a well-established poet, the only Rhymer's Club member to survive the inevitable fin-du-siecle shifting of tastes. Eliot first published "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in the June 1915 issue of *Poetry*. The poem's critical reception need not be rehearsed here. Here was something new, something which Yeats claims to have noticed and read. He even saw it as an announcement of a new age in poetry:

No Romantic word or sound, nothing reminiscent, nothing in the least like the paintings of Ricketts could be permitted henceforth. Poetry must resemble prose, and both must accept the vocabulary of their time; nor must there be any special subject matter. . . . The past had deceived us: let us accept the worthless present. ("Modern Poetry" 499)

But despite all this froth, it is immediately after this that we find "echoes" of Eliot within the poetry of Yeats.² Yeats betrays the influence of Eliot in two poems, both written within two years of the publication of "Prufrock."

"Ego Dominus Tuus," published in *The Wild Swans at Coole* in 1919, but written during the first half of 1917, makes use of an interesting image from "Prufrock." Near the end of the poem Prufrock imagines exposing his thoughts, and the supposed ramifications of that action:

But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while

If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window should say;
'That is not it at all
That is not what I meant, at all.' (105-110)

Here Prufrock imagines a dialogue, one which ends negatively for him. It all takes place as if it were an image from the magic lantern, throwing an image on a screen. Not merely of the outer nature of the supposed conversants, the image pictures their naked nerves, their inner selves. These nerves would create a picture of the essence of the matter, a distillation of the sentiments behind the words. And these words would not be kind to Prufrock. He would be misunderstood, and, in his frailty, he cannot take that chance.

Yeats' echo of this image appears at the beginning of "Ego Dominus Tuus." Hic is speaking to Ille, telling him that,

A lamp burns on beside the open book
That Michael Robartes left, you walk in the moon
And though you have passed the best of life still trace,
Enthralled by the unconquerable delusion,
Magical shapes. (3-7)

This begins a true dialogue, one in which Hic espouses an unfavored point of view. But both Hic and Ille exist in the mind of the complete poet, so this dialogue has a psychomachic quality about it, an outward manifestation of a state of mind. Hic condemns Ille for his actions. He is supposedly a slave to delusion, and can do nothing but spin magical shapes in the moonlight.

Ille's magical shapes call to his opposite, his shadow, in order that he may know and present himself more clearly. What is Prufrock presenting but two sides of his own self? He contains the impotence that

creates the woman's answer, just as Hic tries to grasp both sides of himself, and just as the ideal poet contains both Hic and Ille. The two presentations are somehow out of the ordinary, removed from the everyday discourse of the world.

Both invoke magic to produce an image in the mind of the speaker. The magic here is in the shapes traced by Ille. A participant in the dialogue, rather than a lamp or a lantern, throws these shapes. Ille's self replaces Prufrock's lantern. The dialogic nature of both passages, coupled with the references to magic projections, creates a bond between the two passages. While there is no direct lifting of lines or borrowing of phrases, it is as if Eliot's use of the magic lantern informs Yeats' use of the magic shapes.

Yeats' use of "Prufrock" is not limited to this one poem. One can also see the world of "Prufrock" in "Easter, 1916." Although this poem was not collected until its appearance in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1923, Yeats dates it September 5, 1916, a little over a year from the publication of Eliot's first poem. Eliot's opening lines announced a new age for poetry:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells (1-7)

Once again, there is a dialogue, involving the reader as one of the principals. It is the end of a day. Prufrock asks the reader to walk through the lonely city, watched overhead by a leaden sky. The city itself is neither beautiful nor inviting. It is, of course, a reflection on and of the speaker.

The opening four lines of “Easter, 1916” seem to set the same depressing mood:

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses. (1-4)

Here also, the time of day is evening. The speaker of the poem addresses the reader in a type of confessional voice, as did Prufrock. The city, while not as lonely or deserted, is just as depressing. The color of grey is overt, not merely left to the imagination of the reader in the image of the etherised patient. It is very easy to see a kind of superimposition of Eliot’s city on Yeats’ city. The Eighteenth-century houses fit very nicely on the half-deserted streets. But more than the city, it is the mood of “Prufrock” that informs “Easter 1916.” Both poems, both cities, are filled with ennui and decay, decadence and frustration.

Other echoes of “Prufrock” are to be found in the first stanza of “Easter 1916.” Prufrock participates in and is surrounded by meaningless conversations. The tedious argument of line 8 is followed by the women who talk of Michelangelo in lines 13 and 14. The hands that lift and drop a question on your plate in lines 29 and 30 fill the same time that a hundred indecisions, visions, and revisions take in lines 32 and 33. The women who talk of Michelangelo reappear in lines 35 and 36. Next, the conversation turns dark, for it begins to focus on Prufrock. “They” speak of him in lines 41 and 44. The time for decisions and revisions reappears in line 48. The voices that die with a dying fall enter in line 52. Line 56 introduces the eyes that speak so much, that fix Prufrock in a formulated phrase. Prufrock tries to join in the conversations in line 60, but all he can do is sputter about the meaninglessness of his existence. He digresses, and wonders on it, in

lines 65 and 66. He asks if his topics for conversations are worthy of consideration in lines 70 through 72.

There is then a great gulf of silence for almost 20 lines, and the next utterance that Prufrock dreams on is the talk linking him with another, presumably the reader, in line 89. This is followed quickly by his reference to an overwhelming question in line 93. Can he speak as if he were Lazarus, or even Orpheus, in lines 94 and 95? But he is misunderstood in lines 97 and 98. Finally, in line 104, he arrives at the nub of his thoughts on communication and conversation. He points out the impossibility and therefore the meaninglessness of communication, because it is impossible for him to say just what he means. This line is the only non-parenthetical emphatic assertion in the entire poem. Again Prufrock is misunderstood in lines 108 through 110. The impossibility of verbal communication is reinforced in the mermaids, who do not speak, but sing to one another in line 124. Line 125 states that they do not include Prufrock in their musical communication. Finally, at line 131, Prufrock is drowned when he is waked by human voices, voices calling him back from the mermaid's undersea chambers.

Yeats uses this concept of the meaningless conversation in the remainder of the first stanza of "Easter 1916." The speaker tells of conversations, both with those he deems below him and those he considers his equals:

I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,

Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn: (5-14)

This passage contains three conversations. In the first two, there is an emphasis on both politeness and meaninglessness. This characterizes the speaker's relationship with those who died in the Easter Rebellion. There is also an element of duplicity, for the speaker is already, even as he speaks, crafting a tale, removing his focus from the situation at hand. The final conversation at the club revolves not around the civility one would expect in such a setting, but around the laughter at another's expense. In fact, the people met on the grey street are reduced to jesters, placed there for the amusement of a few self-appointed nobles. At the club, there is complete immersion in the event, duplicitous as it is. We must question the veracity of the speaker here, for we must decide which conversation is actually meaningless.

The similarities between this world and Prufrock's are obvious. Both Prufrock's and this speaker's conversations hide more than they reveal about the self, and yet inform the reader about the speaker with words that are never spoken. Both poems contain laughter at another's expense. The heroes of the Rebellion are mocked just as Prufrock is mocked. Conversations which are constructed by the speaker are another shared device. While in actuality merely an internal monologue, Prufrock imagines his rejection at the hands of one whom he has misunderstood. Yeats' speaker produces an internal monologue as he imagines the story he will relate at his club.

This speaker must deal with the jesters who wear motley, while Prufrock calls himself "Almost, at times, the Fool" (119). Prufrock's most important statement about communication is the fact that he cannot say just what he means. But this speaker will not say what he means, at least not in the street, to those he deems beneath him. The absolute vacuum of meaning behind not only words but also social conventions is a parallel

theme. Prufrock's world is as void of meaning as his words. Both are decaying, taken over by fog and smoke and soot. The world of "Easter 1916" is filled with meaninglessness, where the only true intent that can be gleaned is the desire to ridicule another.

One final strain connects these two poems. Both offer an ironic, fragile image of hope. Prufrock hears the mermaids singing, and, even though they will not sing to him, he has been with them. But he is not alone in this endeavor. Not "He," but, "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea" (131). Here is a sense of community once again, the same sense that starts off the poem. And this escape from the world of meaninglessness to the world of the mermaids offers one last glimmer of hope. It is indeed fragile, for human voices can awaken him from his reverie, and he will drown in a world filled with the impossibility of communication.

Ireland, too may see one shard of hope. The meaninglessness of the world is changed. But what is born as a result of or in order to cause this change is the ironic "terrible beauty" (16). There will be no escape to this beauty, no hiding from the ramifications of the Rebellion's actions. This is a beauty which may instill fear or awe. It will be a combination of opposites, a reversal of the meaning, but a movement toward meaning nonetheless. This fragile conjunction is the hope of the nation as well as its curse, for it can damn as well as inspire.

Yeats' debt to Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is clear. This reversal of the standard critical perception of these two men ironically validates Yeats' cyclic view of history. Here, the present influences the past. But a recognition of this debt not only vindicates Yeats, it indicts him. After such obvious echoing of Eliot, how could he be so harsh to the man critically? For eighteen years Yeats buried this borrowing, never acknowledging the fact that his poetry was informed by Eliot's images, mood, and concerns. The grand culmination of such secrecy was his "Introduction" to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. Here

he vilified Eliot, holding up for scorn not only his poetry but also his religious beliefs. The vigor with which he attacks Eliot is not justified by Eliot's printed critiques of Yeats, which took on a milder tone as his life progressed and actually ended in stunning admiration. It seems that the only possible reason for such excoriation is an older man's debt to a young poet, undiscovered and unacknowledged.

Notes

1. Grover Smith's "Yeats, Eliot, and the Use of Memory," *Yeats Eliot Review* 9 (1988): 131-39 is undoubtedly the finest survey of Yeats' influence on Eliot. Other helpful studies include Maurice Johnson's "The Ghost of Swift in Four Quartets," *Modern Language Notes* 64 (April 1949): 273; Helen Gardner's *The Composition of "Four Quartets."* London: Faber and Faber, 1978, pp.64-69 and 186-189; Leonard Unger's *Eliot's Compound Ghost: Influence and Confluence.* University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1981, pp.112-113; Gregory Jay's *T.S. Eliot and the Poetics of Literary History.* Baton Rouge: LSU, 1983, pp.235-41; Denis Donoghue's "On 'Gerontion,'" *Southern Review* 21 (October 1985): 934-946; Philip Edwards' "'Gerontion' and At The Hawk's Well." in *KM 80: A Birthday Album for Kenneth Muir*, Tuesday, 5 May 1987. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, n.d., pp.42-43; and Neil Corcoran's "Heaney's Joyce, Eliot's Yeats." *Agenda* 27 (Spring 1989): 37-47.

2. I am indebted to Grover Smith, in *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning.* 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974, for the use of this term. I take it to mean less than an allusion, but a contribution to an image in a poem.

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