



How, why and to what extent do Yeats's poems engage with a politics of abstraction, and to what effect?

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To explore William Butler Yeats's engagement with a politics of abstraction, the chronological investigation of his poetry is significant. By exploring the poems; 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' (1890), 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time' (1893), and 'The Fisherman' (1919) the nature of influence in Yeats's poetry is evident. To this end, the examination of the Aesthetic Movement and its influence on early Yeats and his abstraction of Ireland, is important in showing the alienation present in his later poetry, as it informs the causal relationship between egotism and abstraction. As Yeats's poetry progressed, the ways in which Yeats was able to balance his influences take a form, which adopts a bitter tone and manifests itself as becoming more abstracted.

Yeats's engagement in aestheticism is significant in exploring the nature of his early poetry as well as the resultant abstraction in his later poetry. George Watson in *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, highlights what was influential about the aesthetic movement:

[Yeats] was profoundly influenced by several aspects of Pater's aesthetic philosophy. Especially important to him were Pater's stress on the primacy and intensity of the given particular moment, and his emphasis on the importance of artistic impression and how all that is not essential to it must be purged away.¹

In the 'Lake Isle of Innisfree,' Yeats demonstrates his dissatisfaction with aspects of aestheticism; as a result, the poem displays how Yeats construes the tenets of Paterian aestheticism to what he believed literary art should be. Watson goes onto quote a statement by Yeats, which he made in his essay 'Art and Ideas'. This shows how Yeats wanted his poetry, as he 'filled [his] imagination with the popular beliefs of Ireland' and 'sought some symbolic language reaching far into the past.'² Yeats overcame aestheticism's passivity by substituting experience with belief in his search for literary truth. James Pethica in *Yeats in Context*, delineates this transition:

Only transcendental beliefs made the 'delicate emotions' of a Paterian aestheticism worthwhile, since they alone could 'liberate the arts from "their age" and allow literature to be the 'revelation of a hidden life' rather than merely a 'criticism of life'.³

By revealing a 'hidden life' Yeats's self-expression had a motive and direction for an audience, as the effect of his early poetry taught his readers how to respond to a world. To create a sense of abstraction Yeats adopts a representational style of place, which engulfs the senses in a visceral manner, consequently emitting a sensation, which can be

¹ George Watson, "Yeats, Victorianism, and the 1890s." *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats*. Ed. Marjorie Howes and John Kelly. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), p.49

² W.B. Yeats, 'Art and Ideas', *Essays and Introductions (E&I)*, (London: Macmillan, 1961), p.349

³ James Pethica, 'Aesthetics' in Holdeman, David, and Ben Levitas. *W.B. Yeats in Context*. (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), p.207

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associated with Ireland. In the first stanza Yeats immerses himself as well as the reader in something beyond. The first line, 'I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree' is essential in Yeats's establishment of an abstracted Ireland and an abstracted authorial identity.⁴ The compound construction of the line suggests that the first moment of 'going' is separate. To go and then go again suggests that something is leaving Yeats before departing for Innisfree. Therefore, in this first line Yeats illustrates the transcendence of the soul out from the body. By doing this in first half of the first line Yeats presents that what comes afterwards is the vision of the soul; a belief of Innisfree. The 'water lapping with low sounds' and the sound of the 'cricket song' are heard from within and not without and the sights that Yeats subjects the reader to; the 'glimmer' of the night and the 'purple glow' of dawn paints and composes Ireland's past, a past which is desirable to emerge from.⁵ Hence, Yeats acknowledges and inevitably respects the past and by doing so he allows a voice to emerge from it, which writes a new past for Ireland to spring from. However, his ability to engage in abstraction comes from the ambivalent ways in which Yeats's authorial identity emerges from aestheticism. This poetic voice can be further described through Warwick Gould's essay in *Yeats's Mask* as he states, 'Yeats's texts have within their field of allusion many of the 'great masters'; he has learned from imitating.'⁶ Gould proves that 'The Mask' is a useful 'tool' in understanding Yeats's poetic voice; in this case it helps demonstrate Yeats's identification with aestheticism. Through adopting philosophies and styles that came before him, Yeats creates something of his own which he can perform in his poetry. In this sense Yeats's engagement with aestheticism links to his identification with Nietzsche's philosophy. An affirmation that can apply to Yeats's relationship with aestheticism comes from George Watson who quotes Nietzsche in 'The Use and Abuse of History' as the quote from Nietzsche states, "we are merely the resultant of previous generations".⁷ However, this philosophy in relation to Yeats's later poetry shows itself as consequential.

Yeats in 'Art and Ideas', shows a discontent for aestheticism: 'Yet those delighted senses, when I had got from them all that I could, left me discontented'.⁸ At first glance 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' conforms to the conventions of aestheticism; its regard of the beautiful, its immersion into the senses, its deepening impression of place, all show the influence of aestheticism. However, the last two lines, similar to the first line, possess a power over the poem, which goes further than the passive abstraction in aestheticism. In the second to last line Yeats shows that the body never left, 'While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey'.⁹ By stating that he '[stood]' Yeats shows that we are now in the body's present reality. Yeats never fully sinks into his impression and by doing so it becomes clearer that his poetry 'moves away from the purity of Pater's aesthetic idealism towards a more robust inclusiveness'.¹⁰ This 'robust inclusiveness' as Watson explains, is evident in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'. Yeats's emergence out from aestheticism involved the labouring search of an impression and subjectivity that was shared, 'I sought some symbolic language

⁴ W.B. Yeats, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2008), p.31, ii 1

⁵ Yeats, p.31, ii 10, 6, 7

⁶ Gould, Warwick. 'The Mask before *The Mask*,' Margaret Mills Harper. *Yeats's Mask*, Vol. 19. (Open Book Publishers, 2013.), p.12

⁷ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*. 2nd rev. (New York: Macmillan, 1985.) in George Watson, *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, p.56

⁸ 'Art and Ideas', p.348

⁹ Yeats, p.31, ii 11

¹⁰ Watson, p.52, ii

reaching far into the past and associated with familiar names and conspicuous hills that I might not be alone amid the obscure impressions of the senses.¹¹ The poem takes everyone into an impression and yet at the very same time grounds everyone on the same 'grey pavement', the same reality/present. By doing so, Yeats engages with a more active form of abstraction in order to seek something beyond the loneliness of Pater's aestheticism. Yeats does this by symbolically illustrating the process of impression; to teach his reader how to respond to the world while putting himself on the same level as his reader, stood on the 'grey pavement'. In this sense Yeats engages in an abstraction of Ireland but not necessarily of his own identity, because by grounding himself back in reality with everyone else it is evident that, as Pethica states, 'As early as 1893 he proposed that the realization of individual 'genius' was a matter of allowing one's imagination to escape the limitations of a 'egotistic mood' by opening oneself to become a vehicle for the greater genius of 'universal thought'.¹² As is textually evident, the writing of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' demonstrates an unaffected Yeats who was able to harmoniously construe the limitations of Paterian aestheticism.

Similarly, Yeats's ability to engage in an abstraction of Ireland so as to not become abstracted himself, is demonstrated in 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time' (1893), published shortly after 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'. However, even in such a short space of time, there is an element of ambiguity that surrounds the poem which is not as apparent in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'. The ambiguous nature of the poem poses a number of questions to what was once an assured authorial voice. Pethica puts the poem into context as he states that,

'Symptomatically, in 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time', published in 1892, the poet seeks 'Eternal beauty wandering on her way' but flinches from full commitment to his quest, fearing that it may dangerously separate him from 'common things; and 'mortal hopes' and leave him able only to 'chaunt a tongue men do not know' (VP 101).¹³

Yeats's egotism is mitigated by a self-awareness an introspective lens with his own desires, in this sense Yeats is able to allay what would, at first glance, appear to be an esoteric poem. The push and pull of egotism, patriotism and aestheticism finds itself at peace in the poem, in which the process of controlling the delicacy of the mind is actively portrayed in the poem's structure. Its euphonic rhythm, evident in the poem's rhyming couplets, makes the beauty of the poem implicit, which allows Yeats, as he similarly does in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' to ground us back in reality in the second stanza. This is embodied in his descriptions of lesser life forms such as the 'weak-worm' and the 'field mouse'.¹⁴ Yeats states in 'Symbolism in Poetry' (*E&I*), that 'The purpose of rhythm, [...] is to prolong the moment of contemplation.'¹⁵ Therefore, through his rhythmic and euphonic rhyme scheme Yeats evokes thought of the beautiful, which enables him to teach a response to the world. However, Yeats within the evocation of this prolonged contemplative state, keeps himself and the reader in reality, enabling him to show the transcendental power of belief. Moreover, Yeats demonstrates his self-awareness by creating a dialogue between his speaker and beauty itself. Yeats personifies beauty, and subsequently the use of pronouns in the line,

¹¹ 'Art and Ideas', pp.349-350

¹² Pethica, p.207

¹³ Pethica, p.208

¹⁴ Yeats, 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time', p.23, ii 16, 17

¹⁵ 'Symbolism in Poetry', (*E&I*). p.159

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'Eternal beauty wandering on her way', gives beauty a concrete existence allowing an internal discussion, with the abstract concept, to take place.¹⁶ This allows Yeats to bring himself back from this beauty so as to not be separate from reality. In 'Discoveries- The Tree of Life', Yeats highlights a danger of this beauty as he states, 'The more I tried to make my art deliberately beautiful, the more did I follow the opposite of myself, for deliberate beauty is like a woman always desiring man's desire.'¹⁷ His commentary in this essay delineates something dangerous in beauty in its ability to change Yeats. This explains the intrusiveness of the speaker's voice in the line 'Come near, come near, come near—Ah, leave me still'.¹⁸ Yeats separates the second half of the line using the hyphen as if he is actively separating and suppressing an uncontrolled second voice in the poem, one that is not himself. Moreover, the use of the hyphen physically creates a distance between beauty and the speaker which subsequently creates a space between 'Eternal beauty' and reality. Yeats recognises the duty of staying within the world as opposed to writing in a permanent external position. By establishing this position Yeats adheres to his philosophy that, 'The artist stands between the saint and the world of impermanent things' which he states in 'Discoveries- Two kinds of Aestheticism'.¹⁹ In reference to Pethica's statement, Yeats recognises his duty of being the bridge between beauty and reality and engages in abstraction to illustrate the beauty in his beliefs.

Despite Yeats's portrayal of his ability to mitigate a full immersion in aestheticism by establishing a distance, the cyclical structure of the poem changes from the initial impression of their being a resolution to something unresolved as the last line is a repetition of the first line, 'Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days.'²⁰ This inverts the structure's euphonic appearance to a melancholic suffering as if Yeats shows the speaker in a state of grief for something that can't be. Relating this to the Aesthetic Movement, this suggests that Yeats's attraction to aestheticism is strongly ingrained in his poems and is in constant discourse with his ego. Unlike in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', the repetition of the first line and the last line of the poem create a sense of entrapment, whereby it is ambiguous as to whether we ever came back or if the body left with soul to beauty's alluring persuasion. Moreover, in Yeats's statement made in 'Discoveries- The Tree of Life', above, Yeats presents a gendered response as he alludes to the fact that 'deliberate beauty is like a woman always desiring man's desire.'²¹ This shows his belief of needing to stay in the world as it is feminine to be outside it and so his immersion into reality is an act of asserting a masculine voice in his poetry. With this in mind as well as the ambiguity in the poem, shows that, although Yeats maintains a certain essence of balance in his search to 'reconcile his political sympathies and his commitment to artistic excellence and intellectual freedom, and also to assert the practical relevance of his work.'²² Under the surface of the poem is a presentation of Yeats's ego which illustrates an initial engagement in authorial abstraction.

To analyse Yeats's later poem 'The Fisherman' (1919), it is important to put the poem's engagement with abstraction into dialogue with two interpretations of Yeats's

¹⁶ Yeats, p.23, ii 12

¹⁷ 'Discoveries- The Tree of Life', (*E&I*), p.271

¹⁸ Yeats, p.23, ii 13

¹⁹ 'Discoveries- Two kinds of Aestheticism', (*E&I*), p.286

²⁰ Yeats, p.23, ii 1, 24

²¹ 'Discoveries- The Tree of Life', (*E&I*), p.271

²² Pethica, p.208

development, firstly Watson's statement that, 'Yeats's own poetry written in the twentieth century moves away from the purity of Pater's aesthetic idealism towards a more robust inclusiveness.'²³ Secondly, a quote that David Lloyd in *Yeats in Context*, used from Seamus Deane's essay 'Yeats and the Idea of Revolution', "Yeats began his career by inventing an Ireland amenable to his imagination. He ended by finding an Ireland recalcitrant to it."²⁴ The former is significant in understanding how Yeats engaged in abstraction in the form of self-alienation and how aestheticism and egotism are fundamentally linked through ideas surrounding a politics of abstraction. The latter, although not necessarily suggesting anything of Yeats's reaction to this recalcitrant Ireland, 'The Fisherman' proves to be a suitable example as it demonstrates how the esoteric typicality of Yeats's poetry consequently causes the breakdown of the poet in which the Ireland he wants to be a voice for is one that can't be comprehended.

The labouring search for a universal language, where Yeats can communicate with an audience and explain a way to respond to Ireland through symbolism, shows its effect on Yeats in 'The Fisherman'. Typically, in Yeats's earlier poetry, place is symbolic, somewhere where Yeats takes one to. Yet in 'The Fisherman', there is not a place to go, the harsh realism begins to dawn on the poetics and politics of abstraction. Yeats firmly plants the reader in reality as the poem keeps the soul where the body is standing, in reality. Even the 'hill' where the fisherman stands is 'grey' and his clothes are 'grey'.²⁵ The shade being something that grounded his readers back into reality in his early poems is now something that is visible in the supposed abstracted state of Ireland, where the unattainable fisherman stands. Yeats creates a space in this poem to be personal, to take off the aesthetic poetic mask and put one on in which, as Margret Mills Harper states, that 'the dominant emotions [of the late Mask] are a struggle between humility and pride, acceptance, even of ruin, alternating with engagement and approval of those who are passionately involved, even of bringing that ruin.'²⁶ In such a struggle it appears that 'the Mask' can only become performative in order to protect itself. Yeats in this sense adopts the all-knowing attitude of the aesthete; this is evident in the lines 'The witty man and his joke/Aimed at the commonest ear'.²⁷ Yeats retains the authority of the poet as the description, 'commonest ear' shows a certain contempt for the audience, in an almost Wildean manner. In doing so Yeats's change in poetic voice can be described by Lloyd's point that there is a 'gradual transition in Yeats's work from the organic symbolism of the earlier poetry [...] to an inorganic, emblematic, and highly performative mode which poses antithesis rather than identity as its fundamental relation.'²⁸ This statement suggests an alienation, one that is caused by egotism and aestheticism and finds itself amidst the flux of modernism which, in itself, is alienated to a mass culture.

The transition of his poetry is embodied in his contempt for the 'audience' in the poem. In contrast to 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time' where Yeats's speaker is careful not to 'chaunt a tongue men do now know', Yeats in 'The Fisherman' displays an anger at the taste of an audience. His allusion to J.M Synge, 'the dead man who I loved' and the

²³ Watson, p.52

²⁴ Seamus Deane, 'Yeats and the Idea of Revolution', from *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber & Faber 1985) in David Lloyd, 'Nationalism and Postcolonialism', *W.B. Yeats in Context*, p.179

²⁵ Yeats, p.123, ii 3, 4

²⁶ Margaret Mills Harper, 'A Vision and Yeats's Late Masks', p.166

²⁷ Yeats, p.123, ii 19, 20

²⁸ Lloyd, p.187

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reception of *The Playboy of the Western World*, 'in scorn of this audience', is parallel to his own contempt at an audience unable to grasp the concept of his poetry.²⁹ It is foreseeable then that as Lloyd states, 'Above all, the later poetry is haunted by the anxiety that its own function may have become redundant in the postcolonial state'.³⁰ 'The Fisherman' is a clear example of his later poetry becoming haunted by anxiety. Examples of this anxiety is textually evident in the repetition of 'began'. This repetition shows Yeats's transition as he firstly alludes to his early poems, 'It's long since I began/To call up to the eyes [...] To write for my own race'.³¹ This adverts to his early interpretation of what literary art should be, which resulted in him construing Paterian aestheticism so that his poetry was not solipsistic and worked 'to embrace instead the heroic and active agenda of that older, abounding world'.³² Yeats goes onto repeat the verb 'began' in the lines 'Suddenly I began,/In scorn of this audience,/Imagining a man [...] A man who is but a dream;/ And cried, "Before I am old/ I shall have written him one/ Poem maybe as cold/ And passionate as the dawn."' ³³ Yeats repeats the idea of beginning something to illustrate a transition in his poetry, which subsequently shows his own alienation from society and his early poetry. Therefore, 'The Fisherman' illustrates Yeats's detachment from his early poetry and his audience which he tirelessly attempted to teach and mould, in order to change how the world is responded to. Ultimately, however, the transitional nature of this poem does not necessarily show a progression but instead a regression as his contempt of an audience hints at a reversion to the 'chilly Palace of the Aesthetes' as it demonstrates a sense of loneliness.³⁴ Therefore, this is evidence of the consequential nature of Nietzsche's philosophy - that we are influenced by previous generations - as he later claims, "Though we condemn the errors and think we have escaped them, we cannot escape the fact that we spring from them."³⁵

In conclusion, Yeats's engagement with abstraction is both evident in his early poetry and his later poetry; the former, as a style in which to shape his early philosophy. By engaging in abstraction (abstracting Ireland) Yeats, to an extent, was able to balance aestheticism and egotism. This was by the way of adopting a poetic voice that showed self-awareness, which displayed its vulnerabilities and sought to solve them through construing the weaknesses he found in aestheticism. However, in his later poetry Yeats's attempt at creating a symbolic universal language resulted in an abstraction of the self, due to the incomprehensibility of the abstract Ireland he still champions, which developed into a contempt for the audience. This showed that Yeats's identification with aestheticism was not always something that he could construe. This reversion back to aestheticism's solipsistic nature also demonstrates the effect of egotism in causing Yeats's later poetic voice to become alienated.

²⁹ Yeats, p.123, ii 14, 27

³⁰ Lloyd, p.182

³¹ Yeats, p.123, ii 6-11

³² Watson, p.51

³³ Yeats, p.123, ii 26-40

³⁴ Watson, p.50

³⁵ Nietzsche. Watson, p.56

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