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A haunting presence: William Butler Yeats's Swift myth in *The Words upon the Window-Pane*

The glass, by lover's nonsense blurr'd,
Dims and obscures our sight:
So when our passion Love hath stirr'd,
It darkens Reason's light.
[Jonathan Swift, *Written upon Windows
at Inns in England*²]

W.B. Yeats's fascination with Jonathan Swift is part of his process of recovering the Irish Protestant cultural tradition, and it can be seen as part of his commitment to the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy cultural politics at the beginning of the twentieth century. Siding with the Protestant aristocracy in such a critical moment in Irish history – when Ireland was progressing towards the consolidation of the Free State and at the very moment of the Ascendancy's decline – is not an act of “crashing snobbery”³, as some scholars assume, but it reflects Yeats's attempt to fight against the ignorance and intellectual shallowness he associates with the Irish Catholic middle-class of his days. In order to preserve the order and the social stability threatened by the advent of the new ruling class, and to point out the key role of culture in achieving political unity, Yeats turns to the eighteenth century, in his words “that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion” (Yeats 1962, 354), reading diligently and eagerly the works of Protestant Anglo-Irish authors, often identifying with them and more often mythicizing them⁴. The

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² Cf.: Herbert Davis, 134.

³ Cf.: Terence De Vere, White. *The Anglo-Irish*. London: Gollancz, 1972, 42.

⁴ It is in the name of his loyalty both to the Ascendancy and to his own personal myth that Yeats delivers his famous speech against the abolition of divorce at the Irish Senate in 1925; he declares proudly: “We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are

poet thus establishes a personal “Anglo-Irish Parnassus” in which Burke, Berkeley, Swift, and Goldsmith stand not only as the most outstanding “world figures” Irish literature has ever produced (Torchiana 102), but also as the champions of wisdom, pride and discipline – the very qualities Yeats believes could be still taught to his contemporaries. Awkward as it seems, Yeats’s version of the eighteenth century allows him to trace an ideological continuity between past and present. Seamus Deane offers a lucid evaluation of Yeats’s Parnassus, pointing out how the poet’s view conforms to his idea of history as a *myth*, escaping the logical rules of chronological time; the critic rightly states that:

Yeats misreads Berkeley and Swift, makes Goldsmith appear far more eccentric and controversial than he actually was, attributes to England a role in Burke’s thought which really belongs to France – and yet he manages to escape derision [...]. Very simply, we are told not to take such myths *as* history: they are myths *of* history. (29)

More than any other author, it is Swift who constitutes an endless source of poetic inspiration for Yeats, as attested by the poet’s incessant reading of the Dean’s work in the 1920s⁵, as well as by the recurring references to Swift in Yeats’s later production⁶. But it is in the poet’s one-act play *The Words upon the Window-Pane* (1930) and in its introductory essay that the value of Yeats’s mythization of Jonathan Swift emerges more clearly; following a process which is not unusual for Yeats, the Dean becomes a “mask” of the poet, as well as his own “anti-self”. Much more so, Swift emerges as a real “haunting presence” both off- and on-stage (as Yeats himself admits, “Swift haunts me; he is always just round the next corner”, 1962, 958).

Mary Fitzgerald assumes that Yeats’s choice of Swift as the hero of the play is not surprising:

Given a choice among Berkeley, Burke, Emmet, Grattan, Parnell, and Swift, Yeats settled upon Swift with apparent ease. Possibly he saw Swift’s life as the

the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell. We have created the most modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence” (Pearse 99).

⁵ According to Sturge Moore’s testimony, reading Swift was to Yeats an exhausting and troubling experience: “Merely reading Swift could excite him enough to disturb his blood pressure and leave him sleepless” (Torchiana 124).

⁶ Swift’s presence animates many of the poems collected in *The Tower* (1928) and in *The Winding Stair* (1933) (which contains Yeats’s rewriting of The Dean’s famous epitaph); Swift’s is the voice inspiring the poetic *persona*’ stone in the “Crazy Jane poems” in *Words for Music Perhaps* (1932); and finally, Yeats profusely discusses on the Dean’s character, ideas and works in his 1930 diary.

most intrinsically interesting, because of its romantic triangle. A drama about Berkeley, Burke or Grattan might have demonstrated passionate thought, but it would have made less effective theatre that one about the passionate emotion of Swift. A play about Emmet or Parnell might have provoked nationalist feelings that would have confused the issue and obscured his point. But a play about Swift could allow Yeats to subsume politics under personal character, and besides, like Yeats, Swift was both politician and poet. (62)

As Fitzgerald rightly points out, under Swift's mask, Yeats feels free to express his own aristocratic political ideas, the Dean being in the poet's view the epitome of the Anglo-Irishman struggling for political and intellectual freedom as well as the embodiment of his idea of "unity of being", the perfect communion of thought and action. However, the choice of such a precise – and obscure – episode of Swift's private life as the return of the letter Hester Vanhomrigh-Vanessa was supposed to have sent to Esther Johnson-Stella in 1723, questioning her love-rival about the nature of her relationship with the Dean⁷, allows Yeats to devise an effective and thrilling *coup de théâtre*. I assume that in re-writing the episode in perfect compliance with the creation of his Swift myth, Yeats detects in the Dean's complex relationship with the two women his own lacerating dilemma between a detachment from his corporeality and the enthusiastic embracing of his instincts and infuses his fictional Swift with his own sexual and sensual anxieties.

The Words upon the Window-Pane marks a significant shift in Yeats's dramatic *corpus*: his interest in the supernatural and his concern with the Irish cultural tradition blend and are introduced in a realistic setting, reminiscent of Ibsen's plays. In particular, the play retains "the tone and emphasis" Yeats had elaborated following his accommodation "both with the new Ireland and with the new government-subsidised Abbey. The tone and emphasis were ironic, harsh and violent" (Murray 29). The action takes place in Yeats's contemporary Dublin, in an old Georgian building converted to lodging-house. Yeats aptly introduces both Swift's and Stella's presence in Dr. Trench's description of the house, which clearly responds to the poet's idea of the Ascendancy:

It was a private house until about fifty years ago. It was not so near the town in those days, and there are large stables at the back. Quite a number of notable people lived here. Grattan was born upstairs; no, not Grattan, Curran perhaps – I forget – but I do know that this house in the early part of the eighteenth century

⁷ The "legend" goes that Stella was deeply upset by the letter, and when she showed it to the Dean he rushed out and went to Celbridge, where Vanessa lived. There, he returned it to her, without even saying a word, perhaps only frowning at her with that awful look in the eyes capable (as she often writes in her correspondence) to strike her dumb. Swift had thus put a drastic end to his relationship with Vanessa (Johnston 3, 171).

belonged to friends of Swift, or rather of Stella [...]. That was before Vanessa appeared upon the scene. It was a country-house in those days, surrounded by trees and gardens. Somebody cut some lines from a poem of hers upon the window-pane – tradition says Stella herself. (*WWP* 599)⁸

The heterogeneous group of characters, all belonging to the middle-class Yeats despised, have gathered to take part to a séance led by a famous medium, Mrs Henderson. Among them, John Corbet, a young Cambridge postgraduate and a Swift scholar, is introduced as a sceptic, who is attending the séance only to find out the truth about spiritualism. Corbet's presence is indeed functional to the development of the play, not only insofar as he gives voice to Yeats's view of the Dean as a "deposed prince of the intellect", suffering for the advent of Democracy⁹. Corbet's reaction to Stella's lines – the words which give the play its title, four lines from a poem Stella wrote for Swift's birthday in 1772 ("You taught how I might youth prolong / By knowing what is right and wrong, / How from my heart to bring supplies / Of lustre to my fading eyes", Yeats *WWP* 601)¹⁰ – sets the tone of the play, anticipating the central event, and delving into Swift's "love" triangle and "private" tragedy: "How strange that a celibate scholar, well on life, should keep the love of two such women! He met Vanessa in London at the height of his political power. She loved him for nine years, perhaps died of love, but Stella loved him all her life" (*WWP* 601).

Before the sitting starts, the audience understands that previous séances have been spoiled by a "hostile presence", a couple of spirits (a man and a woman), who keep re-enacting a particular episode of their life, "just as if they were characters in some kind of horrible play" (603). Again, Yeats stresses the importance of

⁸ All references to the text are taken from W.B. Yeats. *The Words upon the Window-Pane. The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1982, and hereafter cited in text as *WWP*.

⁹ "His ideal order was the Roman Senate, his ideal men Brutus and Cato. Such an order and such men had seemed possible once more, but the movement passed and he foresaw the ruin to come, Democracy, Rousseau, the French Revolution; that is why he hated the common run of men, – 'I hate lawyers, I hate doctors,' he said, 'though I love Dr. So-and-so and Judge So-and-so' – that is why he wrote Gulliver, that is why he wore out his brain, that is why he felt saeva indignatio, that is why he sleeps under the greatest epitaph in history" (*WWP* 601–2). Indeed, Yeats establishes a link between himself, John Corbet, and the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish tradition: the name "Corbet" is reminiscent of the poet's grandmother and, in particular, of his uncle, Robert Corbet, master of Sandymount Castle, where the poet used to spend his childhood; in addition, Reverend Francis Corbet was one of the executors of Stella's will. Through the young scholar, Yeats connects himself to Swift more firmly than to the other eighteenth-century "world figures".

¹⁰ Swift himself used to carve verses on the windows of the inns where he stayed during his travels. One of this poems in particular, "Written upon Windows at Inns in England" (epigraph to the present paper), dealing with the contrast between reason and passion, may have provided Yeats with the theme for his play.

the setting, instilling in the audience the doubt that the spirits may be among the names already quoted. As Dr Trench affirms, such spirits “do not often come to séances unless those séances are held in houses where those spirits lived, or where the event took place” (Yeats 604). This metatheatrical reference anticipates what is about to happen: the séance is disturbed by a “bad old man” and a young lady in a “fancy dress”, whom Corbet recognises immediately as Swift and Vanessa.

The play-within-the-play which follows offers Yeats's interpretation of the letter episode. Disregarding biographical detail, the poet invents a harsh dialogue for his characters, reminiscent of the tone of his later poetic production. Through Mrs Henderson, Swift and Vanessa give vent to what laid unexpressed in their real last encounter. Yeats's Swift turns to hopeless Vanessa with arrogant words (“Did you not hear what I said? How dare you question her? I found you an ignorant little girl without intellect, without moral ambition”, *WWP* 608), but the girl is not likely to be stricken dumb as the real Vanessa was. Though she spurns his arrogance, she still affirms her love for him and demands a plausible reason for his refusal to marry her. Swift is then forced to reveal his secret: “I have something in my blood which no child must inherit. I have constant attacks of dizziness; I pretend they come from a surfeit of fruit when I was a child” (*WWP* 609).

Yeats subscribes to the theory of Swift's fear of passing what he understood as his madness to his descendants, insofar as it conveys a particular dramatic effect; nonetheless, in the “Introduction” to the play, the poet questions theories trying to explain Swift's celibacy with reference to some “physical defects” or illnesses of his, nowadays commonly explained as Ménière's disease¹¹. In the poet's view, such theories are not compatible with the popular image of a split self, which he is most likely to endorse: that of a man who loves women but is afraid to fall into temptation (“the refusal to see Stella when there was no third person present suggests a man that dreaded temptation”, Yeats 1962, 360). Hence, Yeats concludes, Swift “almost certainly hated sex” (1962, 334), thus explaining the Dean's scornful and mocking attitude towards the women he knew. In addition, even when Swift himself speaks about marriage and his “dizziness” in his letters, he never links the two, founding his rejection of marriage on economic and intellectual reasons; as he explains to Rev. John Kendall, marriage lures those “young, raw & ignorant Scholars” who “believe every silk petticoat includes an angell [*sic*]”, but it also causes the ruin of any man “of sense” (Williams 1963–65, I, 3–5), because it blurs away the intellect of those who do not take into account the responsibilities of conjugal life¹².

¹¹ Cf.: T.H. Bewley. “The Health of Jonathan Swift”. *JR Soc Med.* 91 (11 November 1998): 602–605.

¹² That Swift did not reject the idea of marriage *per se*, as Yeats's Swift insistently does (“I was a man of strong passions and I had sworn never to marry”, *WWP* 609), is attested by the passionate words with which he addressed Jane Waring-Varina, trying to convince her to marry him in 1696: “But listen to what I here solemnly protest, by all that can be witness to an oath,

In Yeats's myth, the madness Swift fears is the symbol of the "sibylline frenzy" the poet describes in "Blood and the Moon" (1928), an insanity which acquires stronger social and political values, since it results from the intellectual's frustrated efforts to oppose the castrating rationalism of the masses. Voicing Yeats's conviction, John Corbet insists on the political implication of Swift's celibacy and madness:

Swift was the chief representative of the intellect of his epoch, that arrogant intellect free at last from superstition. He foresaw its collapse. He foresaw Democracy, he must have dreaded the future. Did he refuse to beget children because of that dread? Was Swift mad? Or was the intellect itself that was mad? (*WWP* 615)

These questions, as I will better explain below, remain unanswered; however, it is relevant that the mystery of the Dean's celibacy adds an important piece to the construction of the Swift myth in *The Words upon the Window-Pane*. The dreadful vision of a future dominated by democracy and "whiggery" is enough to make Yeats's Swift spurn procreation; thus, the poet makes his Dean reject not only the idea of marriage, but also whatever deals with sex and corporeality. Hence, Swift's anxious prayer: "O God, hear the prayer of Jonathan Swift, that afflicted man, and grant that he may leave to posterity nothing but his intellect that came to him from Heaven" (*WWP* 611). Wishing to leave to posterity his intellect only, Swift appears as Yeats's "anti-self", his mirror-image. It is easy to perceive in the poet's interest in Swift's celibacy a retrospective reflection on his own life before marrying Georgie Hyde-Lees (1917), when he himself had tried to suppress his appetites in order to affirm his pure intellect. Swift's prayer in the play recalls the introductory poem of *Responsibilities* (1914), where Yeats asks his ancestors to forgive him for having no children¹³. However, if there's desperation

that if I leave this kingdom before you are mine, I will endure the utmost indignities of fortune rather than ever return again, though the king would send me back his deputy [...] and will my friends still continue reproaching me for the want of gallantry, and neglecting a close siege? How comes it that *they all wish us married together*, they knowing my circumstances and yours extremely well, and I am sure love you too much, if it be only for my sake, to wish you anything that might cross your interest or your happiness? Surely, Varina, *you have but a mean opinion of the joys that accompany a true, honourable, unlimited love* [...]. Is it possible that you cannot be yet insensible to the prospect of a rapture and delight so innocent and so exalted? *Trust me, Varina, Heaven has given us nothing else worth the loss of a thought*" (Williams 1963–65, I, 21–22; my emphasis). It is not surprising that, when Varina at last agreed to marry him in 1704, Swift hesitated, despite he claimed that she was the only one he would have ever wished to marry: his attentions were for Stella, whom he had met in 1700.

¹³ "Pardon that for a barren passion's sake, / Although I have come close on forty-nine, / I have no child, I have nothing but a book, / Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine" (Yeats 1990, 113).

in Yeats's lines, it does not spring from that proud affirmation of the supremacy of the intellect over the appetites which can be discerned in Swift's words. On the contrary, the poet cannot resist the call of the body anymore and looks at his life as a useless waste of energy, spent in pursuing a "sterile" passion (that for Maud Gonne). Much more so: while working on the play in 1930, he was still recovering from a serious illness; during his forced stay in bed, he had pondered over his own fragility, old age, and death, and, in particular, over sex: "I was ill and yet full of desire", he confessed to Olivia Shakespear (Archibald 201). The poet's sexual abstinence fed also his mental excitement, which allowed him to discern in Swift's letters and *Journal to Stella* (which he was eagerly reading) the ingredients of a sexual tragedy. Compelled to choose between body and spirit, then, Yeats decides for the body, while leaving his Swift to struggle against it.

Surprisingly enough, *The Words upon the Window-Pane* offers one more Yeatsian "mask": Vanessa represents everything that Yeats's Swift fights against. Indeed, she is a passionate body herself, stubborn, resolute, and unmanageable¹⁴. Donald Torchiana's interpretation of *The Words upon the Window-Pane* is relevant in this context, since the critic creates a connection between the girl's intractability on-stage and the horrible future both Yeats and his Swift foresee:

the play shows her to be as intractable as the new age Yeats faced and as dangerous as the future he thought Swift quailed before [...]. How very closely she must also resemble the new Ireland that Yeats would educate. And how attractive the beastly wench was to both men. (137–38)

As a symbol of both the eighteenth-century "whiggery" and the twentieth-century democratic – and ignorant – middle-class, Vanessa threatens intellectual freedom. Nonetheless, she is much more attractive because she defies any attempt to subjugate her.

In order to control her, Yeats's Swift de-humanizes and de-sexualizes the girl: "I taught you to think in every situation of life not as Hester Vanhomrigh would think in that situation, but as Cato or Brutus would, and now you behave

¹⁴ In delineating the features of his character, Yeats shows his deep knowledge of Vanessa's correspondence and personality. Thus, he endows his Vanessa with the expressive intensity, the passion and the directness to analyse the nature of her love for the Dean which her letters show. See, for example, one of her letters of 1720, where the avowal of her love is rendered syntactically in a mode closely resembling the modernist "stream of consciousness": "I can not comfort you but here declair that tis not in the power of art time or accident to lessen the unexpressible passion which I have for --- put my passion under the utmost restraint send me as distant from you as the earth will allow yet you can not banish those charming Idaea's which will ever stick by me whilst I have use of memory nor is the love I beare you only seated in my soul for there is not a single atome of my frame that is not blended with it therefor don't flatter your self that separation will ever change my sentiments" (Williams 1963–65, II, 363).

like some common slut with her ear against the keyhole [...]. When I rebuilt Rome in your mind it was as though I walked its streets" (*WWP* 609). Swift seems to have solved his inner conflict, his role of teacher allowing him to suppress his appetites through a hard intellectual effort to control his passionate nature ("My God, do you think it was easy?"), which is nevertheless frustrated by Vanessa's reaction and indeed by her mere presence. Hence, she declares her love and asks Swift to reciprocate it:

Was that all, Jonathan? Was I nothing but a painter's canvas? [...] I loved you from the first moment when you came to my mother's house and began to teach me. I thought it would be enough to look at you, to speak to you, to hear you speak. I followed you to Ireland five years ago and I can bear it no longer. It is not enough to look, to speak, to hear. Jonathan, Jonathan, I am a woman, the women Brutus and Cato loved were not different. (*WWP* 609)

In a last assault on Swift's "arrogant intellect", Vanessa asserts herself as a woman and as a "body" that cannot be rejected or ignored. The play reaches its highest moment of dramatic tension when – using Mrs Henderson as a "physical" medium – the two spirits touch. Guiding Swift's hands to her breasts as "white as the gambler's dice" and describing herself as "the common ivory dice", in opposition to "the dice of the intellect", Vanessa marks Swift's failure:

You said that you have strong passions; that is true, Jonathan – no man in Ireland is so passionate. That is why you need me, that is why you need children, nobody has greater need. You are growing old. An old man without children is very solitary. Even his friends, men as old as he, turn away, they turn towards the young, their children or their children's children. They cannot endure an old man like themselves. (*WWP* 610–11)

Here is the core of Swift's tragedy as Yeats conceives it: to go on living as an old man, grumpy and solitary.

The play-within-the-play ends with Mrs Henderson-Swift completely losing control over himself and beating upon the door in a useless attempt to get away from his enemy. While Mrs Henderson sinks to the floor exhausted and the action is suspended for a short time, the participants perceive a change, as if a "new influence" has entered the room, and Stella is gently introduced by Swift's repeating her name. Although she is not "physically" on the stage (in that she does not even speak or move through Mrs Henderson), her presence is indeed tangible in the effect the mere thought of her creates on Swift: his harshness disappears and the tone of his voice becomes calmer and sweeter: "Have I wronged you, beloved Stella? Are you unhappy? You have no children, you have no lover, you

have no husband. A cross and ageing man for friend – nothing but that” (*WWP* 612). As for Vanessa (who, however, eschews any attempt to idealize her), Swift de-sexualizes Stella, pointing out what she is *not* (a mother, a lover, a wife); nonetheless, his words betray his affection for the woman and sound like a real “declaration of love”, because, as Yeats states, Swift loved Stella, “though he called it by some other name, and it was platonic love” (Yeats 1962, 361). Swift’s name for his love is “violent friendship [...] much more lasting, and as much engaging, as violent love” (Williams 1963–65, III, 145), and as a friend Stella stayed by the Dean till her death, providing him with the emotional and intellectual stability he needed. However, the allusion to Stella’s loneliness reveals that, maybe, that kind of friendship (which has precluded her the joys of marriage and motherhood) is not enough to ensure *her* emotional stability. The doubt is soon dissipated by the remembrance of Stella’s words, which confirm the assumption of the vanity of earthly thing and exalt the spiritual virtues as more lasting than physical beauty:

with what scorn you speak of the common lot of women “with no endowments
but a face –

Before the thirtieth year of life
A maid forlorn or a hated wife”.

It is the thought of the great Crysostom who wrote in a famous passage that
women loved according to the soul, loved as saints can love, keep their beauty
longer, have greater happiness than women loved according to the flesh. (*WWP*
612–13)

Swift’s view of a different kind of love, allowing to “prolong” one’s own life on a different level, recalls that love the young Yeats defended when tying himself to Maud Gonne with a “spiritual marriage”. It is not difficult to discern an autobiographical hint in the reference to the eternal youth of women loved “platonically”, which recalls the Maud Gonne myth Yeats had created in his poems¹⁵. This view is further emphasized by Swift’s quoting a longer section of Stella’s poem, adding lines she had not written on the window-pane:

You taught how I might my youth prolong
By knowing what is right or wrong;
How from my heart to bring supplies
Of lustre to my fading eyes;
How soon a beauteous mind repairs

¹⁵ Lily Yeats thus comments on her brother’s marriage: “Lady Gregory and Maud both, I believe, are pleased. And why shouldn’t they be? They have both, so to speak, had their ‘whack’ – the latter a very considerable ‘whack’ of her own choosing, but she will live for ever in Willy’s verse, which is a fine crown and tribute to her beauty” (Jeffares 1970, 94 n.)

The loss of chang'd or falling hairs;
 How wit and virtue from within
 Can spread a smoothness o'er the skin.
 [...]
 Late dying may you cast a shred
 Of that rich mantle o'er my head;
 To bear with dignity my sorrow,
 One day alone, then die to-morrow. (*WWP* 613)¹⁶

In opposition to the disquieting and sensuous Vanessa, Stella proclaims her love for the Dean praising his moral nature and comparing it to a “mantle”, under which she wishes to shelter. The reference to the “fading eyes” is worth noticing, since it adds, I assume, one more autobiographical touch to the construction of the Swift myth by creating a connection between the Swift-Stella couple and the Yeats-Georgie Hyde-Lees one. Stella refers obviously to her own severe short-sightedness, about which Swift writes worried letters from England – showing his deep concern for his female friend’s health; the Dean himself suffered from eye problems due to old age, but always refused to wear glasses. Yeats may have associated the words with his own situation, as his sight had started to “fade” since the 1920s; Georgie had become “his eyes” through reading and writing for him. Indeed, Georgie was indispensable for the poet: not only had marriage rescued him from old age (in fact, she had prolonged his life by giving him two children), but Georgie had also proven an invaluable help in the creation of Yeats’s pseudo-philosophic system with her experiments in automatic writing, thus freeing him from the stall of poetic sterility. One may rightly affirm that Georgie embodies the centre of Yeats’s spiritual stability in a way which comes very close to what Stella was for Swift; so, the poet always returned to his wife, even when his passionate nature compelled him to look for sexual and sensual relief with other women. Just like the “Dane”, the Irish popular “double” of the St. Patrick’s Dean, whom, however, the poet dismisses in his mythization throughout the play, Yeats needed sex in order to enhance his spiritual energy and to assert himself both as a man and as a poet; his joyful acceptance of whatever concerns the body tallies with his desire to fully enjoy “children’s gratitude or woman’s love” (1990, 289), in an utmost attempt to overcome loneliness.

It is on an image of extreme loneliness that the play-within-the-play ends. Swift’s wish to die peacefully, comforted by Stella’s presence (“You will close my eyes, Stella. O, you will live long after me, dear Stella, for you are still a young woman, but you will close my eyes”, *WWP* 613), is destined to be thwarted: Stella will die long before him, leaving him old, mad, and alone, just as Vanessa had

¹⁶ For Stella’s long poem see: Williams 1966, II, 738.

predicted. The séance thus ends a failure and the participants – after giving some money to the medium – leave the room¹⁷; all but Corbet, who still tarries, trying to grasp from Mrs Henderson (whom he considers “an accomplished actress and a scholar”, *WWP* 614) the ultimate validation of his theories on Swift: “Was Swift mad? Or was the intellect itself that was mad?” (*WWP* 615). Mrs Henderson’s answer dismantles Corbet’s self-confidence. Not only does she acknowledge her complete ignorance about the identity of the spirits who possessed her: her power to bridge the natural and the supernatural worlds also allows her to see a painful aspect of Swift’s tragic existence:

I saw him very clearly as I woke up. His clothes were dirty, his face covered with boils. Some disease had made one of his eyes swell up, it stood out from his face like a hen’s egg. (*WWP* 616)

What the medium has seen goes well beyond the image of the morally upright man Corbet exalts, or the handsome and arrogant intellectual Stella and Vanessa loved. She gets a glimpse of the “dirty old man” Swift had become just a few years before his death, when his body was progressively degenerating and his “madness” – a pure consequence of Ménière’s disease complicated by some other typical senile ailment – was wearing away his brain; in addition, Stella’s death had deprived him of the comfort he had always longed for. Yeats plays with the ordinary chronological sequence of events, setting three different moments in Swift’s life on the same level: 1723, when he last met Vanessa; 30 November, 1721, his birthday and the occasion of Stella’s poem; and the period between 1742 and 1745, the Dean’s painful last years. Such superimposition of different temporal plans coheres with the overall strategy of the play, not only since it displays – in Yeats’s view – the dynamics of the metaphysical world, where the spirits “change all in a moment, as their thought changes” (*WWP* 616). The composite figure of the Dean coming out of it culminates in the most lacerating image of desperation which can be probably found in Yeats’s work and maybe the most overwhelming representation of the Swift myth. As Katharine Worth aptly points out, the closing sentences of *The Words upon the Window-Pane* offer “one of the most thrilling moments in Yeats’s theatre” (1993, 152). Through a Mrs Henderson left alone on the stage, busy making herself a cup of tea, Swift’s voice resonates for the last time, much more terrible because unexpected:

¹⁷ It is worth noticing that only one of the guests, Abraham Johnson – a preacher who practices “among the poor and ignorant” – accompanies the payment with words which are perfectly in tune with the dramatic tension Swift’s presence had created: “I shall pray for you tonight” (*WWP* 614). The choice of the character’s surname is relevant, since it creates a further connection with Swift’s world through the characters themselves, “Johnson” being Stella’s real surname.

Five great Ministers that were my friends are gone, ten great Ministers that were my friends are gone. I have not fingers enough to count the great ministers that were my friends and that are gone [...]. Perish the day on which I was born! (*WWP* 616–17)

By eliminating any other intermediary between his Swift and the audience (all but the necessary Mrs Henderson), Yeats enacts a “suppression of history” (McCormack 365), that is the suppression of the realism which gives historical coherence to the play, in order to show the validity of spiritism and to allow his audience to get an immediate glimpse of his character’s tragedy. The curtain falls on the quotation from *Job* 3, Swift is supposed to have loved repeating on his birthdays (Archibald 197), which, in Yeats’s interpretation, expresses the burden of the Dean’s loneliness and frustration and renders the idea of his “tragic life”.

In the play’s ending resides the peculiarity, and, perhaps, the genius of Yeats’s process of mythization. By using the Dean as a catalyst for his own anxieties as well as for his political ideas – thus, making him both a mask and an “anti-self” – the poet pays his homage to Swift. He accepts the Dean’s suffering as he accepts his status of “victim”¹⁸ and makes his piercing pain an essential feature of his “heroism”.

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¹⁸ Thus the poet gives a detailed account of his view of the Dean as a victim of his age in a letter to Mario Rossi (1933): “[Swift’s] absorption in the useful (the contemporary decline of common sense), all that made him write *The Tale of a Tub*, compelled his nature to become coarse. The man who ignores the poetry of sex, let us say, finds the bare facts written up on the walls of a privy, or himself is compelled to write them there. But all this seems to me of his time, his mere inheritance. When a [man] of Swift’s sort is born into such dryness, is he not in the Catholic sense of the word its victim [...]. Is not Swift the human soul in that dryness, is not that his tragedy and his genius? Perhaps every historical phase may have its victim – its poisoned rat in a hole” (Archibald 204).

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Emanuela Zirzotti

**Wizyta z zaświatów: o przedstawieniach Swifta w dramacie
William Butlera Yeatsa *The Words upon the Window-Pane***

(Streszczenie)

W artykule podjęta została próba analizy dramatu W.B. Yeatsa *The Words upon the Window Pane* (1930), w którym irlandzki pisarz i poeta prezentuje własną interpretację postaci Jonathana Swifta oraz relacji z dwoma najważniejszymi towarzyszami jego życia. Autorka przedstawia dziekana katedry Św. Patryka w Dublinie jako figurę literacką, ukształtowaną na potrzeby tego dramatu przez Yeatsa. Za pośrednictwem tak wymyślonej maski, czy też alter ego, Yeats oddaje własne doświadczenie starości oraz twórczego i osobistego niespełnienia. Zarówno postać Swifta, jak i Yeatsa wpisane zostają w rozważania na temat cielesnej i duchowej ascezy oraz powiązane z problematyką seksualności,

cielesności i pożądania. Autorka stawia tezę, iż właśnie ta sztuka stanowi punkt zwrotny w późnej twórczości Yeatsa, w której szczególną uwagę poświęca się doświadczeniu nadprzyrodzonemu oraz sposobom ukazywania motywów zaczerpniętych z irlandzkiej tradycji literackiej za pośrednictwem realistycznej formy nawiązującej do pisarstwa Ibsena.

KEY WORDS: William Butler Yeats; Jonathan Swift; Irish drama

Biogram

Emanuela Zirzotti jest zatrudniona w ramach grantu badawczego w Katedrze Komparatystyki na Uniwersytecie Sapienza w Rzymie. Prowadzi badania nad twórczością W.B. Yeatsa, Jamesa Joyce'a i Patricka Kavanagha. Jest również autorką przekładów z literatury irlandzkiej na język włoski. Opublikowała monografię poświęconą obecności greckich i łacińskich wpływów w poezji Seamus Heaney (*Incontrando l'antichità. Seamus Heaney e i classici greci e latini*, Aracne, 2014).