

WARTON LECTURE

‘Now Shall I Make My Soul’: Approaching Death in Yeats’s Life and Work

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IT IS A DAUNTING VENTURE to give the Warton Lecture on English Poetry when one is actually an Irish historian. But the founder, Mrs Frida Mond, wanted Warton to be commemorated as the ‘first *historian* of English poetry’, which of course he was—as well as Professor of Poetry at Oxford (like his father), a notable commentator on Spenser and Milton, and a much-derided Poet Laureate. Further, he was at one point elected Camden Professor of History at Oxford. My more substantial rationale must be that I am Yeats’s biographer as well as a historian and I want to consider work and life, in a way that biographers dangerously do—while remembering throughout that Yeats’s creative writing is not autobiography, even if his autobiography is often creative writing. My subject is in fact *death* and work, death being a perhaps peculiarly Irish subject. Lady Morgan remarked in *The Wild Irish Girl*, published two hundred years ago, ‘With respect to the attendant ceremonies of death, I know of no country which the Irish at present resemble but the modern Greeks’.¹ Her fictional narrator put this similarity down to their shared sense of the immediacy of another world. The resemblance has been noted by other commentaries on Irish funerary culture, one of which is actually called

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¹ Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl: a national tale*, ed. Claire Connolly and Stephen Copley (London, 2000), pp. 178–9.

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Talking to the Dead;² both in traditional Irish folklore, and in the tradition of Irish supernatural writing, the veil between the living and the dead is often presented as a very insubstantial matter indeed.

Yeats is in this very Irish. He famously wrote to Olivia Shakespear in 1927 that only two subjects could be of the least interest to a serious and studious mind, sex and the dead.³ Addressing such a remark to one's long-ago first lover, as both of you contemplate old age, may have a special appropriateness, but he certainly lived up to it. For Yeats, his preoccupation with death was by no means a gloomy predilection: one of my themes will be the way that he uses death as an affirmation of life. 'We begin to live', he famously wrote, 'when we have conceived life as tragedy.'⁴ Sometimes he sees death, and its attendant excitements, as a more engrossing, and a more serious business, than the everyday world: even, *pace* his remark to Olivia, than sex. When he went to see Villiers de l'Isle Adam's symbolist play *Axel*, as a very young man, one phrase from it resounded in his head afterwards: 'As for living, our servants will do that for us.' This alluring prospect is presented, when read in context, as part of a suggested suicide pact, which takes the form of a seduction—a seduction into the virginal grave rather than the consummated bed. It is not a *liebestod* in the classic sense, but a kind of avoidance. And this too had resonances for the youthful—and sexually evasive—Yeats.⁵

Several critics have noted this death-preoccupation, though there are surprisingly few detailed treatments of it.⁶ The way that critics approach Yeats and death often says as much about them as about him. Hugh Kenner went so far as to claim that Yeats wrote three 'deaths' into his creative life, as part of a deliberate freeing of his imagination, but also as a way of dictating the shape in which his work would be received: first, in producing his *Collected Works* in 1908, when aged only 43, as a way of

² Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran, *Talking to the Dead: a study of the Irish funeary tradition* (Amsterdam, 1988); see also Fiona Mackintosh, *Dying Acts: death in ancient Greek and modern Irish tragic drama* (Cork, 1994).

³ *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats* (Oxford University Press, InteLex Electronic edn., 2002), Accession no. 5034. Also in Allan Wade (ed.), *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1954), p. 730.

⁴ *Autobiographies* (London, 1955), p. 189.

⁵ For Yeats and *Axel* see my *W. B. Yeats, A Life, I: The Apprentice Mage, 1865–1914* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 139–41.

⁶ Distinguished exceptions are Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: elegy, self-elegy and the sublime* (London, 1990), Seamus Heaney, 'Joy or Night: last things in the poetry of W. B. Yeats and Philip Larkin' in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London, 1995), pp. 146–63 and T. R. Henn, 'The Property of the Dead', in *Last Essays* (Gerrards Cross, 1976), pp. 221–39.

liberating himself for a departure into new style; second, in *The Tower*, where he declared it was time for him to make his soul, and nominated his heirs; and thirdly, in his *Last Poems*. The scheme fits with Kenner's preoccupation with Yeats as a maker of books and self-canoniser, though I think there are problems here too.⁷ Seamus Deane has rather censoriously seen Yeats's preoccupation with death as a way of distinguishing himself from the common mob.⁸ Several others have applied to Yeats the Freudian interpretation of the creative instinct as a flight from the fear of death;⁹ Harold Bloom, in his endlessly influential *Anxiety of Influence*, generalises this insight: 'Every poet begins (however "unconsciously") by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do.'¹⁰ But I think this is not quite right for Yeats, for whom death's 'necessity' was an *enabling* realisation. I should like to connect this to his sense of religion, and of supernaturalism, to the idea of 'late style', recently intriguingly defined by Edward Said in some of his own last writings, and to Yeats's own gathering sense of 'making his soul' as his end neared.

The idea of death as opening a door, which he approaches 'Dreading and hoping all', comes from a short poem he placed second in his collection *The Winding Stair*: called, appositely, 'Death', it reflects all these themes.

Nor dread nor hope attend
 A dying animal;
 A man awaits his end
 Dreading and hoping all;
 Many times he died,
 Many times rose again.
 A great man in his pride
 Confronting murderous men
 Casts derision upon
 Supersession of breath;
 He knows death to the bone—
 Man has created death.¹¹

⁷ Hugh Kenner, 'The Three Deaths of Yeats' in *Yeats: an annual of critical and textual studies*, 5 (1987), 87–92. Also see the Introduction to *W. B. Yeats, Last Poems: manuscript materials*, ed. James Pethica (Ithaca, 1997), especially pp. xxiii–xxx.

⁸ *Celtic Revivals: essays in modern Irish literature 1880–1980* (London, 1985), pp. 41–4.

⁹ See Joseph Hassett, *Yeats and the Poetics of Hate* (Dublin, 1986), p. 68.

¹⁰ *The Anxiety of Influence: a theory of poetry* (Oxford, 1973), p. 10. See Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, pp. 9–13 for an astute general treatment of the theme.

¹¹ Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (eds.), *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (2nd edn., New York, 1966), p. 476.

Unlike the ‘dying animal’ (a phrase which also occurs in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’), this suggests man’s—or Yeats’s—ability to arrange a posthumous existence for himself, by dictating the shape of his life from beyond the grave, as he effectively would do in *Last Poems*. His post-mortem energy is astounding and continues to produce some strange special effects. One of the oddest books written about him is apparently constructed around what Yeats would have done, or thought, or felt, during the Second World War, which actually broke out eight months after his death. Thus he is endowed with an active after-life (and incidentally convicted, more or less, as a committed Nazi).¹² This peculiar project, however off-beam in other directions, bears eccentric witness to the ability of the poet, somehow, to survive death.

It is tempting, as Jahan Ramazani has done, to identify very many of Yeats’s poems as forms of elegy. The death-images come up from the very beginning. He seems sometimes to be afflicted by the delusion called ‘Cotard’s Syndrome’, a *délire des négations* where the sufferer thinks that he has died and become a ghost. If we are to trust Yeats’s memories of his youth, he was preoccupied by death, dreamt of it, fantasised it, was surrounded by it; he was even, with his sallow colouring and jet black hair, christened ‘King Death’ by his schoolmates. More often noted are the images of death in his early poetry, from the very beginning in ‘Time and the Witch Vivien’ through to the poems to Maud Gonne and Olivia Shakespear in the 1890s. An early poem to Gonne fantasised that she died while abroad in a strange land, and was nailed into her coffin; he thoughtfully sent it to her in France, where she was in fact perfectly well, but recovering from an ‘illness’ which was probably a pregnancy. She found this kind of solicitude very funny. Still, the titles of the poems in his first collections show a decided death-fixation.¹³ Another poem of this period was titled ‘He Wishes That His Beloved Were Dead’. Frivolously, this might be seen as a reflection of the uncomfortable fact that, as Yeats himself put it on another occasion, ‘There is always something in our enemy that we like and something in our sweet-heart that we dislike.’¹⁴ But more profoundly, this is in a tradition very much of its time—the personae of Yeats’s love-poems of the 1890s suggest Pelleas and Melisande or Tristan and Isolde, or indeed Axel and Sara rather than the more robust *alter egos* whom he would later choose. For these images, death is a central part of

¹² W. J. Mc Cormack, *Blood Kindred: W. B. Yeats, the life, the death, the politics* (London, 2005).

¹³ As pointed out by Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, pp. 19–20.

¹⁴ W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies*, ed. Warwick Gould and Deirdre Toomey (London, 2005), p. 51.

their love. He reports with satisfaction in *The Celtic Twilight*: 'It is said that no-one that has a song made about them will ever live long'.¹⁵ Love-poems are proleptic epitaphs. Freud's belief that 'the aim of all life is death' is oddly close to Yeats's early linkage of love and death. 'All our lives long, as da Vinci says, we long, thinking it is but the moon that we long [for], for our destruction, and how, when we meet [it] in the shape of a most fair woman, can we do less than leave all others for her? Do we not seek our dissolution upon her lips?'¹⁶ 'Leaving all others' is not just abandonment here, and dissolution is not just the little death. It means embracing the void, and leaving the servants to get on with the messy business of living. Yeats would leave this phase behind him decisively (think of Crazy Jane); but many of the poems in his canonical collection of 1899, *The Wind Among the Reeds*, identify love with the sacrifice of death, embellished with a heavy-breathing Christological imagery which sometimes suggests Wilde or Simeon Solomon.

When the flaming lute-throated angelic door is wide;
 When an immortal passion breathes in mortal clay;
 Our hearts endure the scourge, the plaited thorns, the way
 Crowded with bitter faces, the wounds in palm and side,
 The vinegar-heavy sponge, the flowers by Kedron stream;
 We will bend down and loosen our hair over you,
 That it may drop faint perfume, and be heavy with dew,
 Lilies of death-pale hope, roses of passionate dream.¹⁷

Death and resurrection is not just a Christian framework. It is a recurrent theme in Fraser's *The Golden Bough*, a key book for Yeats, where death is often linked to rituals of power—a theme Yeats explored to ring-ing effect in 'Parnell's Funeral'. But the death-trope in the early poems is also coming more immediately from Yeats's immersion in the Young Ireland poets of the 1830s and 1840s, to whose work John and Ellen O'Leary had introduced him, notably Thomas Davis and James Clarence Mangan. Death keeps coming up in Davis's poetry: in the sense of dying for Ireland, in lamentations for the death of others, and finally in previsions of his own death, which he referred to as 'a very comfortable sort of phantasy and sweet dream'. His first published poem was called 'My Grave'. Mangan is even more preoccupied with spectral visions and the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17: Yeats related this to Raftery and Mary Hynes.

¹⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs: Autobiography—First Draft; Journal*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London, 1972), p. 88. This goes back to a much earlier invocation in 'The Tables of the Law': see *Mythologies* (2005), pp. 197, 416 (n. 20).

¹⁷ 'The Travail of Passion', *Variorum Poems*, p. 172.

morbid necessity of death: the presence of the pale companion is a necessary proof both of poetic credibility and nationalist commitment. Yeats's poetry of the 1890s is similarly nationalist in tone to these avatars. But there is a difference. When he writes perhaps his most fervent nationalist poem 'To Ireland in the Coming Times' (and places it as the *envoi* to his first collection), it is not about dying for Ireland. It is, in a sense, written from beyond the grave—not only in the sense that the poet is calling to the future, from a point when he will arguably be no more—but also in the sense that he is claiming a fusion between nationalism, poetic art (as specifically represented by Davis and Mangan), and the supernatural sphere. We must accept that this dimension matters for Yeats. The mysteries of magic are invoked as well as the sacred traditions. What is striking in 'To Ireland in the Coming Times' is its energetic forward drive—very different from the narcoleptic atmosphere of some of his other-worldly poems of the same period. What he is beginning to eradicate, even this early, is the sense of pathos which he would come to dislike in much Romantic poetry.

Still, several of Yeats's best-known poems are formal elegies, and much attention has been paid to his use of the elegy form—which is, in the work of some critics, interpreted with a reckless inclusiveness.¹⁸ The genesis of these elegies is very often closely linked to dislocations in his life, such as the slow decline of his old friend Mabel Beardsley from cancer. Yeats's visits to her bedside in Hampstead are the subject of his series 'On A Dying Lady', tactfully withheld from publication until she actually did finally die. Death here appears inconsistently—sometimes the 'Great Enemy', sometimes a parent calling a child in from a half-finished game. The death of Synge provoked a great prose elegy, and constant references in poems; the death of Robert Gregory brought forth an unambiguous instruction from his mother Augusta Gregory to write one, which took several stabs to get right. (Some of Yeats's elegies are, in fact, among his least successful published poems: 'In Memory of Alfred Pollexfen', and his first effort for Robert Gregory, 'Shepherd and Goatherd' are poems so constrained and forced that it is hard to read them without wincing.)

Yeats was also much inclined towards the anticipatory elegy.¹⁹ One of the strangest aspects of his relationship with Augusta Gregory was the way that, in his poetry, he 'aged' her before her time. As early as 1923, in

¹⁸ As in Helen Vendler, 'Four Elegies' in A. N. Jeffares (ed.), *Yeats, Sligo and Ireland: essays to mark the 21st Yeats International Summer School* (Gerrard's Cross, 1980), pp. 216–33.

¹⁹ Ramazani uses the phrase 'pre-mortem elegies': *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, p. 50.

his speech receiving the Nobel Prize at Stockholm, he described her, to her fury, as 'sinking into the infirmity of old age', and had to change it. In 1929, three years before her death, he wrote 'Coole Park, 1929', clearly anticipating her death and the death of the house; 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931' reads in a similar way. This may have been a function of his fear of her actual death; when it came, in May 1932, it caused a major creative block and he wrote no poetry for months.²⁰ But he did write a great prose elegy for her, which is one of his most moving compositions. In a sense, ever since those early poems imagining Maud Gonnet's death, he had been practising elegies; and though Gonnet would outlive him by many years, his chilling late poem 'A Bronze Head' is a last proleptic elegy to the other enduring female relationship founded in his youth. Jon Stallworthy calls it 'a poem about Maud Gonnet alive and dead and alive-in-death'.²¹ If Yeats is placing Gonnet at the entrance to the tomb, long before her time, he had been doing something like this ever since he met her.

Yeats's belief in supernaturalism was one of the ways that allowed death to be incorporated—even welcomed—into his work. This too is deeply woven into his background and early life. Fairies are, as Andrew Lang had established to his and many people's satisfaction, ghosts of the dead and Yeats's longstanding interest in them is linked to his belief in more abstruse and demanding theories of supernatural survival.²² I have written before of the attraction felt by Irish Protestants to supernaturalism and Philippe Ariès, the pioneer chronicler of death, has made the same observation about the Protestant subculture in France.²³ Yeats's attitude to formal religion is complex and in its way very Irish—particularly his feelings towards Catholicism (attraction, resistance, respect, repulsion, fascination). When seriously ill, he told his great friend Dorothy Wellesley, he tended to become Christian 'and that is abominable'; though she, sharp for her purposes, told him that several of his pronouncements about Purgatory and the journey of the soul would

²⁰ See my article 'Yeats and the Death of Lady Gregory' in *Irish University Review*, 34 no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2004) (a special issue on Lady Gregory, ed. Anne Fogarty), 109–21.

²¹ Jon Stallworthy, *Between the Lines: W. B. Yeats's poetry in the making* (Oxford, 1963), p. 221.

²² See Kathleen Raine, 'Hades Wrapped in Cloud' in George Mills Harper (ed.), *Yeats and the Occult* (London, 1975), especially pp. 86–107.

²³ See my Chatterton lecture 'Protestant Magic: W. B. Yeats and the Spell of Irish History', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 75 (1989), pp. 243–66 reprinted in my *Paddy and Mr Punch: connections in Irish and English history* (London, 1993), pp. 212–32; and Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York, 1982), p. 462.

'hurry us back into the great arms of the Roman Catholic Church'. ('His only retort was his splendid laugh.')²⁴ But having in his youth, as he himself said, a religious temperament but no religion, his ventures into the Order of the Golden Dawn and other occult involvements is not a surprise. And here too, death is a central part; indeed, a ritual death and resurrection was part of the initiation rites of the Order, which Yeats both underwent—at Clipstone Street, in January 1893—and conducted others through. The idea of death as a two-way door, through which one could pass and return if initiated to the necessary degree (like the mirrors in Cocteau's *Orphée*), would recur in his mind and his work (the liminal position of Cuchulain in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* is just one example).

Again, *The Golden Bough* is important here. The idea of death as a process, and quite a lengthy one, is central to the Greek dramatic imagination, and much of Yeats's work rediscovers it, from *The Wanderings of Oisín* and *The Celtic Twilight* through to *Purgatory*.²⁵ But it is, for him, not just a question of an aesthetically useful exercise or technique: it is a matter of belief. Supernatural belief and occult practice accompanied Yeats throughout his life, and any understanding of his work has to accept this. (It is why some critics remain so deaf to him.) He himself wrote about this in an essay—haunting, in every sense—called 'Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places'. This defends (among much else) his interest in attending seances. 'That is an absorbing drama, though if my readers begin to seek it they will spoil it, for its gravity and simplicity depend on all, or all but all, believing that the dead are near.'²⁶ He was writing this long essay in 1914–15, when sharing a cottage with Ezra Pound, and both poets were deep in the study of ghosts, especially in Japanese literature and the classics. Pound suggested a ringing phrase from the *Odyssey* (where Odysseus meets his mother in the Shades): 'The departing soul hovers about "as a dream"'. Though Yeats chose alternative Homeric lines, ghosts and dreams pervade not only Pound's 'Three Cantos' but Yeats's Swedenborg essay and the marvellous meditation, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, which followed it.²⁷ ('Ghosts and Dreams' was, in fact, the title of a controversial lecture Yeats gave on All Hallows Eve 1913 in Dublin and reprised in London the next year: in it he endorsed

²⁴ Dorothy Wellesley (ed.), *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (Oxford, 1940), p. 195.

²⁵ Mackintosh, *Dying Acts*, pp. 19 ff.

²⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London, 1962), pp. 30–1.

²⁷ See James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism* (Oxford, 1988), p. 245.

'spiritism' rather than telepathy or 'subliminal memory' as the origin of psychic manifestations.)²⁸ In his youth Yeats discovered—via Blake—the eighteenth-century seer Emanuel Swedenborg, who remained an inspiration (and may have influenced Yeats's later interest in Tantric sex). He also, with his image of simultaneous worlds, the sense of death moving all around us, and the divine union of angels, provided Yeats with a sense in which ghosts were very real presences, especially at times of dislocation.²⁹ This could be after a personal catharsis, as in 'The Cold Heaven':

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished, and left but memories that should be out of season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light. Ah! When the ghost begins to quicken,
Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
By the injustice of the skies for punishment?³⁰

Times of astrological conjunction, like Samhain, the Celtic festival that coincides with All Souls Night, preoccupied Yeats: the point when the boundaries dissolve between the Otherworld and this.³¹ But it is clear that historical crisis also thinned the membrane between the living and the dead. This is a powerful theme in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', and perhaps still more in 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen'. The idea inspired another Irish writer with a taste for the supernatural and a sense of history, Louis MacNeice, who conjures up an army of ghosts in 'Autumn Journal'. Elizabeth Bowen, would repeat exactly this theme in her novel about the London Blitz, *The Heat of the Day*, where the living

²⁸ Peter Kuch , "'Laying the Ghosts"?—W. B. Yeats's lecture on Ghosts and Dreams' in W. Gould (ed.), *Yeats Annual*, no. 5 (London, 1987), pp. 114–38.

²⁹ *Explorations*, pp. 32 ff. deals with Swedenborg; also see Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Why Mrs Blake Cried: William Blake and the sexual basis of spiritual vision* (London, 2006), especially chaps. 5, 6 and 9.

³⁰ *Variorum Poems*, p. 316. Heaney judges that 'The Cold Heaven' suggests that there is an overarching purpose to life, by its 'poetic action' as well as its content: 'Joy or Night', p. 149.

³¹ Paul Muldoon relates this concept to 'All Souls' Night', using James McKillop's commentary, in *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London, 2006), p. 13. For further Yeatsian references to Samhain, see *Mythologies* (2005), pp. 81–2, 141–2.

walking down the newly bombed streets rub shoulders with the recently dead. ‘Uncounted, [the dead] continued to move in shoals through the city day, pervading everything to be seen or heard or felt with their torn-off senses, drawing on this tomorrow they had expected—for death cannot be so sudden as all that.’³²

Yeats would have agreed: famously, when asked in the Senate during a particularly tactless speech to ‘leave the dead alone’, he indignantly replied ‘I would hate to leave the dead alone’. That was not what they were there for. And they were, of course, there. Ghosts inhabit his work with an odd persistence: whether lurching in unbidden like Robert Artisson in ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ or summoned with full ritual, like the presences in ‘All Souls Night’. His political poetry after the Rising also uses ghosts with dramatic immediacy, in ‘The Rose Tree’, the play *The Dreaming of the Bones*, and above all ‘Sixteen Dead Men’, where the dead ‘converse bone to bone’.

O but we talked at large before
The sixteen men were shot,
But who can talk of give and take,
What should be and what not
While those dead men are loitering there
To stir the boiling pot?

You say that we should still the land
Till Germany’s overcome;
But who is there to argue that
Now Pearse is deaf and dumb?
And is their logic to outweigh
MacDonagh’s bony thumb?

How could you dream they’d listen
That have an ear alone
For those new comrades they have found,
Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone,
Or meddle with our give and take
That converse bone to bone?³³

Later, in the 1930s, the ghost of Roger Casement would come beating at the door, like the Commendatore in ‘Don Giovanni’. Other late poems, like ‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’, obsessively call up the dead, and even interrogate them.

³² Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London, 1949), pp. 86–7.

³³ *Variorum Poems*, p. 395.

By the last decade of his life, death was a constant presence in Yeats's life; he had faced it down twice by 1930, and it would recurrently threaten him. And from this time too, we find a preoccupation with an ancient phrase, which opens the great closing section of 'The Tower': 'Now shall I make my soul'.³⁴ The phrase deserves some attention: Yeats had an affection for it and it has a peculiarly Irish provenance. Dineen's great Irish dictionary gives it as a usage of the word 'anam', soul: 'ag deanamh a anma, making his peace with God, preparing for eternity'. Yeats's relationship with God was chequered, but he had a strong sense of eternity. And for him 'making one's soul' had a parallel meaning: creating one's consciousness.

Now shall I make my soul,
 Compelling it to study
 In a learned school
 Till the wreck of body,
 Slow decay of blood,
 Testy delirium
 Or dull decrepitude,
 Or what worse evil come—
 The death of friends, or death
 Of every brilliant eye
 That made a catch in the breath—
 Seem but the clouds of the sky
 When the horizon fades;
 Or a bird's sleepy cry
 Among the deepening shades.³⁵

We will hear that bird's cry again.

As Yeats journeyed towards death he 'made his soul' in a very deliberate way. Those serious illnesses in 1924, 1927–8 and 1929–30 produced a very distinct creative reaction. As he noted himself, the experience brought on a sort of euphoria.³⁶ He finished *A Vision*, his extraordinary philosophy-cum-psychic handbook, while convalescing in Italy; he warmed himself into life in 1927 after very nearly dying at Rapallo by writing 'Byzantium' and finding a new inspiration in Jonathan Swift

³⁴ Thomas R. Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow: Yeats's dialogue with history* (2nd edn., Washington, DC, 1989), p. 202, interprets it as a reference to artistic creativity only, but the colloquial Irish usage is clearly central to Yeats's theme. See also A. N. Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1984), p. 117, glossing the poem 'Beggar to Beggar Cried', where the phrase also occurs.

³⁵ *Variorum Poems*, p. 416.

³⁶ Vividly expressed in a letter of 29 Nov. 1927 to Olivia Shakespear: Wade, *Letters*, pp. 732–3.

(whose ghost would take a starring role in one of Yeats's best plays about the continuance of life after death). Death and enlightenment had always been linked in his mind; long before, in *The Hour Glass*, the Wise Man proclaims

I can explain all now
Only when our hold on life is troubled,
Only in spiritual terror can the Truth
Come through the broken mind.³⁷

The insights conferred when approaching the end might be seen as consolation; but it should also be remembered that for Yeats, the end was not the end. Time and again, he had—so he thought—held in his hand the proofs of a continued existence after death. His searches in the rituals of the Golden Dawn, his communion with occultist circles in Paris, his determined pursuit of mediums, are all closely recorded in his own writings, often in the most matter-of-fact manner. In 1903 he encountered the psychologist, philosopher and psychic researcher William James in Boston; Yeats had been taken to see James by a young academic, Fritz Robinson, who wrote down his recollection much later.

Yeats withdrew with James to a table in a distant corner of the library, and they had a tete-a-tete which lasted throughout the call. As we left the house he said to me, 'Well, Robinson, this afternoon has been highly profitable. I have a magical formula which I have confided to the one man in the world who will be best able to use it.' [Robinson added:] I never heard of it again. I have sometimes regretted that I never asked James about it. But I had a feeling that I should be intruding on a solemn secret.³⁸

What had they talked about? It was their only meeting. There is no account of it in James's twelve-volume correspondence. But Yeats, in his notes on Augusta Gregory's *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*, did mention that he had discussed with James accessing the world of the dead (as in the celebrated time-travelling account, *An Adventure*) and the idea of intersections between individual and subliminal memory.³⁹ The Otherworld was a preoccupation of James's as much as of Yeats's:

³⁷ Russell K. Alspach and Catherine C. Alspach (eds.), *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1966), p. 625.

³⁸ F. N. Robinson to Frank Hatch, 2 May 1965, in the possession of the late Professor F. S. Stewart. See John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (eds.), *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats Volume III, 1901–1904* (Oxford, 1994), p. 509 for a useful note on Robinson and James.

³⁹ *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland, collected and arranged by Lady Gregory, with two essays and notes by W. B. Yeats* (London, 1920), p. 351; Anne Moberley and Eleanor Jourdain, *An Adventure* (London, 1911).

just at this time he was much absorbed in the reactions to Frederic Myers's *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*.⁴⁰ James was a more sceptical psychic researcher than Yeats, for whom the dead obligingly continued to come through at seances, including his father and his uncle George Pollexfen. In 1913, he owed to a medium the welcome news that his girlfriend Mabel Dickinson was not—as she claimed—pregnant. The psychic wireless-machine of David Wilson had briefly convinced Yeats in 1917 that he had found irrefutable proof of continued existence across the Styx. Above all, the voices mediated by his wife's automatic writing had brought wisdom from the land of the dead.⁴¹ Death was very clearly not the end. This could intersect with certain aspects of Christian belief. In the middle of an interminable philosophical correspondence with his friend Thomas Sturge Moore in 1928, he was capable of tartly remarking: 'By the bye, please don't quote your brother [G. E. Moore the philosopher] again till you have asked him this question: "How do you account for the fact that when the tomb of St Teresa was opened her body exuded miraculous oil and smelt of violets?"' If he cannot account for such primary facts he knows nothing.⁴² But the 'primary facts' and wisdoms that came from mediums, the Golden Dawn, and Swedenborg were more convincing still. And this continued throughout his life (just as his membership of, and preoccupation with, the Golden Dawn lasted much longer than used to be thought).

From the early 1930s, his sense of death was intensified by the deaths of so many friends and collaborators—George Moore, AE, above all Augusta Gregory. Significantly, his evocation of her in *Dramatis Personae*, where he compares her integrity and nobility of spirit to George Moore's frivolity and malice, draws upon a powerful imagery of ghosts, and incidentally starts with a generalisation very relevant to my subject:

A writer must die every day he lives, be reborn as it is said in the Burial Service, an incorruptible self, that self opposite of all that he has named 'himself'.

⁴⁰ See Ignas K. Skrupselis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (eds.), *The Correspondence of William James* (Charlottesville, VA, 1992–2004), vol. 10 (1902–5), p. 326.

⁴¹ See my *Apprentice Mage*, pp 488–9; my *W. B. Yeats, A Life: II, The Arch-Poet, 1915–1939* (Oxford, 2003), pp 80–1, and chap. 3; also Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 124. Yeats's report on David Wilson's psychic wireless-machine is published in Christopher Blake's edited text in 'Ghosts in the Machine: Yeats and the Metallic Homunculus with transcripts of reports by W. B. Yeats and Edmund Dulac' (*Yeats's Collaborations: Yeats Annual No. 15: a Special Number 2002*, pp. 69–101.

⁴² Ursula Bridge (ed.), *W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: their correspondence 1901–1937* (London, 1953), pp. 121–2. This preoccupation recurs in poems such as 'Oil and Blood' and 'Vacillation', *Variorum Poems*, 483, 499.

George Moore, dreading the annihilation of an impersonal bleak realism, used life like a medieval ghost making a body for itself out of the drifting dust and vapour; and have I not sung in describing guests at Coole—‘There one that ruffled in a manly pose, For all his timid heart’- that one myself? Synge was a sick man picturing energy, a doomed man picturing gaiety; Lady Gregory, in her life much artifice, in her nature much pride, was born to see the glory of the world in a peasant mirror.⁴³

By the time he wrote this great reflection on the way that artistic genius meets its other self, the writer’s block imposed by Gregory’s death had been cleared and the poems he was producing were astonishing in many ways. They reflect the way that an artist and his Daimon are halves of the same whole, a thought which also lies behind his judgement of Gregory, and recalls the philosophies of Swedenborg and Blake.

Yeats’s late poems also raise the question I mentioned earlier: the issue penetratingly addressed by Edward Said as ‘late style’. In this last book, Said advances some fascinating ideas about how an artist towards the end of his or her life often moves into a radical phase. Ibsen is instanced, in a way that can only make one think of Yeats; Ibsen’s final works, Said says,

tear apart the career and the artist’s craft and reopen the questions of meaning, success and progress that the artist’s late period is supposed to move beyond. Far from resolution, then, Ibsen’s last plays suggest an angry and disturbed artist for whom the medium of drama provides an occasion to stir up more anxiety, tamper irrevocably with the possibility of closure, and leave the audience more perplexed and unsettled than before.⁴⁴

In his consideration of late style Said never mentions Yeats, which seems an oversight, though we should realise that this is unfinished work—dictated, in fact, in a sense from beyond the grave. (Another surprising omission is Philip Roth, whose own late style is such a compelling departure, and whose recent books are studded with references to Yeats.) But one reason for the omission of these and other writers is that what Said in fact wanted to write about is music. Here too, the assonance with Yeats is irresistible, especially when Said quotes Adorno on Beethoven’s late works—the deliberate waywardness, the discontinuities, the dislocated modernity (if one can use the word) of the last piano sonatas, for instance. As Adorno puts it, ‘The maturity of the late works does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are . . . not round, but furrowed,

⁴³ *Autobiographies*, p. 457.

⁴⁴ Edward Said, *On Late Style: music and literature against the grain* (London, 2006), p. 7.

even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation.⁴⁵ The analysis is arresting: partly because of another effect of those late sonatas. Alfred Brendel, one of the supreme interpreters of these works, said once that the achievement of the 'Hammerklavier' sonata was the quality of the silence it created when the last note had died away. That deliberate sense of creating the receptive silence that follows is inseparable from Yeats's very late works: works written, in fact, on his deathbed.

Yeats's deathbed was a very active and indeed public place. Woody Allen once said that he wasn't afraid of dying, he just didn't want to be there when it happened. Yeats would have profoundly disagreed with this—as also with a rather different thinker, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who declared that death was 'not an event of life, not something lived through'.⁴⁶ Yeats's death was very much lived through, recorded, written about in parallel by himself, controlled. Long before he had written about the death of Synge: 'It was as though we and the things about us died away from him, and not he from us.'⁴⁷ He ensured the same kind of continuing presence for himself.

It has been established that the inspiration (or at least jumping-off point) for Yeats's own epitaph-poem, 'Under Ben Bulbin', was an essay on Rilke's ideas about death. These revolved around finality and annihilation—wood consumed by flame—and anger at the process. Yeats found this unsympathetic, as he would probably have found Dylan Thomas's injunction to 'rage against the dying of the light', or the unrelenting grimness of Larkin's 'Aubade'—which Seamus Heaney has brilliantly set in counterpoint to Yeats's 'The Man and the Echo'.⁴⁸ Paul Muldoon has recently written about the 'end of the poem' but the ends of poets provide an engrossing subject in themselves—especially for those whose work constantly anticipates it, like Shelley, or compulsively joke about it, like Emily Dickinson. Biographers should approach the deaths of their subjects with great care: Hermione Lee has written a brilliantly admonitory essay on the assumptions and manipulations that the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Quoted by Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, p. 1.

⁴⁷ *Autobiographies*, p. 511.

⁴⁸ Heaney, 'Joy or Night', pp. 153–63. For Yeats and Rilke see Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley, 15 Aug. [1938], *Collected Letters* (InteLex version), Accession no. 7790: partly in Wade (ed.), *Letters*, p. 913. See also Jon Stallworthy, *Vision and Revision in Yeats's Last Poems* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 148–9.

death-bed scene involves.⁴⁹ But sometimes poets' deaths seem almost unbearably apposite to the circumstances that inspired them in life: Robert Lowell's heart-attack in the back of a taxi at Kennedy Airport, returning to his first wife Elizabeth Hardwick, the suicides of Berryman and Plath, the 'torn-off' endings of Randall Jarrell, under a bus, or Theodore Roethke in a swimming-pool, or Chatterton as imagined by Watts. There are also the deaths in far-flung places of Byron, Rimbaud and Brooke, oddly conflating exoticism, idealism and mundaneness (rather like their poetry). Yeats's death also took place far from home, on the French Riviera. But he made it the site of an exploration back into his beginnings, writing in those final weeks a series of works which interrogated the origins of his inspiration, right back to Ireland in the heroic age. One thinks again of that quotation from Homer which Pound gave to Yeats, 'the departing soul hovers like a dream'; and we remember, as Yeats himself had put it in a key passage of *A Vision*, that leaving life involves a re-visioning of all that has made us what we are.

In the *Dreaming Back* the *Spirit* is compelled to live over and over again the events that had most moved it; there can be nothing new, but the old events stand forth in a light which is dim or bright according to the intensity of the passion that accompanied them. They occur in the order of their intensity or luminosity, the more intense first, and the painful are commonly the more intense, and repeat themselves again and again. In the *Return*, upon the other hand, the *Spirit* must live through past events in the order of their occurrence, because it is compelled by the *Celestial Body* to trace every passionate event to its cause until all are related and understood, turned into knowledge, made a part of itself. All that keeps the *Spirit* from its freedom may be compared to a knot that has to be untied or to an oscillation or a violence that must end in a return to equilibrium.⁵⁰

The notion of re-living the key moments of one's life in reverse order at the moment of death has been exploited by countless biographers since Lytton Strachey's flowery conclusion to *Queen Victoria*.⁵¹ More profoundly, these ideas about the spirit slowly detaching itself from life had been addressed in several of Yeats's works—obviously *Purgatory*, but perhaps more relevantly *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, a play written when he was himself being torn between his competing relationships with three women. Here he places his *alter ego* Cuchulain in a liminal state between

⁴⁹ 'How to End It All' in *Body Parts: essays on life-writing* (London, 2005), pp. 200–18.

⁵⁰ W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* [1937 version] (London, 1962), p. 226.

⁵¹ Hermione Lee, 'How to End It All', pp. 207–9, deals with maladroit versions by John Halperin (for Jane Austen), D. J. Taylor (for George Orwell) and Peter Ackroyd (for Charles Dickens).

the next world and this one, called back into life by a woman's sacrifice—death and resurrection once again. And on his deathbed he chose to return to Cuchulain and finish his story. In his play 'The Death of Cuchulain' and his nearly-last poem, 'Cuchulain Comforted', both completed at Roquebrune in the last weeks of his life, he explored the hero's leavetaking of life and anticipated his reception into the Shades. To make Cuchulain more emphatically his *alter ego*, he ages him (the Cuchulain of mythology dies young) and presents his death as the necessary fate for a man out of joint with his times, and the decadent culture which has invaded the world. Much in this short play (especially its jarring prologue) echoes the uncomfortable reflections which Yeats has just committed to *On the Boiler*. *The Death of Cuchulain*, in fact, presents a classic 'late style' conundrum: critics like Vendler, Kermode and others disagree radically on how to evaluate it.⁵² (His wife, a sensible woman and a good critic, just thought it 'a bad play'.) But for our purposes, the circumstances of the play's conception are what matter. Long before, in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, he had written of heroes who claim their deaths as essentially their own, to be lived (or died) on their own terms, and had written—with eerie prescience—that perhaps the deaths of such heroes 'will, it may be, haunt me on my own death-bed'.⁵³ Twenty years after writing this, he made it come true.

The way he approached this is of a piece with his belief in tragic joy and the need to meet death with dignity rather than excessive emotion, much less sentimentality. (This was connected with his firm decision not to have a large-scale ceremonial leavetaking in Dublin: 'I write my poems for the Irish people but I am damned if I will have them at my funeral'.)⁵⁴ Tragedy, Augusta Gregory had told him long before, must be a joy to the man who dies. Yeats himself thought it must break down the dykes that separate man from man.⁵⁵

⁵² Frank Kermode considered it 'perhaps Yeats's finest play': *Romantic Images*, 2nd edn. (London, 1961), p. 82. On the other hand, Helen Vendler finds it 'disconnected and jerky', the end-product of Yeats's effort to make plays for a 'coterie theatre', and incapable of achieving 'tragic joy': *Yeats's 'Vision' and the Later Plays* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 236–46.

⁵³ *Explorations*, 416

⁵⁴ To Dorothy Wellesley, 7 Sept. 1938 Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin; see *Collected Letters* (Intellex), Accession no. 7300.

⁵⁵ 'The heroes of Shakespeare convey to us through their looks, or through the metaphorical patterns of their speech, the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death, "She should have died hereafter", "Of many million kisses, the poor last", "Absent thee from felicity awhile"; they have become God or Mother Goddess, the pelican, "My baby at my breast", but all must be cold; no actress has ever sobbed when she played Cleopatra, even the

But there is, of course, another dimension to all this. As he grew older, the dead were all around him; he wrote in the Introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1937 ‘we find it more and more difficult to separate ourselves from the dead when we commit them to the grave’.⁵⁶ The Swedenborgian idea of love beyond the grave, and the intercourse of angels, added to the interest, and is dealt with in Yeats’s poem ‘Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Ailinn’.⁵⁷ (Sex and the dead, again.) It is important to remember that Yeats’s death was the death of someone who believed in psychic survival. The deaths of believers in spiritualism are not, apparently, all approached in the same way. Yeats’s old friend and fellow-occultist Florence Farr, approaching death from cancer twenty-odd years before, had written to him at great length of Hindu beliefs about the journey of the soul out of life, and the possibilities of liberation at the moment of death; but as her own death approached she wrote jauntily to her other old lover, GBS, that her own awaited liberation had got rid of ‘my secret horror of death, I mean of the death-bed scene—I have been through with it once or twice & it’s nothing at all’.⁵⁸ (Yeats wrote of her death in ‘All Souls Night’.) The death of another prominent psychic researcher, Arthur Conan Doyle, was considered by his spiritualist family as an incident of very little significance; at a great memorial service in the Albert Hall, his wife and children sat smiling on the platform beside an (apparently) empty chair which they were quite convinced held his liberated spirit. Rosamond Lehmann spent her last days astrally travelling from her bed, convinced (inaccurately) that she was going to live for an extremely long time. Yeats himself had written ‘It is even possible that being is only possessed completely by the dead’,⁵⁹ and the notion that death was actually a non-event is perhaps the crudest reduction of spiritualism.

shallow brain of a producer has never thought of such a thing. The supernatural is present, cold winds blow across our hands, upon our faces, the thermometer falls, and because of that cold we are hated by journalists and groundlings. There may be in this or that detail painful tragedy, but in the whole work none. I have heard Lady Gregory say, rejecting some play in the modern manner sent to the Abbey Theatre, “Tragedy must be a joy to the man who dies”. See also *Essays and Introductions* (London, 1961), pp. 522, 241.

⁵⁶ *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935, Chosen by W. B. Yeats* (Oxford, 1936), p. xx.

⁵⁷ See also *Explorations*, p. 34, for Swedenborg’s version of the post-death state.

⁵⁸ Josephine Johnson (ed.), ‘Florence Farr’s Letters to W. B. Yeats 1912–1917’ in Deirdre Toomey (ed.), *Yeats and Women: Yeats Annual No. 9, a special number* (London, 1992), pp. 241–2, 249.

⁵⁹ *Essays and Introductions*, p. 226.

But Yeats's own approach was not of this kind. Leaving life would be a process of considered detachment, as with the ancient Greeks.⁶⁰ His withdrawal to the Riviera, where he arranged to be surrounded by the women closest to him and to 'make his soul', is a moving and appropriate final act in the great drama of his life. William James once wrote that people who had devoted themselves to psychic research, like Myers and Hodgson, grew happier, stronger in personality, and handsomer as they approached death.⁶¹ Yeats himself, in an unpublished draft for *A Vision*, wrote that Asiatic philosophy combined with psychic research prepared people to 'face death without flinching, perhaps even with joy'.⁶² But at the very end the way he choreographed it did not depend upon the insights of the mediums and mystics whom he had pursued in Boston suburbs or up Soho staircases and defended in essays such as 'Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places'. Ideas of reincarnation, which were much tangled up in the arcane theories of after-life shared with him by Farr and others, are notable by their absence. In fact, though Yeats's anticipatory epitaph for himself, 'Under Ben Bulben', contains some implications about reincarnation, it is notable that this reassuring theory features very little in his elegies and his writings about death—with the possible exception of 'News for the Delphic Oracle'. But an aspect of 'Under Ben Bulben' that has not been remarked is that it returns to and reworks that early invocation of Irish nationalism, 'To Ireland in the Coming Times'—in metre, language and theme.

As the end approached, the presence invoked in poems like 'Cuchulain Comforted' is Dante (also chosen as a guide into the Shades by poets as diverse as Pound, Eliot, Lowell and Heaney). Until late in life Yeats invoked Dante carefully, but sparingly, and mostly in his prose.⁶³ Pound, however, had been influential here as elsewhere. In the end, Yeats's

⁶⁰ Mackintosh, *Dying Acts*, pp. 20 ff.

⁶¹ *Memories and Studies* (London, 1911), p. 194. Cf 'The Apparitions', *Variorum Poems*, p. 624.

When a man grows old his joy
Grows more deep day after day,
His empty heart is full at length,
But he has need of all that strength
Because of the increasing night
That opens her mystery and fright.
*Fifteen apparitions have I seen;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger.*

⁶² Hazard Adams, *Blake and Yeats: the contrary vision* (Ithaca, 1955), p. 302.

⁶³ See Stephen Paul Ellis, 'Yeats and Dante', *Comparative Literature*, 33, no. 1 (Winter 1981), 1–17.

own continued existence was to be dictated by his poetic masters and his own creative bedrock of inspiration. This is the recurring message of 'Last Poems'. By this I do not mean everything comprehensively gathered into the section of *Collected Poems* called by that name, but the nineteen literally last poems which he himself saw as an entity and whose arrangement preoccupied him on his deathbed. It is a remarkable list: 'Under Ben Bulben', 'Three Songs to One Burden', 'The Black Tower', 'Cuchulain Comforted', 'Three Marching Songs', 'In Tara's Halls', 'The Statues', 'News for the Delphic Oracle', 'Long-legged Fly', 'A Bronze Head', 'A Stick of Incense', 'Hound Voice', 'John Kinsella's Lament for Mrs Mary Moore', 'High Talk', 'The Apparitions', 'A Nativity', 'Man and the Echo', 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', and 'Politics'. To which can be added the poems from *On the Boiler*: 'Why Should Old Men Not Be Mad?', 'Crazy Jane on the Mountain' and 'Avalon'.

These works have been marvellously clarified by the work of scholars such as Jon Stallworthy and James Pethica. Their order, partially dictated by Yeats in perhaps one of his last conscious acts before slipping into a coma, has been much argued about, as has their varying states of accomplishment. Not all are as achieved and successful as 'Long-legged Fly' or 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'. It is the affirmation of their message that counts, and the eerie way that they arc back to his early inspirations, and even ballad forms, while simultaneously asserting that edge of dislocation, that bracing jolt, that deceptive simplicity of language, which Adorno identifies with Beethoven's late style, or Said with Ibsen's. As in Yeats's first work, inspired by Celtic mythology, horsemen ride out of the sides of mountains, revelation is at hand, and the dead are all around us—as 'buried men' thrust back into life. The old inspiration of Hindu mysticism recurs too, eclectically combined with Zen Buddhism. Above all, the prophecy of 'The Tower' is coming true. At the end of *The Death of Cuchulain*, Cuchulain's wife Emer pauses at the end of her mourning dance and there are heard a few faint bird cries: a sign that her hero-husband has passed into the shades. The poem 'Cuchulain Comforted' follows him there and we leave the hero joining the world of shrouds in Dante's wood of the dead: among a company of outcasts who 'had changed their throats and had the throats of birds'. He died days after completing the poem.

Yeats's death is in its own way an extraordinary achievement, for which some at least of his obituarists could not forgive him; several of his death notices implicitly censure him for not dying in a state of abject repentance. Much of the material of the late poems was deemed offensive,

as was his own supernaturalist faith. While this attitude moderated in Ireland by the time of his reburial in 1948, some of his admirers continued to fret: W. H. Auden's marvellous elegy fixed in print the idea of Yeats's genius competing with his 'silliness'. It could be argued, however, that Yeats's esoteric beliefs equipped him both for life and for death in unexpected ways; and his method of 'making his soul' had assonances not only with the Christianity of his childhood, but with the classical virtues which inform his work throughout. This is echoed in the great late poem 'The Man and the Echo'. It is set in the Sligo landscape of his youth, with a man (called in the first draft 'Poet') 'shouting a secret to the stone' in a hidden chasm on Knocknarea. It might be claimed as Yeats's quintessential death-poem and the concluding section runs:

While man can still his body keep
 Wine or love drug him to sleep,
 Waking he thanks the Lord that he
 Has body and its stupidity,
 But body gone he sleeps no more
 And till his intellect grows sure
 That all's arranged in one clear view
 Pursues the thoughts that I pursue,
 Then stands in judgement on his soul,
 And, all work done, dismisses all
 Out of intellect and sight
 And sinks at last into the night.

Echo. Into the night.

Most poets would end it there. But in a characteristic 'late style' swerve Yeats gives to the man's voice a closing note of concreteness which establishes what he called elsewhere 'the desolation of reality'. The man replies to the Echo:

O Rocky Voice
 Shall we in that great night rejoice?
 What do we know but that we face
 One another in this place?
 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.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *Variorum Poems*, pp. 632–3.

That audacious note of uncertainty makes this a masterpiece of Yeats's late style. The same tone comes through a fragment from a letter he wrote to his friend Elizabeth Pelham about three weeks before he died.

I know for certain my time will not be long. I have put away everything that can be put away that I may speak what I have to speak, & I find my expression is a part of 'study'. In two or three weeks—I am now idle that I may rest after writing much verse—I will begin to write my most fundamental thoughts & the arrangement of thought which I am convinced will complete my studies. I am happy and I think full of energy, of an energy I had despaired of. It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put all into a phrase I say, 'man can embody truth but he cannot know it.' I must embody it in the completion of my life. The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the song of sixpence.⁶⁵

It is beautifully of a piece with all he was writing as he headed into the shades. The 'Song of Sixpence' also features in an abandoned epilogue to 'The Death of Cuchulain'. (The note reads: 'Four and Twenty black-birds—the pie—the sixpence—the ry [sic] & the pocket—nothing to do with each other—an untrue story and yet immortal.')⁶⁶ We long to know more, but the letter quoted above is a fragment—which has only survived because its recipient quoted it in a letter to Yeats's widow. Elizabeth Pelham was one of Yeats's great confidantes in his last years; endearingly eccentric to the end, she died in a crowded London flat in 1975. 'She kept everything', her nephew told me, 'tons of letters and papers. They filled a whole skip in Mecklenburgh Square.' The biographer winces in agony at the thought of the rest of *that* letter, and so much else, blowing around the streets of Bloomsbury. But Yeats would have felt it hardly mattered: creatively speaking, he had made his soul. Long before his death, prophetic as ever, he remarked 'If you don't express yourself you walk after you're dead. The great thing is to go empty to the grave.'⁶⁷

⁶⁵ 4 Jan. 1939: Wade, *Letters*, p. 922.

⁶⁶ W. B. Yeats, *The Death of Cuchulain: Manuscript Materials, including the author's final text*, edited by Phillip L. Marcus (Ithaca, 1982), pp. 8–9.

⁶⁷ An interview with Louise Morgan in June 1931: Louise Morgan, *Writers at Work* (London, 1931), pp. 1–9, and E. H. Mikhail, *Interviews and Recollections* (London, 1977), 2. 199–204 at p. 203. My thanks to Warwick Gould for pointing out that this remark can be read as a gloss on 'Crazy Jane and the Journeyman' (*Variorum Poems*, p. 511).