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Yeatses: The Yeatsian Multiverse

Issues of Non-linear Time and Alternate Realities in W.B. Yeats's Literary World

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The second issue of *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies*, published in 2012, was the first to be entirely devoted to W.B. Yeats's work. We have since felt the urgency to shed new light on the vast and multifaceted body of work he authored. This issue of *Studi irlandesi* aims to explore the layers of complexity and richness that define the Yeatsian universe, both in its poetic and thematic dimensions, which Fiorenzo Fantaccini and I have enthusiastically termed the “Yeatsian multiverse”.

The multiverse theory reveals a rich interplay of ideas that challenge our understanding of reality and inspire new ways of thinking about the universe and our place inside it. The theory draws from Hugh Everett III's (1957) Many-Worlds Interpretation (MWI) of quantum mechanics, suggesting that all possible outcomes of quantum measurements are realized in separate branches of the universe. Each random event creates a new branch, leading to a vast multiverse of possibilities. This concept helps us encompass both the existence of multiple, potentially infinite, artistic universes crafted by Yeats and the expansive, profound nature of his poetic lines – *multiverses*.

All the contributions included in this issue focus on one – or more – of Yeats's multiple poetic and literary realms: nationalism and political engagement, esotericism and occultism, theatrical stances and diverse forms of translation, as well as Yeats's insights into the human condition. His engagement with the esoteric and the occult, for instance, is not just an artistic endeavor, rather it is a profound exploration of the spiritual dimensions of human existence. His involvement with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and his fascination

with mysticism deeply influenced his poetry and plays, infusing them with layers of symbolic meaning that resonate with the universal themes of life and death. Similarly, his political writings and activities, deeply rooted in the cultural and national identity of Ireland, offer a rich tapestry of historical and cultural reflections that continue to inspire critical thinking.

To explore the Yeatsian multiverse is to venture into a maze where the boundaries between reality and imagination are blurred, and human experience is woven into the fabric of myth, history, and personal introspection. Here, Irish culture, political engagement, materiality, spiritual transcendence, artistic immortality, and apocalyptic imagery intertwine, creating an intricate narrative that challenges and enriches our understanding of his production. Such plurality is reflected in the contributors' approach to Yeats's corpus, by showcasing a committed engagement with his diverse styles, themes, and perspectives. This deeper, more nuanced look at Yeats's literary worlds allows readers to appreciate the full scope of his genius and the enduring relevance of his work in contemporary literary discourse.

This multifaceted exploration aims not only to revisit Yeats's contributions but also to engage with his work in a way that reflects the dynamic nature of contemporary scholarship. Encompassing the manifold complexity of the Yeatsian multiverse opens up new pathways to understand and interpret Yeats's works, thus ensuring that Yeats's legacy continues to evolve and inspire future generations of readers and scholars.

In terms of Yeats's system, is this beast the avatar of the new dispensation? Its herald? Its symbol? A symbol of preceding disorder? Its Daimon? How do other images and symbolic figures in Yeats's later work relate to it? (Mann 2024, *infra*, 27)

Neil Mann's essay, "Yeats's Daimonic Birds and Beasts of Apocalypse", looks at the complex symbolism in Yeats's works, particularly the daimonic elements represented by birds and mythical beasts. With its dual nature and its varying representations in animal form, the Daimon is a central figure in Yeats's poetic and philosophical framework. Mann combines textual analysis and historical/biographical material to connect Yeats's automatic writing sessions conducted with his wife George and their literary and symbolic developments. As Neil Mann shows, the Daimon is an evolving concept in Yeats's work, which shifted from an antagonistic counterpart to an archetype spanning multiple lives. This evolution is also mirrored in Yeats's poetic symbols, such as the swan, the dove, the unicorn, and the sphinx, each embodying different aspects of the Daimon and its influence on individual and collective realities. Mann's close reading of "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan" offers a nuanced understanding of Yeats's visionary system, illustrating how the daimonic element is represented on a macrocosmic level through the figures of the dove and the swan in the annunciations to Mary and to Leda.

As in a kaleidoscope where various colored glass pieces mix to form ever-changing images with each rotation of the cylinder, Yeats's poetry shines with colors, images, illuminations, sudden epiphanies, and the irruption of forms and figures that seem to emerge from the rich, hypertrophic deposit of symbols that the poetic word brings forth in a readable form each time. (Serpillo 2024, *infra*, 39)

In "*Jeux de Cartes: i tarocchi e la poesia di W.B. Yeats*", Giuseppe Serpillo discusses

the profound influence of Tarot imagery and symbolism on Yeats's poetry. Serpillo begins by recounting Yeats's well-known fascination with the occult, noting his involvement with several mystical societies, such as the Hermetic Society and the Golden Dawn, as well as his connections with prominent occult figures like Madame Blavatsky. For Serpillo, Yeats's interest in the Tarot became an essential tool for meditation and symbolic exploration within these circles. In his autobiographical writings, Yeats frequently incorporates Tarot imagery to create a sense of mystery and suspense while also exploring themes of love, death, and rebirth. Serpillo highlights how several poems are permeated with Tarot symbolism, such as "Ego Dominus Tuus", where the presence of the Tower, the Moon, and Water imagery mirrors the cards' symbolic meanings, or "The Phases of the Moon", where the Tarot's influence is palpable in the characters of Michael Robartes and Aherne, who seem to embody certain Tarot figures. Serpillo's essay also discusses how the lunar imagery and the theory of lunar phases, as discussed by Yeats, reflect the cyclical nature of life and history, resonating with the esoteric teachings he was familiar with. It also draws parallels between the dynamic figures in Byzantine mosaics and the suggestive imagery in the Tarot cards. This visual analogy extends to Yeats's fascination with capturing moments of timeless significance in his poetry.

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all: [...]. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry. (W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", 1939)

Arianna Antonielli's essay, "*Make it new*: When Luigi Meneghello transplanted 'silly Yeats'", discusses Meneghello's translation of Yeats's poems into Vicentine dialect. Yeats's vision of different aspects of life and art resonated deeply with Meneghello, whose translations cover several phases of Yeats's poetic vision and capture the essence of Yeats's connection to the Irish landscape, as well as providing insight into his spiritual quest. In his collection, *Trapianti*, Meneghello included seventeen compositions by Yeats, showcasing his ability to preserve the essence and rhythmic tension of the original texts while giving them new life and meaning. The translated, or transplanted texts, are characterized by a fairly colloquial tone, and they feature unique structures to capture the essence of Yeats's thematic and symbolic issues. All this is given new life in the Vicentine dialect. Meneghello's translations are not merely linguistic exercises; rather, they appear as profound cultural and interpretive actions. By bringing Yeats's poetry into his own cultural context, Meneghello creates original, vibrant works that resonate with the original's themes while offering fresh perspectives.

For what are our animal spirits or vehicles if not the condensation of the vehicle of the anima mundi? What else do they do but give substance to its images "in the faint materialisation of our common thought, or more grossly when a ghost is our visitor?" (Yeats 1994, 22)". (Bondi 2024, *infra*, 67)

In "The Yeatsian Henry More", Roberto Bondi addresses Cambridge Platonist Henry More's influence on William B. Yeats. His essay showcases Yeats's engagement with More's ideas and, in particular, with the *anima mundi* concept. More's description of the spirit of nature as incorporeal substance pervading the universe influenced Yeats considerably. The poet linked this idea to the idea of a universal memory enriched by individual memories and experiences. Yeats's belief in a great mind and memory transcending the individual consciousness is articulated in his essay on magic. This belief underpins much of his poetic and philosophical exploration, revealing a deep-seated conviction in the interconnectedness of all minds and memories.

The orchestra brings more elaborate music and I have gone over to the enemy. I say to the musician: “Lose my words in patterns of sound as the name of God is lost in Arabian arabesques. They are a secret between the singers, myself, yourself. The plain fable, plain prose of the dialogue. Ninette de Valois’ dance are there for the audience. They can find my works in the book if they are curious, but we will not thrust our secret upon them”. (John Harbison 1977, <<https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/24194/Full-Moon-in-March--John-Harbison/>>)

Richard Allen Cave’s contribution looks at the challenges and nuances of staging W.B. Yeats’s late dance play *A Full Moon in March* through using John Harbison’s operatic adaptation as lens. Yeats’s work is difficult to interpret, and Cave emphasizes how recent performances have both illuminated and struggled to render the unique demands of his dramatic style. The recent production of *A Full Moon in March*, for example, highlighted both the strengths and pitfalls of interpreting Yeats’s unique dramatic style. Cave points out that this rendition emphasizes the necessity of preserving the intellectual and mythological integrity of Yeats’s work. The poet’s lasting impact on drama is affirmed through his innovative blend of myth, ritual, and intellectual depth, inspiring ongoing exploration and adaptation in the theatre world.

I see *Purgatory* as the Old Man’s attempt to heal a trauma and turn it into memory; yet the son’s reactions bring in some of the main risk factors for a trauma becoming unhealed, thus transgenerational. (Balázs 2024, *infra*, 86)

Zsuzsanna Balázs’s “Patrilineage and Transgenerational Trauma in Yeats’s *Purgatory* (1939)” offers an innovative dramaturgical reading of Yeats’s renowned verse play. It explores patrilineage through the lens of transgenerational trauma, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of Yeats’s drama. Balázs draws from the rich field of trauma studies to highlight how Yeats’s *Purgatory* is not just a narrative of familial conflict; rather, it can be seen as a profound exploration of unhealed trauma reverberating and affecting whole generations. The play’s “Dreaming Back” episodes reflect the Old Man’s struggle with his internalized trauma, which calls for validation and understanding from his environment. Balázs’s contribution provides a challenging perspective on Yeats’s work, situating it within contemporary discussions of trauma and its transgenerational impacts. Yeats’s play is further revealed as a poignant commentary on the lasting impacts of familial and societal trauma.

[...] a feature of Yeats’s later career is his “intention to memorialise his friends, and himself by association” [...], in response to an “impulse to make monuments or to erect tombs”. (Cotta Ramusino 2024, *infra*, 101)

Elena Cotta Ramusino’s essay, “William Butler Yeats and Monumentalisation”, looks at how Yeats uses poetry to celebrate and memorialize friends, peers, and himself. Yeats’s 1923 Nobel Prize lecture, during which the poet paid homage to the Irish Dramatic Movement and to key figures like John Millington Synge and Lady Gregory, is the starting point for Ramusino’s investigation. From there, she traces the development of Yeats’s tone, whose roots can be traced back to his early poetry, which then evolved in subsequent collections, such as *The Green Helmet*, *Responsibilities*, and *The Wild Swans at Coole*. The 1937 poem “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”, which reflects on significant figures in Yeats’s life, occupies a special place in this analysis. Yeats’s assertive and celebratory style served to cement his legacy and that of his contemporaries within the cultural and historical narrative of Ireland.

I have in this essay sought to move between Descriptive Bibliography of unique objects and the human ‘messiness, muddle and irrationality’, but offer in closing Edwards’s caution against the ‘growing reliance, particularly by graduate students, on virtual forms [which] has created a diminished interest in the detailed analysis of material aspects of the book and of any sense of why it matters’. During my own lifetime, ‘English’ or ‘Literature’ as a ‘subaltern’ discipline has endured the condescension of Historians. As ‘Humanities Computing’ asserts its presumptuous suzerainty in Literature and Bibliography, ‘the book’ in its materiality risks becoming more alien to future students. (Gould 2024, *infra*, 139)

Warwick Gould’s essay, “Bibliophilia and Descriptive Bibliography: the Case of Yeats’s Books”, explores the significance of copy-specific research in descriptive bibliography and its role within the broader context of historical bibliography. Gould contrasts the traditional view of connoisseurship, which is associated with private contemplation of rare and valuable books, to its democratization through virtual reading rooms. Such technological advancements enable the comparison and collation of different copies of the same book from libraries across the world, as if they were side-by-side on a single, physical desk. The essay looks at how value is recreated in the rare book trade, in particular, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the transition of auctions and salesrooms to the online environment. Gould highlights the importance of reassessing and justifying the collection and valuation of rare books in this new landscape, taking W.B. Yeats’s work as case study. Yeats was often bewildered at collectors’ fascination with the first editions of his works. This essay focuses on how copy-specific antiquarian studies can enhance our understanding of the Irish author’s legacy, through his interactions with prominent figures in the book trade and unique inscriptions that enriched his works. Drawing from Ulinka Rublack’s analysis of the relationship between art, collecting, and commerce in early modern Europe, it takes Albrecht Dürer’s self-advertising altar-piece as a lens to question the idea of “value”. Yeats’s books show the complexities of bibliographical research and the challenges posed by physical and historical intricacies in the writer’s oeuvre.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the contributors for their exceptional efforts and their enthusiastic support in enriching this monographic issue. My sincere thanks also go to the journal’s General Editor, Fiorenzo Fantaccini, whose commitment to this Yeatsian issue has been invaluable, to our Review Editor, Samuele Grassi, for his constant support and generosity, and to Isabella Martini for her accurate revision of this text.