

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

Yeats and Remorse

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NEAR THE END OF JULY 1915, Henry James was busy soliciting on behalf of Edith Wharton, and addressed Thomas Hardy with a request for a poem to be written, sent, and received in just under a fortnight. Asking Hardy ‘if you *can* manage between now and the 10th to distil the liquor of your poetic genius, in no matter how mild a form, into three or four blest versicles’, James reassured the poet that ‘It is just the stray sincerities and casual felicities of your muse that that intelligent lady [Edith Wharton] *is* all ready to cherish’, and urged him finally to ‘overflow, no matter into how tiny a cup’.¹ Responding (as requested) ‘gently and helpfully’, Hardy poured out a generous enough measure for *The Book of the Homeless*, Wharton’s charity venture in aid of Belgian refugees: ‘Cry of the Homeless’, which was later to carry the subtitle ‘After the Prussian Invasion of Belgium’, filled up three eight-line ‘versicles’, two of them voicing the curses of the war’s victims on the ‘Instigator of the ruin— / Whichsoever thou mayest be / Of the mastering minds of Europe / That contrived our misery.’² In the final stanza, after the bitter wish from the ‘victims’, ‘“May thy dearest ones be blighted / And forsaken . . . And thy children beg their bread”’, Hardy spoke in an authorial first-person voice, modulating the poem’s curses into something more subtle:

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¹ Henry James, *Letters: Vol. 4 1895–1916*, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 773.

² Thomas Hardy, ‘Cry of the Homeless’, in Edith Wharton (ed.), *The Book of the Homeless* (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1916), p. 16.

Nay: too much the malediction.—
 Rather let this thing befall
 In the unfurling of the future,
 On the night when comes thy call:
 That compassion dew thy pillow
 And absorb thy senses all
 For thy victims,
 Till death dark thee with his pall.

Whatever the extent of this poem's 'casual felicities', its concluding stanza appears to mark a moment when 'stray sincerities' enable the voice to return on the rhetoric it has entertained, and concede that it is in some ways 'too much'. In wishing 'compassion' on what this poem calls simply the 'Enemy', Hardy allows himself his own instant of corrective reflection. Writing to James on 8 August (two days ahead of his deadline), Hardy held on to his misgivings: 'I send the enclosed page, for what it may be worth, as not quite the right thing. . . . Anyhow I hope it may help, though infinitesimally, in the good cause.'³

By the time he published it in his volume *Moments of Vision* (1917), Hardy evidently felt that not every detail of his poem was 'quite the right thing', having refined the curses of its first two stanzas so that 'thy dearest ones' (now simply 'thy loved') are no longer just 'blighted / And forsaken', but 'slighted, blighted / And forsaken', thus giving a full measure of insult to the original injury.⁴ Moreover, the final stanza is now voiced by the 'victims' rather than the poet, and instead of going back on a malediction that was 'too much', offers 'a richer malediction' in a future of 'compassion' that will no longer 'dew' but now 'bedrench thy pillow'. Although the poem's level of vitriol rises in revision, Hardy makes his own position more difficult to determine by assigning the last 'malediction' to voices not his own. Other contributors to *The Book of the Homeless* shared Hardy's revisionary impulse: W. D. Howells, for example, seems to have had early qualms about his 'The Little Children', where hapless infants are seized by 'The master-spirit of hell':⁵

³ Thomas Hardy, letter of 8 August 1915, quoted in Thomas Hardy, *Complete Poetical Works*, Vol. 2, ed. Samuel Hynes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, repr. with corrections 1987), p. 505.

⁴ Thomas Hardy, 'Cry of the Homeless: After the Prussian Invasion of Belgium', *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Hynes, Vol. 2, pp. 296–7.

⁵ William Dean Howells, 'The Little Children', in Edith Wharton (ed.), *The Book of the Homeless*, p. 17.

through the shuddering air
 Of the hope-forsaken world
 The little ones he hurled,
 Mocking that Pity in his pitiless might—
 The Anti-Christ of Schrecklichkeit.

Perhaps feeling that this too was ‘too much’, Howells attempted to withdraw the poem shortly after despatching it; yet the situation was too late to mend, as Edith Wharton was able to report:⁶

He sent a ringing little poem to Mr. James, and when he wrote to recall it, Mr. James flatly refused, to my eternal gratitude. The poem is just what I wanted—and curiously enough, it is very much like the one which Mr. Hardy has written for me.

Whatever Howells’s second thoughts about his shrill verses in the cause of ‘Pity’, the ‘ringing little poem’ fitted in well to the scheme of *The Book of the Homeless*, and was duly printed there, joining Hardy, James himself, and many others, among them W. B. Yeats.

Unlike Hardy (and Howells), Yeats provided a poem which, rather than just prompting later reconsideration, was *already* a kind of recantation of poetic ‘meddling’ with the times. The six lines, as they appeared in Wharton’s book, carried the title ‘A Reason for Keeping Silent’:⁷

I think it better that at times like these
 We poets keep our mouths shut, for in truth
 We have no gift to set a statesman right;
 He’s had enough of meddling who can please
 A young girl in the indolence of her youth
 Or an old man upon a winter’s night.

Sending the poem to the editor, Yeats regretted only that it was not longer;⁸ in a letter copying the verses to James, he added some brief reflections:⁹

⁶ Edith Wharton, letter to Sarah Norton, 10 September 1915, quoted in Alan Price, *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War* (London: Robert Hale, 1996), p. 66.

⁷ W. B. Yeats, ‘A Reason for Keeping Silent’ in Edith Wharton (ed.), *The Book of the Homeless*, p. 45.

⁸ See Alan Price, *The End of the Age of Innocence*, p. 63.

⁹ W. B. Yeats, letter to Henry James, 20 August 1915, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), pp. 599–600. It is interesting to compare this with opinions expressed in a letter to the poet from his father J. B. Yeats, on 25 April 1915: ‘On two subjects I want to share with you some of my wisdom, war versus art. The ego in man, the undying worm from whose [*word indecipherable*] he escapes in the mad and at heart utterly frivolous excitement of war or in the sane and beneficent and profoundly wise excitement of art and poetry.’ See Richard J. Finneran, George Mills Harper, and William M. Murphy (eds.), *Letters to W. B. Yeats*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 313.

It is the only thing I have written of the war or will write, so I hope it may not seem unfitting. I shall keep the neighbourhood of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, hoping to catch their comfortable snores till bloody frivolity is over.

Yeats's 'I hope it may not seem unfitting' is in a different key to Hardy's more diffident 'not quite the right thing', for 'It is the only thing I have written of the war or will write' gives the poet's 'hope' a certain air of confidence. The appropriateness of 'A Reason for Keeping Silent' to *The Book of the Homeless* is not, however, of the same kind as that of Howells's poem, or of Hardy's; the silence it keeps about 'times like these', and the distance it puts between itself and what the letter calls 'bloody frivolity', might constitute not responsible detachment but culpable uninterest.

If Yeats was in some sense in error in the tone of his contribution to Edith Wharton's book, his mistake was not one which acts of local revision could make good. Nor is 'A Reason for Keeping Silent' an isolated occurrence, a freakish mismatch between Yeats's particular kind of imagination and the prevailing circumstances, for another short poem, explicitly addressing the war, shares the same attitude towards acts of 'bloody frivolity':¹⁰

A Meditation in Time of War

For one throb of the artery,
While on that old grey stone I sat
Under the old wind-broken tree,
I knew that One is animate,
Mankind inanimate phantasy.

The determined abstraction of this poem, which sends the reader directly to Yeats's more esoteric concerns with its shorthand mixture of Blake and neoplatonism, may sit uncomfortably with the facts from which it seems to avert its gaze. All the more so, perhaps, when one sees that the poem's first draft is in a notebook immediately beneath a memorandum of a prophecy made by Olivia Shakespear:¹¹

¹⁰ W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957) (cited hereafter as *Variorum Poems*), p. 406.

¹¹ This note, with a draft of the poem lower on the same page, is in a notebook given to Yeats by Maud Gonne in 1912, and now in the National Library of Ireland (NLI 30,358 fol. 58^r). A photographic reproduction of the page, with a transcription of the poem only, is given in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Thomas Parkinson with

A few days ago Mrs Shakespear said 'I was praying for the happiness of the souls of those that die in battle' (she had I know been moved by the preyeirs for this object ordered by the Grand Lama) & got the impression 'Peace on Feb 14' I want you to make a note of it

The prophecy was recorded on 9 November 1914; many more 'souls of those that die in battle' were to come to account before Yeats published 'A Meditation in Time of War' in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). Whether Yeats took a just measure of such facts has seemed debatable, and it is still possible to find critics who take this poem, together with 'A Reason for Keeping Silent', as powerfully negative evidence against the Yeats 'who had denied a high degree of reality to the Great War, and who refused to write a poem about it on request'.¹²

In the weeks shortly before the Armistice, Yeats's American patron John Quinn wrote to the poet on the subject of the war, and on his part in its literature—too small a part, in Quinn's view:¹³

I never said to you before what I have said frequently to your father, and that was how much I regretted that you had not taken some part on the side of what I have always felt to be justice and right in this war, or at least have spoken some word for France or for the justice and right. . . . I do not mean

Anne Brennan (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 194–5. My transcription of Yeats's memorandum about Olivia Shakespear's prophecy differs slightly from that given by John Harwood in his *Olivia Shakespear and W. B. Yeats: After Long Silence* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 138. It is worth noting that the date 'Nov. 9, 1914' appears directly under the memorandum in Yeats's notebook (where the context seems to make a dating of the prophecy necessary); Harwood takes this to be the date for Yeats's note, and not for the poem which follows. Parkinson and Brennan, perhaps agreeing with this, do not include the date in their transcription of the poem. The other draft of a poem contained in the notebook (on fol. 68^v) is for 'The Rose Tree', and is dated 'April 7. 1917', and 'A Meditation in Time of War' might have been composed around this time. However, 'A Meditation in Time of War' has been dated as 9 November 1914 by some of Yeats's editors, following Richard Ellmann's 'Chronology of the Composition of the Poems' in *The Identity of Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1954; 2nd edn. London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 290: see for example A. Norman Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 207, and Daniel Albright (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: The Poems* (London: Dent, 1990), p. 238. If this short poem was composed *after* 1914, and perhaps a considerable time afterwards (Yeats did not include it in either the 1917 or the 1919 versions of *The Wild Swans at Coole*), then it may be in part a meditation also on the hopes for peace (however oddly received and expressed) of 1914, in the light of later events; its abstractions are therefore abstractions made *after* the facts, rather than in advance (and innocence) of such things.

¹² Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 246.

¹³ John Quinn, postscript of 22 October 1918 to letter dated 2 October 1918, *The Letters of John Quinn to William Butler Yeats*, ed. Alan Hiber (Epping: Bowker, 1983), p. 192.

anything like making a propagandist of yourself or a journalist or anything of that sort, nor the reshaping of your mind and style. I merely mean some expression as an artist in the form either of prose or verse that your genius might take—some token that you felt that in this, perhaps the greatest struggle of all time, you had been on the side of justice and right.

Although Quinn did not demand any ‘reshaping of your mind and style’, he thought that change of some kind was in order for Yeats. Quoting the remark of Abbey Theatre actor J. M. Kerrigan that too many Irishmen are ‘grave worshippers’, Quinn urged Yeats to ‘forget’ those specifically Irish things which prevented a fuller act of contemporary remembrance:

It is sometimes the highest wisdom to be able to forget. Of course some artists simply cannot make themselves over. For example Joseph Conrad, whose heart is, I know, all in the struggle on the side of right and justice. He has not given any artistic expression to it, except in the one contribution of ‘Reminiscences in Poland in War Time’ which was published in a book that Mrs. Wharton got up for France. I have not overlooked your little contribution to that book, but those five or six lines were quite unworthy of you and the occasion.

‘A Reason for Keeping Silent’ is much concerned with worthiness, both to itself and to its occasion; Quinn’s criticisms here impugn that sense of what is appropriate in a fundamental way. The question of the war provokes for Quinn the imperative of artists having to ‘make themselves over’, a phrase which one would not address to W. B. Yeats without a degree of critical deliberation. As Quinn would have known well, Yeats’s *Collected Works* of 1908 had included an epigraph in which the poet boasted of his powers of self-reinvention:¹⁴

The friends that have it I do wrong
When ever I remake a song
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake.

This friend, however, was quarrelling with Yeats’s *failure* to make himself over in relation to the war, and thought he saw specifically Irish reasons for the poet’s unwillingness to speak. Quinn’s suspicion has been shared by Yeats’s critics, and is voiced clearly in Denis Donoghue’s declaration that ‘The plain fact is that Yeats did not feel inclined to put his genius to work in England’s cause.’¹⁵

¹⁴ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 778.

¹⁵ Denis Donoghue, *We Irish: Selected Essays*, Vol. 1 (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), p. 185.

Although it is perfectly possible to argue for the profound long-term effects of the First World War on Yeats's poetry, it would be hard to make a case for his having accepted Quinn's advice to provide some immediate 'token' of his support for 'justice and right' or to have 'spoken some word' that might not be construed as equivocal at the time. Yeats did, in fact, remake 'A Reason for Keeping Silent', but he altered the poem only in the direction of stiffer rhetorical grandeur, having the lines now announce themselves as 'On Being Asked for a War Poem', and disposing of 'We poets keep our mouths shut' in favour of 'I think it better that in times like these / A poet's mouth be silent'.¹⁶ There is just one poet now, and the added sense of dignity, of the poem's worthiness of the poet, could have done little to increase Quinn's admiration of its appropriateness for the times. In fact, far from setting itself to be worthy of its occasion, the poem in question had always adapted occasions to suit itself: Yeats already had the lines when James wrote on behalf of Edith Wharton in July 1915, having written them early in February, with the title 'To a friend who has asked me to sign on his manifesto to the neutral nations'.¹⁷ Some time after *The Book of the Homeless*, a holograph copy made its way into a college library in Massachusetts, as part of the response to an appeal on behalf of 'The Fatherless Children of France'.¹⁸ In 1917 and 1919, the poem took its place in the two versions of Yeats's collection *The Wild Swans at Coole*. In all these (and, it could be said, in subsequent) appearances, the six lines spoke to different occasions; but the poetic stance, for all the poet's minor revisions, remained constant and unapologetic.

Ten years after the end of the war, Yeats embroiled himself in controversy when he rejected Sean O'Casey's play *The Silver Tassie* for the Abbey Theatre, and his reasons for dealing this blow to the playwright developed and consolidated those which had conditioned his writing a decade earlier. In what he described as 'a hateful letter to write', the poet did not flinch from spelling out the grounds of his condemnation:¹⁹

¹⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 359.

¹⁷ See W. B. Yeats, *The Wild Swans at Coole: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 219.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, p. xiii for details of manuscript in the Dinand Library, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts; another holograph fair copy was made by Yeats, and is now in the Burns Library of Rare Books and Special collections at Boston College (*ibid.*, p. xii).

¹⁹ W. B. Yeats, letter to Sean O'Casey, 20 April 1928, *Letters*, ed. Wade, p. 741.

The mere greatness of the world war has thwarted you; it has refused to become mere background, and obtrudes itself upon the stage as so much dead wood that will not burn with the dramatic fire. Dramatic action is a fire that must burn up everything but itself. . . . Among the things that dramatic action must burn up are the author's opinions; while he is writing he has no business to know anything that is not a portion of that action.

O'Casey himself was unable to forget or forgive this: remembering Yeats's assertion in the letter that 'You are not interested in the Great War; you never stood on its battlefields', his indignation in the autobiography *Rose and Crown* (1952) was still fresh.²⁰

Oh, God, here was a man who had never spoken to a Tommy in his life—bar Major Gregory; and to him only because he was an artist as well as a soldier—chattering about soldiers to one who had talked to them all. . . . *Not interested* to one who had talked and walked and smoked and sung with the blue-suited, wounded men fresh from the front; to one who had been among the armless, the legless, the blind, the gassed, and the shell-shocked!

O'Casey's outrage, burnt in rather than burnt away with the passing of time, assumes that Yeats has wronged the plain facts of experience; Yeats on the contrary decided that the matter of fact had overcome the artist in O'Casey. Yeats's 'Pages from a Diary in 1930' returns to the controversy, now even more certain of its ground.²¹

The war, as O'Casey has conceived it, is an equivalent for those primary qualities brought down by Berkeley's secret society, it stands outside the characters, it is not part of their expression, it is that very attempt denounced by Mallarmé to build as if with brick and mortar within the pages of a book. The English critics feel differently, to them a theme that 'bulks largely in the news' gives dignity to human nature, even raises it to international importance. We on the other hand are certain that nothing can give dignity to human nature but the character and energy of its expression. We do not even ask that it shall have dignity so long as it can burn away all that is not itself.

The implied violence of Yeats's recurring metaphor, 'burn away', replies to the rejected violence of the war as part of another tit-for-tat exchange in the poet's late manner between the English and 'We Irish'.

Yeats's later pronouncements regarding the war were not to change matters, and his most notorious remarks, in the Introduction to *The*

²⁰ Sean O'Casey, *Rose and Crown* (1952), in *Autobiographies*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 275.

²¹ W. B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 339–40.

Oxford Book of Modern Verse (1936) revealed an attitude hardened by the years, for which ‘passive suffering is not a theme for poetry’, and in which the situation of the war-poets excluded from his anthology was reshaped as ‘some blunderer has driven his car on to the wrong side of the road—that is all’.²² The poetry of war, it seemed, was anywhere but in the pity. Privately, Yeats was no more accommodating, and wrote of Wilfred Owen as ‘all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick’, conceding only that ‘There is every excuse for him, but none for those who like him’.²³ Yet there were those who were unable to excuse Yeats for this, especially as another war cast its shadow over his words, and Stephen Spender’s declaration that ‘Yeats wrote by saving himself from the mud of Flanders’²⁴ was one sign of a reaction against his perceived irresponsibility. In 1915 and after, the poet had found his reasons for keeping silent; when the opportunity for redress offered itself, in the anthology twenty years later, Yeats only exacerbated the original affront.

On the face of things, Yeats emerges in this respect as a writer who is singularly lacking in the capacity for conceiving and articulating regret. However, the registers of regretful memory, or retrospective doubt and qualm, are central to a great deal of Yeats’s best poetry, and find their focus in his poetic vocabulary with the word ‘remorse’, a term which denotes something *more* than regret, though also one which suggests significance other than the purely occasional or personal for that regret. For Yeats, remorse exists in the most intimate relation to the poetic impulse, and happens even in the textures of the poetry itself, in the soundings of words’ returns on themselves and their sounds, through the structures of rhyme and of repetition; at the same time, remorse is a force against which the poetry exerts its own rhetorical counter-pressures. Sometimes, a victory of sorts is achieved, as in the concluding stanza of ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul’:²⁵

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast

²² W. B. Yeats (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. xxxiv.

²³ W. B. Yeats, letter to Dorothy Wellesley, 21 December 1936, *Letters*, ed. Wade, p. 874.

²⁴ Stephen Spender, ‘Tragedy and some Modern Poetry’, *Penguin New Writing*, 4 (March 1941), 147.

²⁵ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 479.

We must laugh and we must sing,
 We are blest by everything,
 Everything we look upon is blest.

‘When such as I cast out remorse . . .’: the reaction of an O’Casey to that ‘such as I’ may be readily imagined, and would not be disallowed completely by the knowledge that ‘I’ here does not represent (all of) the poet W. B. Yeats. ‘Cast out’ poses its own problems: one might cast out devils, but an emotion like remorse is not commonly understood as devilish, and Yeats’s voice here seems all too ready to perform its own acts of self-forgiveness and exorcism in a manner quite incompatible with actual sorrow or regret. In his account of his own early writings in *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), Yeats identified remorse as a problem:²⁶

For ten or twelve years more I suffered continual remorse, and only became content when my abstractions had composed themselves into picture and dramatization. My very remorse helped to spoil my early poetry, giving it an element of sentimentality through my refusal to permit it any share of an intellect which I considered impure.

When Yeats recalls his own younger sense of the inappropriateness of poetic abstraction to the matter of life and plain facts, he identifies a disabling remorse there; and this puts him in good poetic company, since he had claimed Edmund Spenser as ‘the first poet struck with remorse’ in his selection from that poet in 1906, where the demands of Elizabethan religion and policy were seen as responsible for the remorseful impulse to allegorise of ‘the first poet who gave his heart to the State’.²⁷ The word ‘remorse’ sounds through much of the later Yeats, and in *The Winding Stair*, where the Self casts out remorse in its dialogue with the Soul, there is also ‘The Choice’, with its presentation of the alternatives of ‘The day’s vanity, the night’s remorse’,²⁸ and the poem ‘Remorse for Intemperate Speech’, with its final acknowledgement of the Irish ‘Great hatred, little room’ that ‘Maimed us at the start’.²⁹ At the beginning of the sequence ‘Vacillation’, the destructive ‘brand, or flaming breath’ is given a double identification: ‘The body calls it death, / The heart remorse.’³⁰ Announcing ‘The first principle’ in ‘A General Introduction for My Work’ (1937), Yeats declares that ‘A

²⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 188.

²⁷ W.B. Yeats, ‘Edmund Spenser’, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 373.

²⁸ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 495.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 506.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 500.

poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness.³¹ The very late play *Purgatory* ends with the bleak prayer to God to ‘appease / The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead’.³² The meaning of Yeatsian remorse is clearly something other than simple regret, and its function is quite distinct from that of apology or reparation. The definition of remorse offered by the *OED* (*sb.2a*), ‘A feeling of compunction, or of deep regret and repentance, for a sin or wrong committed’, introduces elements that seem almost completely absent from Yeats’s uses for the word. Most importantly, remorse for the later Yeats is something which has its dealings with the dead, and which can also describe the dead’s business with the living.

To define Yeats’s remorse in this way is to claim an intimacy between the word and those obsessions with spiritualism, magic, and esoteric and arcane traditions which run through almost the whole of the poet’s writing life. However, such a definition also helps to locate this remorse historically, for it is during the First World War that Yeats, at the same time as he makes the breakthrough effected by and in the automatic script of his wife George, discovers remorse as a potent term in his imaginative vocabulary. If specific war casualties were bearing in on Yeats at this time—Sir Hugh Lane, perhaps, or later Major Robert Gregory—a much more numerous army of ‘those that die in battle’ could no more be ignored by the poet than they were by a public eager for the consolations of a belief in the afterlife, as exercised in the church or the seance-room. In the light of this, it is possible to see Yeats’s writing about the war as including *A Vision* (1925) along with the many poems which, remorsefully and remorselessly, speak to, for, and sometimes against the dead.

By the time Lady Gregory’s son Robert was killed in action on 23 January 1918, Yeats was already absorbed creatively in the dynamics of death and remorse. In his attempt at a pastoral elegy for Robert, ‘Shepherd and Goatherd’, Yeats had to hand a developed theory of the ‘dreaming back’ of the dead. In the poem, the process is misleadingly (though understandably in the circumstances) consolatory in its effect:³³

³¹ W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 509.

³² W. B. Yeats, *Collected Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1952), p. 689.

³³ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 342.

Jaunting, journeying
 To his own dayspring,
 He unpacks the loaded pern
 Of all 'twas pain or joy to learn,
 Of all that he had made.
 The outrageous war shall fade . . .

Behind this is a theme which, although it becomes elaborate in the automatic writings of 1917 and afterwards, had roots deep in Yeats's customary preoccupations. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, finished just before George's communications began, Yeats gives the idea a high rhetorical polish, writing that 'The toil of the living is to free themselves from an endless sequence of objects, and that of the dead to free themselves from an endless sequence of thoughts'.³⁴ In 'Shepherd and Goatherd', Robert Gregory dreams back his life without pain or remorse, but Yeats knew that other thoughts beside these could be assigned to his ghost, and was to write a poem in 1920 in which these 'second thoughts' could be spelled out. By this time, Yeats is able to confront the dead with history, and demand remorse from both the dead and the living.

To measure the distance between Yeats's writings at the beginning of the war, and his attitudes by 1920 and the writing of 'Reprisals', is to encounter a number of plain facts lodged in history, which affected the poet in more and less profound ways. Of course, the significance of such historical matter is nothing like so plain: that the most catastrophic event in Irish history in the year 1916, for example, should have been ignored by Yeats seems unlikely. And yet the dead from the Irish and Ulster Divisions at the Somme are silent in Yeats's writing, and are silenced in much Irish history, while the dead of the Dublin insurrection of 1916 enjoyed, and continue to enjoy, a much more active afterlife. By the time of the poem 'Reprisals', the war had come to Ireland in the shape of the Black and Tans; Yeats voices anger and bitterness, forcing Gregory's ghost to face the brutal matter:³⁵

³⁴ W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 353–4.

³⁵ The text of 'Reprisals' quoted here is that of the typescript which Yeats sent to Lady Gregory in a letter of 26 November 1920, as reproduced in *The Wild Swans at Coole: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Parrish, p. 423. The textual history of this poem is an involved one: its first publication was in *Rann: An Ulster Quarterly of Poetry* (Autumn 1948), in a text deriving from a MS fair copy in Yeats's hand (NLI 13,358), which went on to be the basis for the text of 'Reprisals' in *Variorum Poems* and some other editions. The typescript sent to Lady Gregory is regarded as more authoritative by Richard J. Finneran in *Editing Yeats's*

Yet rise from your Italian tomb,
 Flit to Kiltartan Cross and stay
 Till certain second thoughts have come
 Upon the cause you served, that we
 Imagined such a fine affair:
 Half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery
 Are murdering your tenants there . . .

A note in Yeats's hand on a draft of the poem records a remark made by Gregory to the poet, that 'I see no reason why anyone should fight in this war except friendship', and that 'The England I care for was dead long ago'.³⁶ When he instructs Gregory's ghost to 'stay / Till certain second thoughts have come', Yeats does so in the context of rethinking of his own, most clearly expressed in the opening of a manuscript version of the poem:³⁷

Some nineteen German planes, they say,
 You had brought down before you died.
 We called it a good death. To day,
 Can ghost or man be satisfied?

To go back over things is not the same as being able to go back on them: 'We called it a good death'—and yet, as the poem ruthlessly records, we were wrong. What is more (and what is worse), there is no going back open to the voice in this poem, just as there is no possibility of regret open to the ghost itself. A last couplet instructs Gregory to 'stop your ears with dust and lie / Among the other cheated dead', advice which echoes the bitter send-off given to Parnell in 'To a Shade' (1913), 'Away, away! You are safer in the tomb'.³⁸

In appearing to demand remorse from its subject and then, failing to elicit this, giving him his marching-orders, Yeats's 'Reprisals' follows a remorseless rhetorical course. In this sense, at least, it needs to be

Poems: A Reconsideration (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 147–51, where the matter of the poem's early history is discussed in detail. It seems that a third version of the poem was available to T. R. Henn, whose 1965 lecture 'Yeats and the Poetry of War' quotes in full a text 'taken down from [Peter] Allt himself, in 1947, which seems to me far more Yeatsian' (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, 51 (1965), p. 310, repr. in T. R. Henn, *Last Essays* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1976), p. 89). However, Henn's lecture remains the only source for this text of 'Reprisals'.

³⁶ This note is on the verso of a MS fair copy (NLI 13,583), and is quoted by Finneran in *Editing Yeats's Poems: A Reconsideration*, p. 150.

³⁷ NLI 13,583, reproduced in *The Wild Swans at Coole: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Parrish, p. 422.

³⁸ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 293.

distinguished from the poet's other Gregory poems, as Yeats himself knew: it was written to the moment, and for a purpose, 'because I thought it might touch some one individual mind of a man in power'.³⁹ The atrocities at which the poem bristles are those which it hopes it might help put an end to; bound originally for the *Nation*, and then for *The Times*, 'Reprisals' was written as a provocative poem, but the poet hoped that it would also provoke remorse among at least some of its English readership. Yeats was pleased with the poem, and had to have second thoughts forced upon him by Lady Gregory:⁴⁰

I cannot bear the dragging of R., from his grave to make what I think a not very sincere poem—for Yeats knows only by hearsay while our troubles go on—and he quoted words G.B.S., told him and did not mean him to repeat—and which will give pain—I hardly know why it gives me extraordinary pain and it seems too late to stop it . . .

It was not too late; the poem was stopped; and Yeats himself (whether remorsefully, regretfully, or forgetfully) did not include it in a future collection. Whatever the reasons for this occlusion, 'Reprisals' is a poem in which Yeats's imagination allows itself to become opportunistic, and in which the dead (whether Gregory in his 'Italian tomb' or the victims of the Black and Tans) are too simply pressed into service. There is a damaging sense in which 'Reprisals' cheats on the dead when it declares them to have been 'cheated', and the distortion which its (proper) outrage at the news from Ireland forces on the war is a part of that cheating which no amount of just intentions on the poet's part can make good. Lady Gregory thought it better that, in times like those, poets should keep their mouths shut—at least, if their words were to pay less than respect to either the truth or the dead—and Yeats may have come to agree with her. At any rate, the passive suffering which 'Reprisals' tries to force on Gregory's ghost was not a theme for Yeats's best poetry.

When Yeats wanted to engineer remorse in a public register, he insisted on 'second thoughts' as the trigger, and his own more private experiences lay behind this, suggesting as they did the possibilities (and the liabilities) of going back over the past. Again, the point at which the dynamics of personal regret and self-doubt begin to charge Yeats's

³⁹ W. B. Yeats, letter to Lady Gregory, 3 December 1920, quoted in Finneran, *Editing Yeats's Poems: A Reconsideration*, p. 151.

⁴⁰ *Lady Gregory's Journals*, Vol. 1, ed. Daniel J. Murphy (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1978), p. 207.

work with energies of remorse comes during the war, in the flurry of ultimatums and decisions surrounding his marriage in 1917. Certainly, the Yeats who wrote to Lady Gregory on 19 September of that year was burdened by worries, about his love-life, the reasonableness of his own behaviour, and the intrusiveness upon all this of the war. With Maud Gonne and her daughter Iseult excluded from Ireland under the Defence of the Realm Act, the poet found himself in 'rather a whirlpool':⁴¹

Poor Iseult was very depressed on the journey and at Havre went off by herself and cried. Because she was so ashamed 'at being so selfish' 'at not wanting me to marry and so break her friendship with me.' I need hardly say she had said nothing to me of 'not wanting.' Meanwhile she has not faltered in her refusal of me but as you can imagine life is a good deal at white heat. I think of going to Mrs Tucker's on Monday but may not as I am feeling rather remorseful especially now that this last business of the defence of the realm act has come.

The next day, Yeats reported that 'I am going to Mrs Tucker's in the country . . . and I will ask her daughter to marry me.'⁴² Even this decisive (and successful) proposal did not put an immediate end to the poet's personal remorsefulness, and a honeymooning Yeats found himself 'in great gloom', and 'saying to myself "I have betrayed three people"'.⁴³ It is easy to say grandly of Yeats that 'The transformations of art . . . are closely bound up with betrayal',⁴⁴ but the enduring costs of such 'transformations' are more difficult to account for; and here, certainly, the meaning and role of remorse are at issue. With three people betrayed (Maud, Iseult, and his bride George), it is understandable that a pair of short poems from Yeats's period of 'gloom', subsequently titled 'Owen Aherne and his Dancers' (and thus put within the fictional orbit of *A Vision*), should figure remorse prominently:⁴⁵

A strange thing surely that my Heart, when love had come unsought
Upon the Norman upland or in that poplar shade,
Should find no burden but itself and yet should be worn out.
It could not bear that burden and therefore it went mad.

The south wind brought it longing, and the east wind despair,
The west wind made it pitiful, and the north wind afraid.

⁴¹ W. B. Yeats, letter to Lady Gregory, 18 September 1917, *Letters*, ed. Wade, p. 632.

⁴² W. B. Yeats, letter to Lady Gregory, 19 September 1917, *ibid.*, p. 633.

⁴³ W. B. Yeats, letter to Lady Gregory, 29 October 1917, *ibid.*, p. 633.

⁴⁴ Stan Smith, *The Origins of Modernism: Eliot, Pound, Yeats and the Rhetorics of Renewal* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 179.

⁴⁵ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, pp. 449–50.

It feared to give its love a hurt with all the tempest there;
It feared the hurt that she could give and therefore it went mad.

In these lines, from the first of the poems, the Lover's dilemma is to be cornered by fear of emotional facts which are all too plain, and the Heart's apparent madness is presented as the result of being put in an impossible position. However, Yeats provides a companion poem, in which the Heart can have its say, this time in open opposition to the earlier verses assigned to the voice of the Lover. Now, the attitude is one that mocks the Lover's responsible worries: 'Let the cage bird and the cage bird mate and the wild bird mate in the wild.' Yeats begins and ends this second poem with the Heart's reckless dismissal of the Lover's misgivings, but he lodges a stanza of remorse, voiced for the lover, in the poem's midst:

'You but imagine lies all day, O murderer,' I replied.
'And all those lies have but one end, poor wretches to betray;
I did not find in any cage the woman at my side.
O but her heart would break to learn my thoughts are far away.'

'Owen Aherne and his Dancers' is not an overbalancing or a lopsided dialogue; although the Heart has the last word, it does not refute the Lover's accusation that 'You but imagine lies'. Instead, the Heart retorts by bringing to bear other home truths:

'Speak all your mind,' my Heart sang out, 'speak all your mind; who cares,
Now that your tongue cannot persuade the child till she mistake
Her childish gratitude for love and match your fifty years?
O let her choose a young man now and all for his wild sake.'

The air is thick with 'lies' in this debate, where each participant tries to force second thoughts upon the other. The poem's final exultation, in other words, resonates also with the echoes of self-doubt and remorse. The effect achieved by Yeats here has been described as 'disturbed and disturbing',⁴⁶ and this accounts accurately for the relative states of the two voices, one stricken with paralysis, the other goading and relentless in its mockery. Each side alleges facts against the other, and the facts lie plainly on both sides of the argument. However uncomfortable Yeats might have felt, his poetry was able to thrive in such an impossible position, and he sent the paired poems to Lady Gregory with the comment that 'they are among the best I have done'.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p. 105.

⁴⁷ W. B. Yeats, letter to Lady Gregory, 29 October 1917, *Letters*, ed. Wade, p. 634.

In biographical terms, the breaking of this particular stalemate in Yeats's emotional life might seem miraculous; the poet himself would have applied that term, though in doing so he might have been rather more literal in intent, for George's automatic writing, which constituted the otherworldly intervention in 1917, did something decisive with some all too recalcitrant facts. Not least, the messages which George supplied spoke directly to Yeats's sense of remorse, and about it, in an idiom which enabled the poet to construct a system in which that remorse might find its place. On a personal level, George encouraged the poet to inspect his past—and especially the 'Crisis Moments' in his emotional past—in the light of ideas of character, fate, and passion which are developed from themes already present in his writing. One early communication enjoins both 'self knowledge' and 'anihilation [*sic*] of the concealed', and recommends 'confession':⁴⁸

[*Question*] What do you mean by confession.

[*Response*] Confession is preceded by self knowledge—confession itself implies a need for human sympathy & expansion of the nature—the word is perhaps implying too much the idea of christian conf[ession] & repentance—I mean it as an acknowledgement of weakness or an acknowledgement of the need of all human beings for protection in one side of their nature . . .

The process of emotional defrosting which George's writing encouraged can be seen here, and its supernatural and symbolic accompaniments need to be understood partly as an idiom of reference which husband and wife shared. If 'repentance' was unhelpful at this stage (and also, in some ways, by this stage pointless), 'acknowledgement of weakness' was an area in which, increasingly, Yeats's creative strength lay. What was more, the crossing of 'self knowledge' with more esoteric concerns gave the poet's habitual preoccupations a new lease of life.

As usual, such vitality in Yeats exists in close proximity to, and attempts to draw its energy from the dead. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, where 'The dead, living in their memories are . . . the source of all that we call instinct',⁴⁹ Yeats had already sketched out the lines connecting the dead, memory, judgement, and the self which George's automatic writing (and, in time, *A Vision*) would elaborate.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ George Mills Harper (gen. ed.), *Yeats's Vision Papers: Vol. 1 The Automatic Script 5 November 1917–18 June 1918*, eds. Steve L. Adams, Barbara J. Frieling, and Sandra L. Sprayberry (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 90. This message is dated 20 November 1917.

⁴⁹ W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (1962), p. 359.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

We carry to *Anima Mundi* our memory, and that memory is for a time our external world; and all passionate moments recur again and again, for passion desires its own recurrence more than any event, and whatever there is of corresponding complacency or remorse is our beginning of judgment; nor do we remember only the events of life, for thoughts bred of longing and of fear, all those parasitic vegetables that have slipped through our fingers, come again like a rope's end to smite us upon the face . . .

'Memory' is the medium in which 'passionate moments' come back on the self as they 'recur again and again'; the 'remorse' which figures here in Yeats's prose is the same remorse which becomes part of the process of 'dreaming back' explored in George's automatic script, where the whole idea of recurrence is elevated into a central principle of historical as well as personal fate. In the system which George and her husband developed, the destiny of the individual soul is to go back over its lives again and again, and the fate of civilisations is to re-enter cycle after cycle of growth and decay. Both processes are marked by moments of cataclysmic significance, which become the focal points for Yeats's poetic attention. While poems like 'The Second Coming' and 'Byzantium' emerge from Yeats's fascination with points of historical change, and attempt some measure of detachment from the scenes upon which they magnificently spectate, the poet's need to go back over the matter of memory, and the 'passionate moments' which found their place in the more personalised aspects of the symbolic system, make self-scrutiny and unsparing recollection necessary. Above all, in this supernaturally shadowed brooding on 'self knowledge', Yeats is able both to figure remorse in his writing, and to take his writing beyond remorse. Like his efforts to make good a creative detachment from the catastrophes of history, Yeats's inspections of and departures from remorse run the risk of seeming to outrun (culpably, for some of his readers) the plain facts, and to forget too readily or wilfully those loose ends of personal or public history which recur again and again, and come back, as it were, to smite him upon the face.

Yeats saw remorse as something distinct from action, and grew increasingly convinced of the need for art to include and forward action. Passivity, as Yeats understood it, could produce only an art of inertia, and this was a tendency he was able to detect retrospectively in some of his own early writing, and in that of his contemporaries. *The Trembling of the Veil* broods over the fate of a whole 'Tragic Generation' of artists whose defiance of things as they are carries with it a high cost in terms of inaction, self-delusion, and remorse. This is most subtly explored in

Yeats's depiction of Oscar Wilde, but is a theme which brings many of his contemporaries into the same fold. Accounting for William Sharp's belief in his own literary alter ego, for example, Yeats recalls how 'he had created an imaginary beloved, had attributed to her the authorship of all his books that had any talent, and though habitually a sober man, I have known him to get drunk, and at the height of his intoxication when most men speak the truth, to attribute his state to remorse for having been unfaithful to Fiona Macleod.'⁵¹ Similar paralysis afflicts Lionel Johnson, 'who could not have written *The Dark Angel* if he did not suffer from remorse', and who, despite the fact of his alcoholism 'showed to friends an impenitent face'.⁵² Going over the past in his autobiographical writings, Yeats sees remorse as a state producing paralysed repetition—or in the case of Ernest Dowson paralytic repetition: 'the last time I saw Dowson he was pouring out a glass of whiskey for himself in an empty corner of my room and murmuring over and over in what seemed automatic apology, "The first to-day."' ⁵³ The cast of Yeats's 'Tragic Generation' go over and over the same things, as incapable of action in their lives as they are, being dead, for Yeats in 1922. Thus, when Yeats invokes Matthew Arnold against Owen and other war poets, it is the Arnold of the 1853 Preface, who stands in judgement on his own work, doing away with *Empedocles on Etna* on the grounds that 'the suffering finds no vent in action . . . there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done'.⁵⁴ By 1936, Yeats had found plenty for his own poetry to do; and one crucial thing done in the verse was the poet's listening to the sounds of his own endurance, and his ability to go back over those sounds.

It is no more than a truism to say that Yeats's poetry, from a very early stage, tends towards patterns of verbal and rhythmic repetition. However, there is a critical tendency to treat repetition in poetry as a device only, and an unremarkable one at that; whereas for Yeats (as for many other poets) such specifics of poetic texture are never simply formalities. In the matter of memory, with its possibilities of remorse, Yeats's poetry is especially prone and alert to recurring sounds. Even the contrived stasis of an early poem like 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' depends largely on the surprise effect of having what should be

⁵¹ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (1955), p. 341.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁵⁴ Matthew Arnold, Preface to *Poems* (1853), *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott, 2nd. edn., ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1979), p. 656.

the rhyme words repeat themselves exactly, so that ‘Tread softly because you tread on my dreams’⁵⁵ comes to possess a certain intransigence of relentless (and perhaps remorse-provoking) suffering. In the later Yeats, such returns of sound carry strong and complex charges. In a draft of section V of the sequence ‘Vacillation’ (a section which initially bore the title ‘Remorse’), the triggers for remorseful memory include ‘a sound’:⁵⁶

Blunders of thirty years ago
Or said or done but yesterday
Or what I did not say or do
But that I thought to do or say
A word or sound and I recall
Things that my conscience and my vanity appall.

‘A word or sound’ can be caught up in the patterns of recurrence where remorse figures, and threatens the paralysis of memories stuck in the grooves of their own repetition. Again, the crises and resolutions in Yeats’s personal life during the First World War produce poems in which repetition becomes a major force. In ‘Broken Dreams’, written for Maud Gonne in 1915, the element of repetition may be a force for a profound inertia, and the poem’s coda-like conclusion seems to acknowledge as much.⁵⁷

The last stroke of midnight dies.
All day in the one chair
From dream to dream and rhyme to rhyme I have ranged
In rambling talk with an image of air:
Vague memories, nothing but memories.

This final line has become a kind of irregularly-returning refrain; finishing the poem with the line intensifies a sense that the voice has not gone beyond this point (nor wanted to get beyond it), and its recurrence becomes a kind of reassurance, with its internal repetition almost comforting. This measure of resignation (and, it may be, of passive suffering) has left behind the raw wounds present in early stages of the poem’s composition, where Yeats remembered ‘The lineaments that peirced [*sic*] my life with pain / Till it could have no life but memories’.⁵⁸ ‘Broken Dreams’, which ranges from repetition to

⁵⁵ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 176.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (1964), pp. 272–3.

⁵⁷ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 356.

⁵⁸ Holograph of ‘Broken Dreams’ (NLI 30,370 fol. 2’), reproduced and transcribed in *The Wild Swans At Coole: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Parrish, pp. 186–7.

repetition, is a poem in which Yeats sounds out measures of resignation, but also one in which he takes the measure of such resignation, and balances against an imagined afterlife in which Gonne's beauty will be restored the small, actual imperfections ('Your small hands were not beautiful') which survive the vagueness of the 'memories'.

However problematic it may be in its context, the final line of 'Broken Dreams' echoes into other writings in which Yeats takes the measure of regret. On the back of one of the pages on which the elegy 'Shepherd and Goatherd' is composed, a fragment in four-stress couplets begins by hearing again the words and rhythm of 'Vague memories, nothing but memories', and paring them down:⁵⁹

Memories upon memories
 Have bowed my head upon my knees.
 A dying boy with handsome face
 Upturned upon a beaten place,
 A sacred yew tree on a strand
 A woman that holds in steady hand
 A burning wisp beside a door
 And many and many a woman more[.]
 And not another thought than these
 Have bowed my head upon my knees.

Yeats then alters his final couplet to produce 'Memories upon memories/ Have bowed my head upon my knees'. If the fragment has a connection with 'Shepherd and Goatherd' and Robert Gregory (as seems likely), it records a more personal corollary of the 'dreaming back' which the airman's ghost experiences in the poem proper, where 'He grows younger every second', so that 'The outrageous war shall fade';⁶⁰ here, powerful and inscrutable symbolic images are canvassed, but the paralysis of passive recollection takes over, leaving the voice to murmur over its 'Memories upon memories'.

There is another context for these lines, or at least a suggestive parallel for them, in Yeats's wartime writings. In the play *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, which was much on the poet's mind in the first year of George's automatic writing, and in fact featured on occasion as the subject-matter of the spirit communications, the character of Cuchulain

⁵⁹ Holograph, Berg Collection, New York Public Library (Quinn (14)). The lines quoted here are on the verso of leaf 4 of the five leaves of draft for 'Shepherd and Goatherd': they are reproduced and transcribed in *The Wild Swans At Coole: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Parrish, pp. 418–9.

⁶⁰ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 342

is depicted in relation to three female figures: his wife Emer, his mistress Eithne Inguba, and the supernatural Fand, a woman of the Sidhe. Given Yeats's anxieties over his having 'betrayed three women', the play's engagement with love, possessiveness, and renunciation is biographically loaded, as its author and his wife well knew. If the play's subject-matter is familiar, so is some of its language, as when Cuchulain's ghostly form converses with Fand:⁶¹

Woman of the Sidhe What pulled your hands about your feet,
Pulled down your head upon your knees,
And hid your face?

Ghost of Cuchulain Old memories:
A woman in her happy youth
Before her man had broken troth,
Dead men and women. Memories
Have pulled my head upon my knees.

As his body lies between life and death, Cuchulain's ghost is tempted away from the weight of recollection, the 'memories' which 'Weigh down my hands, abash my eyes'. While there is a recollection of 'Broken Dreams' here (and in the fragment relating to 'Shepherd and Goatherd' obviously relevant to the play), there is also the most glancing of allusions to another poem of 1915 in the word 'abash'. This poem, 'The People', remembers and restages an argument between Yeats and Maud Gonne, letting Maud's dignified reply face down and cast doubt upon the poet's pride and affected haughtiness; at the poem's conclusion, the voice of the poet is chastened again in its recollection of the original mistake:⁶²

And yet, because my heart leaped at her words,
I was abashed, and now they come to mind
After nine years, I sink my head abashed.

'Abashed . . . abashed' taps into the distinctive energies of poetic repetition: the poet is abashed twice—nine years ago and now—but he is also brought up against the word's sound again, and its reiteration makes audible a humiliation which has become a sticking-point. 'Abashed' comes back like a rope's end which smites the poet on the face. The Yeats who wrote these lines (unusually for one of his lyric poems, they are in blank verse) had learned much from listening to

⁶¹ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1952), p. 291.

⁶² W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 353.

Wordsworth, the great English poet of repetition, in Ezra Pound's renditions during the wartime winters spent at Stone Cottage.⁶³ When 'abash' returns in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, it comes in a different formal element, the ritualistic rhymed tetrameters in which one world converses with another; now, as Fand woos Cuchulain's ghost away from the vestiges of its humanity, memory must be erased altogether.⁶⁴

Woman of the Sidhe Then kiss my mouth. Though memory
Be beauty's bitterest enemy
I have no dread, for at my kiss
Memory on the moment vanishes:
Nothing but beauty can remain.

Ghost of Cuchulain And shall I never know again
Intricacies of blind remorse?

With 'Memory on the moment vanishes' the rhythm, for a moment, flutters out of its course, and the repetitive, four-beat measure in which memories recur seems, for a breath, to be loosening its grip. Cuchulain's question to Fand is sunk in the rhythm it hopes perhaps to leave behind when it forsakes remorse along with memory. Fand's last lines to Cuchulain promise a remorseless 'oblivion':⁶⁵

But what could make you fit to wive
With flesh and blood, being born to live
Where no one speaks of broken troth,
For all have washed out of their eyes
Wind-blown dirt of their memories
To improve their sight?

Cuchulain, on the verge of vanishing forever with Fand, is reclaimed for humanity only by his wife Emer's last-minute decision to renounce his love. For Yeats, in the process of both inspecting and finding ways around his own 'Intricacies of blind remorse', the scene's incantatory rhyming towards and away from the hold of memory has a certain exploratory significance.

The rhythmic effects of repetition had always, in some obvious senses, been important to Yeats; his early poetry is often essentially incantatory, and years of effort, experiment, and thinking went into his practice, with associated excursions into the speaking of dramatic

⁶³ See James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York: OUP, 1988), pp. 142–3.

⁶⁴ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Plays* (1952), p. 292.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

poetry, and the virtues offered by Florence Farr's psaltery accompaniments. But the question of poetic rhythm's hold on reality changes and deepens as Yeats grows, and by the time of the First World War it has taken on new dimensions. Now the stakes are higher: memory, the dead, betrayal, action, and remorse are all implicit in poetry's rhythmic integrity, or its lack of integrity, but they are also concerns which might find blunter expression in the resistance put up to such poetry by an all too intrusive historical situation. When John Quinn chastised Yeats with 'It is sometimes the highest wisdom to be able to forget', he underestimated the complexity of the ways in which poetry remembers, and of Yeats's own knowledge (and experience) of this; whatever his *bona fides* on the subject of Ireland, England, and the war, Quinn's demand that Yeats do something 'on the side of right and justice' was too confident of what it took to be the facts of the matter. When Yeats writes 'Easter 1916', a poem in which the historical ironies of the insurrection's self-consciousness are given full rein, he does so with memory as his subject, and the poem concludes with the incantatory creation of memory, as the voice 'murmur[s] name upon name'.⁶⁶ 'Easter 1916' takes full measure of its dead and, in fundamental ways, questions them and subjects them to the forces of historical chance and irony; in creating their memory as a historical meaning, the poem shapes the dead into a deliberate, quasi-liturgical rhythm, sealed up behind the marble walls of the polished and emphatic refrain that structures and ends the poem. 'Changed, changed utterly' is built on a dead repetition, one which acknowledges grimly that, from now on, there will indeed be no change.

The dead of 'Easter 1916' are not the living men and women of Yeats's memory; like the dead in the poet's supernatural system, they have become a force to reckon with, 'living in their memories'. The poem's Irish context and meanings have this as their starting-point, but Yeats's procedure here derives also from his protracted encounter with the special demands of the dead as these presented themselves to him in wartime. Irish history makes the Dublin dead of 1916 an obvious source for much subsequent imagination and action; but Yeats's sense of the dead as a 'source', which conditions the poem, continues to develop in his writing, in ways which perhaps try to address Quinn's desire for something 'on the side of justice and right'. Yeats's equivalent to that phrase, when he describes the abstractions of *A Vision* as elements

⁶⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 394.

which 'have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice',⁶⁷ has two sides to it, and summarises a process in which the dead are both accommodated and resisted. The place of remorse in this, and of the sounds and rhythms of remorse in Yeats's poetry, help to explain the poet's ambivalence about the dead as a 'source'.

Looking for the source of action was a habit well-known to Yeats, and one which he experienced in both personal and historical speculations. But when, in the Self's final stanza in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul', 'source' is rhymed with 'remorse', the connection for Yeats is a matter of something more than either chance or convenience, and refigures earlier connections of the idea of 'source' and those of judgement and dreaming-back in *A Vision*. Of the personality at Phase 26, for example, Yeats says that 'His own past actions also he must judge as isolated and each in relation to its source; and this source, experienced not as love but as knowledge, will be present in his mind as a terrible unflinching judgment'.⁶⁸ Describing 'The Return', Yeats again fixes on 'the source':⁶⁹

During this state which is commonly called the *Teaching* he is brought into the presence, as far as possible, of all sources of the action he must presently, till he has explored every consequence, dream through. This passion for the source is brought to him from his own *Celestial Body* which perpetually, being of the nature of *Fate*, dreams the events of his life backward through him.

When the Self announces that 'I am content to follow to its source / Every event in action or in thought', it is preparing to quarrel in the most fundamental way with 'a terrible unflinching judgement'; defying the Soul in Yeats's 'Dialogue', the Self will also face down the dead by judging itself, forgiving itself, and casting out remorse. In the stanza's strong and supple construction, the rhyme for 'source' is deployed only to be rejected, and the connection of sounds is made only to be superseded by other, liberating forms of rhyming and rhythmic connection.⁷⁰

The stanzaic nature of so much of Yeats's poetry from *The Wild Swans at Coole* onwards offers the poet opportunities of self-dramatisation, but

⁶⁷ W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (London: Macmillan, 1937), p. 25.

⁶⁸ W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (1925), quoted from *A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision (1925)*, eds. George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 112.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁷⁰ See Peter McDonald, 'Yeats, Form and Northern Irish Poetry', in Warwick Gould and Edna Longley (eds.), *Yeats Annual 12: That Accusing Eye: Yeats and his Irish Readers* (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 216–17.

also presents him with a medium in which the rhetorical momentum can change in relation to the returns, postponements, confirmations, and surprises of rhyme. If the couplet, for Yeats, sounds out the dynamics of fate and inevitability, then stanzaic structures are those of freedom and action. In one sense, stanzaic forms give opportunities for Yeats to put remorse in its place, and it is this which the Self uses to its own advantage in the 'Dialogue'. In 'The Choice', a single stanza of *ottava rima*, the more expansive range of the 'Dialogue' has been compressed:⁷¹

The intellect of man is forced to choose
 Perfection of the life, or of the work,
 And if it take the second must refuse
 A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark,
 And when the story's finished, what's the news?
 In luck or out the toil has left its mark:
 That old perplexity an empty purse,
 Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse.

Despite the appearance of insistently binary divisions, it is not clear that the poem acknowledges the reality of any choice at all: the intellect is not free to choose, but 'forced' to do so, and the terms of its choice are slewed towards 'the work'. However bitterly, the poem represents 'toil' and its consequences rather than any putative 'perfection of the life', and it follows the traces of this in its chain of rhymes, from 'work' to 'dark', to 'mark', preparing for a concluding couplet in which the plain fact of 'an empty purse' rhymes with 'remorse', and provides its own untranscendent gloss on that term. Furthermore, despite its internal division and balance, the last line presents 'the day's vanity, the night's remorse' not as alternatives, but as aspects of the same thing. 'The choice' is a poem about a choice long made, and not the presentation of a decision still open. Even so, the poem is alert to, and alive with second thoughts, not least in its freeing of the word 'remorse' from the associations with the dead that rhymes like 'source' might conjure. As Helen Vendler has noticed, Yeats opens up the last couplet by making 'perplexity' and 'purse' 'reinscribe the contest between the lofty and the vulgar dictions of the first six lines', whereas 'vanity' and 'remorse' 'belong to a single register of diction' and 'clash in content, but do not clash in plane'. The couplet does not rhyme like with like, and 'remorse' remains to that degree unstable, its work unfinished. On another level, 'The Choice' itself represents a second

⁷¹ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 495.

thought, having been cut away from its original place as a stanza in 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931'. This adds its own weight to Vendler's summary of the last line, that 'the work one was so vain about in the daytime turns out to be, in the watches of the night, the cause of remorse'.⁷²

The capacity of Yeats's poetry to return upon itself is the measure of its ability to speak to (and sometimes speak against) remorse. The process comes to its most extreme pitch in some of the late poetry, and in 'The Man and the Echo', where another dialogue takes place, the ambition to 'measure the lot' results in questions which articulate powerful self-doubt and regret:⁷³

All that I have said and done,
 Now that I am old and ill,
 Turns into a question till
 I lie awake night after night
 And never get the answers right.
 Did that play of mine send out
 Certain men the English shot?
 Did words of mine put too great strain
 On that woman's reeling brain?
 Could my spoken words have checked
 That whereby a house lay wrecked?

The full rhymes and the metronomic regularity of the verse here bring these lines very close to the measures of Yeatsian remorse, just as the poem itself is situated on the border between life and death. Like others of his dialogue poems, 'The Man and the Echo' makes itself listen to the voice of the dead, and here the voice of the Echo is dead indeed, repeating fragments of the living voice exactly. In so far as the poem attends to and joins in this repetition, it gravitates towards the state of remorse which is the domain of the dead; to the extent that it resists the recurrence and reiteration of painful memory, the poem finds an element of freedom and escape from what seem by now all but inescapable conditions. In a prose draft, Yeats pictured himself 'Worn down by my self torturing search', and wrote how 'Among this solitude I seek remorse', but struck out 'remorse' to replace it with 'escape'.⁷⁴ The

⁷² Helen Vendler, 'Yeats and *Ottava Rima*', in Warwick Gould (ed.), *Yeats Annual* 11 (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 32.

⁷³ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, pp. 632–3.

⁷⁴ Transcription of holograph draft in Jon Stallworthy, *Vision and Revision in Yeats's Last Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 60.

words are true alternatives: one precludes the other, and Yeats's decision to choose 'escape' is what causes this poem's creative heart to beat. The particular freedom of 'The Man and the Echo' is its willingness to take stock of the worst possible things, the plainest and most humiliating facts, and still recognise that they are not the only facts, and that the living and individual will can yet, even here, pursue its thoughts towards active (and, finally, open) self-judgement. The remorselessness of the poem's self-interrogations is the guarantee of its escape from the deathwards pull of remorse. The extraordinary conclusion, in which 'I have lost the theme', takes the poem to places wholly unprepared for in its initial scenario of unsparingly ultimate questions:

But hush, for I have lost the theme,
Its joy or night seem but a dream;
Up there some hawk or owl has struck
Dropping out of sky or rock,
A stricken rabbit is crying out
And its cry distracts my thought.

'Seem but a dream' concentrates the grim closeness of the rhymes into a near-jingle, while 'struck' and 'rock', 'out' and 'thought' break free from close rhyme's air of inevitability. The repetition of 'cry' which happens internally in the last couplet is at the same time contrasted by the off-rhyming of 'out' with 'thought' (and also perhaps carries a faint recollection of the 'cry', 'cry' repetition in 'In Memory of Alfred Pollexfen', where the rhyme was—inescapably—with 'die').⁷⁵ 'A stricken rabbit is crying out' takes the poem's predominantly trochaic tetrameter (the metre of 'Under Ben Bulben') away from its rhythmic norm just as, at an earlier moment of assertion, the voice stretched the line's confines to accommodate:

That were to shirk
The spiritual intellect's great work
And shirk it in vain. There is no release
In a bodkin or disease . . .

Such moments effect releases of their own, and in order to hear them it is necessary also to hear the menacing enclosure and completeness from which they depart. Seamus Heaney has praised the poem's last rhyme, writing that 'The rhyme—and the poem in general—not only tell us of that which the spirit must endure; they also show *how* it must endure'.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 360.

⁷⁶ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 163.

The poem's final lines are lines enacting this exemplary escape, and not lines of remorse, where, as Jahan Ramazani has well characterised them, 'life disrupts the meditative progression toward death, calling the poet back with a cry of suffering'.⁷⁷

There are, of course, many kinds of suffering, his own and others', to which Yeats might be called back; in his late work especially, he seems to have a high tolerance for the kinds of suffering that can be theorised as conflict and realised as war. The Self in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' speaks not just with a sword, but for the sword: ten years after that other dialogue in 'Owen Aherne and his Dancers', it echoes the Heart's 'who cares?' in its principled rejection of remorseful brooding, but adds to this a deliberate belligerence. A very early skeleton of the poem has the Soul as 'He' and the Self as 'Me', with the demand 'What use to you now / love and war[?]' being met with 'only the sword gives truth'.⁷⁸ Yeats's actual swashbuckling in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' is not, it hardly needs saying, quite so clearly defined as this, and it is an incautious reading of the poem which does not attend to the Soul's protracted silence at the same time as the Self's prolonged aria of victory which that deliberated silence permits. Nevertheless, the casting-out of remorse characterises a particularly heroic action for the later Yeats, one which he was not reluctant to apply to contemporary events. In 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited', the assassinated Kevin O'Higgins becomes one such heroic figure.⁷⁹

Kevin O'Higgins' countenance that wears
A gentle questioning look that cannot hide
A soul incapable of remorse or rest . . .

Whatever Yeats's attitudes towards the remorselessness of his friend's actions in the service of the Irish State, the poem takes O'Higgins as an example of the militant encounter of the living with the force of the dead. The otherworldly corollaries of remorse are still present in a draft of the stanza, in which Yeats begins by seeing 'Kevin O'Higgins eyes which on death and birth rest', then asks 'Kevin O'Higgins on what horizon stares?' The historical weight of O'Higgins's example is felt

⁷⁷ Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy, and the Sublime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 199.

⁷⁸ Holograph fragment, National Library of Ireland (NLI 13,590 fol. 1^r), reproduced and transcribed in *The Winding Stair (1929): Manuscript Materials*, ed. David R. Clark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 22–3.

⁷⁹ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 601.

fully when Yeats calls his friend ‘That guilty and remorseless man’ who ‘that weary body bears’.⁸⁰ Yeats does not shirk the facts—but nor does his finished version of the lines try to conceal them, insisting as it does on what cannot be hidden. There is a certain remorselessness in the poet’s returning on the image of O’Higgins: ‘guilty’ is not summarily erased from the lines, but is fully absorbed into ‘incapable of remorse or rest’: the costs are real, and the poem knows that they have been borne in full.

If Kevin O’Higgins’s heroism consists for Yeats partly in his ability to resist remorse, and so stare down the dead in his capacity for action, ‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’ constitutes a more complex and ambivalent ‘action’ in its own right. Here, after all, the figure of the poet is brought almost literally to his knees by the power of memory:⁸¹

Heart-smitten with emotion I sink down,
My heart recovering with covered eyes;
Wherever I had looked I had looked upon
My permanent or impermanent images . . .

At first sight, this comes to within a hair’s breadth of remorse, but the voice keeps itself out of remorse’s downward pull; in part, this is something audible in the lines, which absorb repetition in order to effect change: ‘recovering’ and ‘covering’, ‘looked’ and ‘looked upon’, ‘permanent’ and ‘impermanent’ may sound like Yeatsian close-textured incantation, but they are taking the measure of repetition only to deny it its chance. In a poem concerned with understanding and channelling the energies of the dead, the inertia of remorse is rejected in both theory and action. What Yeats presents in the poem are not ‘Vague memories, nothing but memories’, or those ‘Memories upon memories’ that ‘Have bowed my head upon my knees’, but ordered, functioning and available ‘images’ which, at the conclusion, he seems himself to join, sure of the benevolence of his legacy. If there is a contrast to be noticed between this and the more ambivalent legacy recorded in ‘Easter 1916’, where the verse concentrates into an almost threatening sounding of the dead as a ‘source’, there is a difference too between ‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’’s achieved and expansive poise and the grim, marching rigour of other late poems, not least ‘Under Ben

⁸⁰ Holograph draft in National Library of Ireland (NLI 13,593 (29)), as transcribed by Wayne K. Chapman, ‘“The Municipal Gallery Re-visited” and its Writing’ in Warwick Gould (ed.), *Yeats Annual* 10 (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 166.

⁸¹ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 602.

Bulben'. These things also are parts of the Yeatsian legacy, and in such contexts the overcoming of remorse (or the imperviousness to it) may seem too easily achieved.

To judge Yeats in such terms is to set his poetry in relation to a selection of plain facts, and to fix upon the poet 'that accusing eye' which, in certain moods, he was happy to invite. Irish criticism and Irish poetry have both registered profound difficulties with Yeats's work, and with the designs it seems to have upon a future which is, in part at any rate, our own time. There are readers of Yeats who regard his writings as a part of Ireland's cultural and political history for which, at this point in the century, critical remorse might be in order. In such arguments, there are always facts to be adduced, facts which Yeats may be said to have ignored, distorted, or wilfully denied. Such objections have ground in common with fundamental literary downgradings of Yeats's work as, in Yvor Winters's phrase 'a more or less fraudulent poetry'.⁸² When Christopher Ricks, for example, notes Yeats's refusal to rethink a line from a poem of 1886, where 'peahens dance on a smooth lawn',⁸³ and then deplores his retort 'As to the poultry yards, with them I have no concern', he flings the plain facts about peahens in the poet's face: 'no amount of high and mighty scorn will undo the fact that a high price is paid by a poetry which invokes poultry and at the same time declares that it has no concern with the poultry yards'.⁸⁴ But the fact of peahens' behaviour and the fact of this 'high price' are not obviously facts of the same order, and Ricks's rhetorical sleight of hand itself misses (or bypasses) the facts both of what Yeats said and the context of his saying it. The quoted retort comes from Yeats at the age of twenty-three (itself a fact of some possible relevance, given the weight being attached to his remark), in a letter to John O'Leary written in the wake of a blood-thirsty review of *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* in the *Freeman's Journal*. As is fitting in a letter addressed to a much older man, and one whom the young poet regarded as a figure of authority,

⁸² Yvor Winters, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1960), quoted in Elizabeth Butler Cullingford (ed.), *Yeats: Poems 1919–1935* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 124.

⁸³ W. B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, p. 77.

⁸⁴ Christopher Ricks, 'Literature and the Matter of Fact', in *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 304. Ricks's source for his quotation from Yeats is A. Norman Jeffares's *Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, in its first edition (London: Macmillan, 1968): although this provides a reference to Yeats's *Letters* for the offending words, it does not supply direct information regarding the date of Yeats's remarks, or their context.

the tone is one of deference to authorities greater than that of the periodical press.⁸⁵

The Freeman reviewer is wrong about peahens they dance throughout the whole of Indian poetry. If I had Kalidasa by me I could find many such dancing. As to the poultry yards, with them I have no concern—The wild peahen dances or all Indian poets lie. . . . That Freeman review will do no harm—It is the kind of criticism every new poetic style has received for the last hundred years. If my style is new it will get plenty more such for many a long day. Even Tennyson was charged with obscurity . . .

The facts of literature and the facts of a bad press are not to be reconciled here: Yeats is defiant in settling for literature—for poetry rather than poultry yards—and even dancing himself a little in his rhetorical postures for O’Leary’s benefit. Part of the letter’s winning quality resides in its boastfulness, and in the temerity of the young Yeats mentioning himself and the (still living) Tennyson in the same breath. It is less remarkable a century later for Ricks to align those two poets, but when he goes on to register an instance of Tennyson’s regard for botanical accuracy as a fact which ‘seems to me the more honourable position—and to have made for the greater poetry’, the critical consequences of this kind of respect for the facts begin to come into view.⁸⁶ An older Yeats was even less ready to apologise for this order of mistake, still less to attempt to go back on it, as when he noted that ‘Henry More will have it that a hen scared by a hawk when the cock is treading hatches out a hawk-headed chicken’, and added the parenthetical remark that ‘I am no stickler for the fact’.⁸⁷ However, it would be a poor reader who seized on this as evidence of the poet’s culpable disregard for the facts, since Yeats’s irony (here, indeed, about the poultry yard) is more subtle and more pervasive than a critical demand for indiscriminate verisimilitude can comfortably acknowledge. In Ireland, the facts sometimes adduced against Yeats are different (and, it may be, of a different order), while the canonical consequences are altogether distinct, but the assumption that an ‘honourable position’ (however that is to be ascertained or assessed) can ‘make for the greater

⁸⁵ W. B. Yeats, letter to John O’Leary, 3 February 1889, *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Vol. 1 1865–1895*, eds. John Kelly and Eric Domville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 138. As the editors point out, Yeats was correct, in point of fact, on the subject of peahens in Indian literature: ‘There are . . . a number of descriptions of peahens dancing in the poems of Kalidasa, the great Sanskrit poet of the fifth century.’ If Indian poets do, indeed, ‘lie’ on this matter, Ricks’s quarrel must be with them as well as with Yeats.

⁸⁶ Christopher Ricks, *Essays in Appreciation* (1996), p. 305.

⁸⁷ W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (1959), pp. 350–1.

poetry' is made in an unreflecting way by many who find Yeats less than satisfactory in relation to the truth as they see it. The kinds of remorse such readers demand are not forthcoming in Yeats's writings, and the remorse he does write of seems to them a hollow mockery of the real thing.

Demands like these tend to coarsen the reading of literature, and in particular of poetry. It needs to be observed also, in justice, that their insistence on the plain facts does not always coexist with a respect for facts that may be at variance with their arguments: one recent attack on T. S. Eliot, which concludes that 'like a true politician [he] never apologizes and he never explains' still prints a misattribution as a crucial part of its evidence, labelling this 'Wrong' in a footnote, without apologising, explaining, or taking stock of the damage done to the facts of the case.⁸⁸ In reading Yeats, the poetry's complex relations with facts, whether these are facts of the poet's private life or of the life of his times, are always critically relevant. Acknowledging this, and acknowledging the difficulty of understanding these relations with the necessary fullness, it is vital to add that the poetry itself is another fact in the matter, and that it too demands respect. To seek out and evaluate Yeats's uses for remorse is, in this sense, to take the measure of remorse *in* Yeats's poetry as well as *for* his poetry; this is to insist on form as something other than accidental or narrowly functional in literature and in literary meaning. In taking the measure of remorse, Yeats's poetry enacts what Geoffrey Hill calls 'that "return upon the self" which may be defined as the transformation of mere reflex into an "act of attention", a "disinterested concentration of purpose" upon one's own preconceived notions, prejudices, self-contradictions and errors.'⁸⁹ Such attention (an attention to form in its truest sense) is part of a fundamental respect for the facts, and finally it is bound up with that honesty about the facts of which Yeats was time and again capable. It was this capacity in Yeats to which T. S. Eliot responded when he wrote of the poet's 'exceptional

⁸⁸ Tom Paulin, 'T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism', in *Writing to the Moment: Selected Critical Essays 1980–1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 160. Paulin's laconic 'Wrong' (p. 151) refers to a misattribution of the authorship of an anonymous review in *The Criterion*; but cf. Paulin's 'Getting it Wrong', later in *Writing to the Moment*: 'The history of criticism is littered with tiny errors, huge *faux pas* and comic misquotations. What critic worth their salt has a clear conscience in this matter?' (p. 311). Paulin's conscience does not lead him to discuss the question of whether the Eliot misattribution is a tiny error or a huge *faux pas*: it may, perhaps, be more in the nature of a comic misquotation.

⁸⁹ Geoffrey Hill, *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (London: André Deutsch, 1984), p. 155.

honesty and courage' and praised 'the honesty with oneself expressed in the poetry' in its 'revelation of what a man really is and remains'.⁹⁰

Yeats's remorse should not be confused with his regret, or his sense of guilt with regard to things done or left undone in his private and public lives. Rather, Yeats's imagination settles on remorse, and is able to act upon it, as part of the attempt to 'hold in a single thought reality and justice'. The poet's returns upon himself, and the returns so insistently attempted by the dead upon the living, are themes which Yeats does not regard as separate, and together they constitute the underlying facts of, and conditions for his writing. The notion of 'the dead living in their memories' remains more than Yeats's eccentricity, however distinctively Yeatsian its expression; and in this sense, at least, the poet's Irish reception is especially alert to the specific dimensions of his continuing importance. Yeats's dealings with remorse are in tune with the kinds of honesty Eliot and others praised, for they do not allow emotion—whether it is regret, pain, humiliation, grief, or simple frustration—to overcome the proper freedom of poetic action. To take remorse as the measure of integrity is to understand the facts of art, and the facts of life, in altogether too plain a manner. For in serious terms, remorse is never enough: it has been said (against Eliot) that 'Remorse without atonement has its own equilibrium; introspection and the private acknowledgement of error do not always lead to amends being made'.⁹¹ More simply, Geoffrey Hill has classed remorse among 'impure motives' for writing, when he postulates that 'a man may continue to write and to publish in a vain and self-defeating effort to appease his own sense of empirical guilt', and adds that 'It is ludicrous, of course'.⁹² When such as Yeats casts out remorse, these facts continue to matter; and the poetry's reality goes on answering to, and answering for, its sense of justice.

⁹⁰ T. S. Eliot, 'Yeats' (1940), in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 257.

⁹¹ Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 177.

⁹² Geoffrey Hill, *The Lords of Limit* (1984), p. 7.