

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

Two Political Poems: Marvell's 'Horatian Ode' and Yeats's 'No Second Troy'

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THEY SAY ONE CANNOT PROVE A NEGATIVE, but I am as sure as I am sure of anything that Yeats did not have Marvell in mind when he wrote 'No Second Troy'. It follows that I shall be making no claims of causal connection or influence today. I shall merely compare one poem with another.

In 'No Second Troy' the poet contemplates the woman he was to love all his life, from a necessary distance. Within the poem we are never told the name of the lady but everyone knew in 1910 that it was Maud Gonne, the fiery political activist who turned down Yeats's proposal of marriage. In the poem the a-political heart is transfixed when it encounters the fact that the loved woman is herself political. Thus—at least for the poet—the root of the matter may appear to be pre-political: Yeats detests violence, loves Maud Gonne, but Maud Gonne is violent.

Why should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
Had they but courage equal to desire?
What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire,

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With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
 That is not natural in an age like this,
 Being high and solitary and most stern?
 Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
 Was there another Troy for her to burn?

The first words can seem for a moment merely petulant: a transparent *occupatio* in which the overt meaning, 'I have no cause to censure you for . . .' immediately implies the reverse, 'I have cause to censure you for . . .' Ben Jonson's 'To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr William Shakespeare' begins with the words, 'To draw no envy (Shakespeare) on thy name, / Am I thus ample to thy book, and fame', and instantly the damage is done. The low-minded reader is made by the very disclaiming of envy to scent its presence, and is soon rewarded by the famous twitch of hostility at line 31, 'small Latin, and less Greek'. But Yeats knows what he is doing. The transparent *occupatio* is deliberately planted, its self-destruction is foreseen and the petulant complaint is then appropriated by a stronger emotion.

The process is, I take it, as follows. First, 'Why should I blame her for filling my days with misery?' So far, indeed, we have a question which virtually invites a sceptical response. What better reason could a person have for resentment? But the succeeding suggestion, which follows swiftly, is that self-pity is an ignoble emotion and of course we pull back at once; we do not wish to be trapped into endorsing it. Then, as the sentence moves from the personal plane to the political—'taught to ignorant men most violent ways, / Or hurled the little streets upon the great'—we begin to see that the poet is not after all playing a trivial game; the lady has made him wretched and, meanwhile, has stirred up revolution, poor against rich. He may mean neither more nor less than what he says. If the personal misery seems a puny thing, the sentence implies, then let it be so; something larger is in any case afoot here. We should think not of Jonson but of the 'Beloved Author' he addressed, Shakespeare. The sonnet, 'They that have power to hurt' has disorientated generations of readers by seeming at first to promise an easy irony, a guying of the coldly virtuous figure through mock-praise, but then insisting that, although the speaker is himself at the opposite pole of humanity, the praise offered is real praise; the emotionally messy, loving poet finds it in his heart to praise the very unresponsiveness of the beautiful young man, his passionless, preservative virtue. In this sonnet like is not addressing like. If a socialist praises a conservative for his conservatism we rightly suspect irony at once. If a drunk praises a total abstainer for his asceticism we are less sure. With Yeats's

poem as with Shakespeare's it is of the essence of the work that it does not present the marriage of true minds, is not about the easy love of congenial spirits. The poet must, so to speak, establish his own unsympathising character before he allows the lady her proper transcendence. That is why, when the reference shifts to politics, the tone is tetchily personal, half-comprehending, indeed (we must use the word again) unsympathetic. Listen to it.

. . . or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
Had they but courage equal to desire?

I have called the persona of this poem a-political. The commonplace rejoinder would be to say, 'There is no such thing as an a-political statement; those who think they are a-political are usually implicitly supporting the status quo; they are conservatives even if they do not know it.' In general I do not care for this line. It is rooted, augustly enough (I suspect) in Scripture: 'He that is not with me is against me' (Matthew, 12: 30). It will always seem cogent to those who feel they have solved the riddle of the universe, who are sure that they are right. No doubt if Calvin were to travel to our century in a time machine and were to read *The Duck-breeder's Weekly* he would say, 'This is a godless publication; commit it to the flames.' *The Duck-breeder's Weekly* is indeed godless, but that somehow is not its most important characteristic, for the greater part of human kind. Yet here the argument makes obvious sense. Maud Gonne and Yeats both loved Ireland but her love was programmatic, future-orientated while his was backward-looking, enamoured of custom and ceremony. We may add that Yeats obviously got a further kick out of the (to him) exhilarating rebarbateness of reactionary, hierarchical views; strutting, he thought, beat walking any day. The poet's contempt for the ignorant poor is there on the page, with no attempt to palliate or conceal it.

The same contempt blazes in a harsh two-line poem:

Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man:
'Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone.'

The crushing effect of the measured, spondaic prophecy—coming from the great revolutionary himself!—is to turn the 'cheering man' of the preceding line into a suddenly arrested grotesque—like something in Picasso's *Guernica*. The same tic of contempt shows in the line, 'Had they but courage equal to desire'. Yeats pulls off a curious technical feat here. He is simultaneously saying what he really thinks and is speaking 'in

character'; 'These are the things people like me will always say' (this is something Evelyn Waugh was to do all his life). Meanwhile the lines are there to be at once blotted out, by the lady herself, and, insofar as she is the Unanswerable Positive of the poem, the conservative suggestion must be negated, which is as much as to say, rendered, after all, a-political. Hence the appropriateness of an element of primitive defamiliarisation in 'Hurled the little streets upon the great'. It is as if the sophisticated political meaning, 'Caused the lower classes to rise in violent struggle with the upper classes' is engulfed by a child's surrealism, houses fighting houses.

The next lines show how there is indeed no irony in the poet's carefully public decision not to resent her treatment of him. Yeats alone of twentieth-century poets could unleash, when he chose, authentic, over-mastering high style, which carries all before it. He does so here.

What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary and most stern?

This is intended to transcend all that has gone before, and it does just that. The poet's own, fainter thoughts (including a world, one might say, of hesitant but real political difference) are erased by an intuition of splendour which is really identical with love. It is not so much that criticism dies away before the image of the lady herself, the very *disclaiming* of the right to criticize dies, becomes irrelevant to the contemplated wonder ('Who am I, that dare dispute with thee?'). The lady is not of our age, not of our kind perhaps; she is like fire from the sky, wholly non-negotiable.

In this she resembles Marvell's Cromwell, who enters the 'Horatian Ode' in the following manner:

The forward youth that would appear
Must now forsake his muses dear,
Nor in the shadows sing
His numbers languishing.
'Tis time to leave the books in dust,
And oil th'unusèd armour's rust:
Removing from the wall
The corslet of the hall.
So restless Cromwell could not cease
In the inglorious arts of peace,
But through adventurous war
Urgèd his active star.
And, like the three-forked lightning, first

Breaking the clouds where it was nursed,
 Did thorough his own side
 His fiery way divide.
 (For 'tis all one to courage high
 The emulous or enemy:
 And with such to inclose
 Is more than to oppose.)
 Then burning through the air he went,
 And palaces and temples rent:
 And Caesar's head at last
 Did through his laurels blast.
 'Tis madness to resist or blame
 The force of angry heaven's flame:
 And, if we would speak true,
 Much to the man is due,
 Who, from his private gardens, where
 He liv'd reservèd and austere,
 As if his highest plot
 To plant the bergamot,
 Could by industrious valour climb
 To ruin the great work of time,
 And cast the kingdoms old
 Into another mould.
 Though justice against fate complain,
 And plead the ancient rights in vain:
 But those do hold or break
 As men are strong or weak.
 Nature, that hateth emptiness,
 Allows of penetration less:
 And therefore must make room
 When greater spirits come. (1–44)

It may be said, 'Yeats was opposed to Maud Gonne's revolutionary politics, but Marvell approved of Cromwellian Republicanism.' But of course that is far too simple. In 1650, the date of the 'Horatian Ode', Marvell was still uncertain—still friends with royalists like Lovelace. It has often been pointed out that Marvell's attack on the Republican Tom May belongs to this same year, 1650.

It seems to me that all attempts to provide a complete political rationale for this poem miss the point. The poem is all about reasons breaking upon, erased by, a peculiar sort of fact. Cromwell's appearance is not so much an intervention in history as an abolition of history. The centrepiece of Marvell's poem is the execution of Charles I. Immanuel Kant, looking back on this execution, shuddered at the thought of persons 'adopting violence as a deliberate principle and exalting it above the most

sacred canons of right'. 'This, like an abyss which engulfs everything beyond hope of return', he continues, 'is an act of suicide by the state, and it would seem to be a crime for which there can be no atonement.'¹ Kant is here concerned with the concept of a political right (compare Marvell's phrase, 'Plead the ancient rights in vain'). It will be said that Kant differs from Marvell in that, where the poet is in a kind of suspense, Kant's condemnation of the revolution is absolute (he speaks elsewhere, curiously telescoping the 'Caesaricide to new Caesar' movement we shall find later in Marvell's poem, of Cromwell's attempt to establish a '*despotic republic*'—my italics).² Yet we may also sense in the word, 'abyss', a hint of the exciting Sublime, of that which cannot be comprehended or enclosed by the mind. Certainly when he thought about the French Revolution Kant hesitated and—a little desperately—contended that legally speaking it was not really a revolution at all, because Louis voluntarily surrendered his power to the Third Estate.³ More radically, he sought to argue *both* that popular rebellion can in the nature of things never be legally justified *and* that, once such a rebellion has occurred, attempts to restore the old order are likewise unjustifiable. One senses that, behind the finely ordered reasoning, Kant's mind—even Kant's mind—has begun to boggle.

For Marvell, given the inescapable fact that Cromwell has exploded or dissolved history, all our judicial and ethical discourse, grounded in that history, has been rendered irrelevant. Critics often speak of the 'balance' and 'impartiality' of the 'Horatian Ode', but these words are wrong insofar as they suggest an achieved rational conspectus. The poet does not know what to think, because thought itself has been undermined by a kind of super-fact.

Marvell's verse is even subtler than Yeats's. In 'No Second Troy' there is a faint sense that the opening words, for all that they are uttered by the poet *in propria persona*, should really be in inverted commas; it is, as I have suggested, the feeling that not only is the poet saying this but, at the same time, this is the sort of thing that such people say. The opening words of the 'Horatian Ode', 'The forward youth that would appear', rather more distinctly, are not in Marvell's own voice. There is a suggestion of *oratio obliqua*: this is the sort of thing knowing fellows in Westminster or Whitehall are saying: 'The young man who means to get on

¹ *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Part ii, 'Public Right', Section 1, 'Political Right', §49; in *Immanuel Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1991), p. 146.

² *The Contest of Faculties (Der Streit den Facultäten, 1798)*, x, in Reiss, op. cit., p. 188 n.

³ See Reiss, op. cit., Introduction, pp. 30–1.

can't mess about with—hrrrmph!—poetry, these days.' It would indeed be too much to say that these lines are burlesque; rather, the faint, mannered obliquity implies *nervousness*. As the sentence modulates, however, into the second line, with the 'muses dear' (not a clubman's phrase) the poet becomes audible, *in propria persona*. But, for the reader who has read other poems by Marvell, there is a disturbing sense that everything is running backwards. The muses are to be ditched. The poet of 'The Garden', the celebrant of retreat from the rat-race to the grassy orchard, here shows us a hero moving in the opposite direction, passing from his private garden, from the cultivation of pear trees ('to plant the bergamot') to a kind of super-publicity.

Of course the intelligence, since it is Marvell's, puts up a tremendous fight before it confesses defeat at the hands of this mere phenomenon. One can catch an intellectual pre-echo of what was to become the great question between Marxist and non-Marxist historians. Do great men initiate historical change or are such 'great men' always the predictable product of underlying economic or social forces? The fact that Cromwell was 'nursed' by his own political 'side' suggests the second line, but then his violence to that nurturing constituency ('Did thorough his own side / His fiery way divide') returns us to the former hypothesis, the initiating individual. 'Active star', that is to say, 'driving star', implies a determinative context but the full phrase, 'urgèd his active star', destabilises that very notion. This man is spurring on that which is bearing *him* into the future.

A sort of climax of abnegation is reached at 25–6:

'Tis madness to resist or blame
The force of angry heaven's flame . . .

Cromwell is here, simply, a trans-ethical, trans-rational force. 'Heaven', interestingly, carries no hint of Christian endorsement. This is a Roman sky (Caesar has been mentioned two lines before). As in 'No Second Troy', wonder silences the chattering intellect.

Yet both poets have more to say. In this 'more', however, they differ profoundly. Yeats loves his Helen-figure but Marvell does not love his Caesaricidal republican Caesar. Yeats marvels at the lady's beauty. To have beauty effacing political discourse is precisely, it might be said, to privilege the aesthetic over the socio-ethical, and—again it will be said—this also is implicitly political, a deep conservatism. Consider the terms of the poet's praise: 'nobleness', 'high and solitary'. In another writer the application of such epithets to a professed radical might have been done

as a joke, but I believe Yeats to have been innocent of any such intention. A few years ago a certain left wing Shakespearian editor publicly rejoiced when an establishment scholar described his work as ‘vulgar’. Consistently enough he felt that what was censure in the enemy camp might well be reconstrued as praise on his side of the fence. But Yeats is not playing this game. Rather, at the moment when deliberate argument lays down its arms, the poet’s natural temper finds expression.

Alexander Pope wrote, of his father,

Convict a Papist He, and I a Poet
(*The Second Epistle of the Second Book of Horace, Imitated*, 67)

If Yeats were to borrow this cadence and apply it to Maud Gonne, the line would become,

A politician she, and I a poet.

Being what he is, what could he do but praise her thus? The aristocratic language flows naturally. Hazlitt famously wrote in his essay on Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*,

The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle. . . . It rises above the ordinary standard of sufferings and crimes. . . . It shows its head turreted, crowned and crested. . . . Kings, priests, nobles are its trainbearers. . . . Poetry is right royal. It puts the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right. A lion hunting a flock of sheep . . . is a more poetical object than his prey.⁴

In ‘No Second Troy’ the exemption from ordinary standards, which seemed at first to promise a degree of respect for the lady’s radicalism, is immediately fused with the Romantic transcendentalising imagination, with the result that this fervent leveller is praised for, of all things, her nobility, for her towering elevation above the common herd.

I have said that there is no deliberate irony in this. Yeats is not covertly insulting the lady by inverting her deepest beliefs in the terms of his celebration. The praise is real praise. But there is, famously, a sting in the tail of this poem. The last, blood-freezing line reads,

Was there another Troy for her to burn?

Earlier I set this poem beside Shakespeare’s ‘They that have power to hurt’. We may now press a little harder on that comparison. Shakespeare’s

⁴ ‘Coriolanus’, in *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*, 5th edn. (1854), p. 73.

sonnet also moves from painful conscientious praise of that in the loved person which is most opposite to the nature of the poet to an abrupt, suddenly hostile warning at the end:

Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

What is the meaning of Yeats's last line? Has real political hostility erupted after all in open opposition—'What else could we expect? You are a destroyer of cities'? To say this is to be half-right. Only half-right, because the sudden intuition of utter destructiveness does not cancel the other intuition of trans-ethical splendour. The final explosive effect of the poem is due to the very simultaneity of these two intuitions. The poet's love is not quenched but is instead ignited by the thought of violence. It blazes strangely, almost uncontrollably. The fires which 'burnt the topless towers of Ilium'⁵ (Marlowe's words are feeding the poem) flare in the imagination of the twentieth-century poet. The towering altitude of Homer's, Marlowe's Troy is behind the imagery of height applied to Maud Gonne and at the end of the poem returns to exert its imperious power. Whatever else it was, the burning of Troy was a *great* thing. I referred earlier to Yeats's command of something which the twentieth century has chosen, in general, to set aside, real high style. This lady is destructive, yes, but she is Helen of Troy.

I believe that Helen is present in this poem long before Troy is named. The word 'blame' in the first line has, it might be said, a Shakespearian resonance: 'I cannot blame thee, for my love thou usest; / But yet be blamed, if thou thyself deceivest' (Sonnet 40). Yet this same word, 'blame', also carries, with an uncanny precision, the central critical burden of the Greek story of Helen. She was ambiguous from the start and the question which exercised the Greeks through hundreds of years was, 'Should we blame her?' The groundwork is laid by the poet of the *Iliad*. Homer's Helen consistently insults herself as if anxious to say the harsh thing before someone else says it. In the third book Helen and Priam gaze together at the Greeks, parading in the distance, and Priam asks, 'Who is that huge, royal figure, taller by a head than the rest?' Helen tells him that it is the king, Agamemnon, brother-in-law 'to me, ah shameless me' (iii. 180). In book vi the Trojan hero Hector goes to the tent of Paris and finds him idly toying with his beautiful bow. Helen is sitting near by. Hector rebukes Paris for his inaction and Paris promises that he

⁵ *Doctor Faustus*, 1604 version, V. i. 92.

will overtake him anon on the way to the battle. Hector receives this in silence. The atmosphere, we may say, is tense. Helen then speaks. She says that it would have been better if she had been swept away by a great wind before the war began; she calls herself ‘dog’, ‘trouble-maker’, ‘horrible’ (vi. 344–8). At iii. 411–12 she says that the Trojan women will blame her in time to come. Still earlier, at iii. 164, the old king Priam says to her, ‘For my part I don’t blame you; I blame the gods.’ Here the Greek is marvelously light; the fleeting monosyllable μοι, ‘to me’, which I rendered heavily as ‘for my part’, is enough to betray the fact that others are probably very ready to blame Helen. The old men on the tower concede that anyone who has once seen Helen will no longer wonder at the loss of life she has caused (iii. 156–7). Where Priam could not bring himself to blame Helen, they, too old for love or war perhaps, say instead that you cannot blame the men who kill for her. Here, as in ‘No Second Troy’, criticism is, in a manner, silenced by mere beauty. But the old men, with an earthiness which is altogether Homeric and not at all Yeatsian, add that, all the same, it would be better if she were sent home on the first available ship.

Centuries after Homer Helen was given a set rhetorical *apologia*, a speech of self-defence, in *The Trojan Women* of Euripides (914–65) a speech swiftly countered by the majestic censure of Hecuba (979–1032). In the fifth century BC the sophist Gorgias wrote his paradoxical ‘Praise of Helen’, which he himself sums up with the words, ‘So I, by speech, have removed infamy from a woman.’ There is a faint shiver in this sentence, a sense that, with Helen, the possibility of a mysterious, dangerous priority of rhetoric to moral norms is glimpsed (though at the very end Gorgias says, ‘I was joking of course’).

In the sixth century Stesichorus wrote the lines which have come down to us as ‘the Palinode’ or ‘Recantation on Helen’ (they may originally have formed part of a longer poem):

οὐκ ἔστ’ ἔτυμος λόγος οὗτος
οὐδ’ ἔβας ἐν νηυσὶν εὐσέλμοις
οὐδ’ ἴκεο πέργαμα Τροίας⁶

It’s not true, that story—you never went on the well-benched ships, you never came to the towers of Troy.

It was said in antiquity that Helen blinded Stesichorus because he spoke ill of her and in response he wrote his recantation. His act of restitution

⁶ Text is that of D. L. Page (ed.), *Poetae Melici Graeci* (Oxford, 1962), p. 104.

was to provide her with an alibi; it was a phantom which went to Troy; the real Helen was in Egypt all the time. Clearly in Stesichorus's mind the Homeric story operates to the discredit of Helen. Similarly, the main thrust of Gorgias's formal argument (or pseudo-argument) is the opposite of Yeats's. We should not blame Helen, he says, because she was a weak victim; we ought really to blame the man who carried her off by force. But Gorgias also says that she may have been persuaded by the magical, drug-like power of words (just as his own words will work their own illicit magic and turn a bad woman into a good one). Now something closer to the thought of Yeats may begin to revive in our minds: the idea that it is the poetry of Homer, the splendour of the *Iliad* which really enforces our acceptance of Helen. It is not perhaps so very strange that to late-born readers the lines of Stesichorus, 'You never went to Troy' could be read as a put-down of the heroic Helen rather than as a rescuing of her reputation. So strong was the presumption for Benjamin Jowett that he inverted the entire sense of the lines in his great Victorian translation of the dialogues of Plato (Plato quotes the Stesichorean palinode at *Phaedrus*, 243A). Jowett wrote, 'I told a lie when I said thou never embarkedst on the swift ships or wentest to the walls of Troy'.⁷ The coin has flipped over. It is no longer the Homeric story which is false; instead it is the later, Egyptian story which is to be withdrawn with apologies. In Yeats's poem the identification with the Homeric Helen exalts the lady. It is in no sense a put-down. The high style does its proper work; *magnificat*, it magnifies. This is a poem which ends not with a whimper but a bang.

Yeats was not a learned man. He liked to say, rather grandly, that he had forgotten his Hebrew, but it rather looks as if the only Hebrew he had to forget—all he had ever learned—was the alphabet and a few Hebrew words.⁸ Gilbert Murray might have told him about Stesichorus's palinode but I do not suppose he would have known anything about Gorgias. All that he needed was already there in Homer. Most of Yeats's references to

⁷ *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1875), ii. 119. Perhaps the harshest of all the judgements on Helen is that of Tertullian, for whom her sexual sins, her appearance in—ugh!—poetry and the fact that she was exalted by certain (Gnostic?) heretics are all alike damning: 'O hapless Helen, what a hard fate is yours between the poets and the heretics, who have blackened your fame, sometimes with adultery, sometimes with prostitution: only her rescue from Troy is a more glorious affair than her rescue from the brothel. There were a thousand ships to withdraw her from Troy; a thousand pence were probably more than enough to withdraw her from the stews,' *De Anima*, xxxiv, *The Writings of Quintus Sept. Flor. Tertullianus*, trans. S. Thelwall and P. Holmes, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1869–70), ii. 493.

⁸ See Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (1969 reprint of the edn. of 1949), p. 3.

Homer are fairly blank; he is the great poet of old time and that is that. But there is one letter, to Lady Gregory, in which Yeats speaks of the captive women who seemingly wept for Patroclus but really wept each for her own sorrow, because he was ‘ever kind’.⁹ This looks like a fairly precise memory of *Iliad*, xix. 300–2.

Marvell is more devious. I have said that a climax of abnegation is reached with

’Tis madness to resist or blame
The force of angry heaven’s flame

but the poet is quick to reduce the incipient grandeur. In the lines which follow he drops suddenly—almost comically—into a confidential, personal, almost chatty register:

And, if we would speak true,
Much to the man is due . . .

‘It makes no sense even to think of opposing or criticizing this great force’ is suddenly followed by ‘And we have to admit that this chap is quite an achiever . . .’

Meanwhile Marvell has chosen to express the transcendence of his subject not through the glorifying language of ancient myth but by reference to what we know today as Physics. The faint questionings of the conventional political moralist are countered by a conjuring not of Homer but of a bleaker, essentially inhumane order of causation:

Nature, that hateth emptiness,
Allows of penetration less:
And therefore must make room
When greater spirits come.

John M. Wallace ponderously observes that in these lines Marvell originates a new theory: ‘Marvell’s use of the law of impenetrability is, as far as I am aware, original with him. . . . The law states that no two *bodies* can occupy the same space at the same time, but Marvell . . . has referred it to spirits.’¹⁰ Surely, as Blake said of Reynolds, this man was hired to depress

⁹ Dec. 12, 1900, in *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, general editor John Kelly, vol. ii (Oxford, 1997), p. 603. Kelly cites T. A. Buckley’s 1851 Bohn translation of the *Iliad* but the phrase ‘ever kind’ suggests that Yeats may have used not Buckley but the version by Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf, and Ernest Myers (1882). Buckley, translating xix. 300, has ‘ever gentle’; Lang, Leaf, and Myers have ‘ever kind’.

¹⁰ ‘Marvell’s Horatian Ode’, *PMLA*, 77 (1962), 33–45, 36.

art. Marvell may be awestruck by the phenomenon, 'Cromwell', but a trace of wit or humour remains. The sentence may draw on science but it hardly offers itself as a serious contribution to seventeenth-century Physics. 'Nature abhors a vacuum' is a chestnut of received scholastic Physics by this date. Galileo in his *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences* calls it 'Quella decantata repugnanza che ha la natura all'ammettere il vacuo',¹¹ ('That much rehearsed repugnancy of nature to the admission of a vacuum'). Rabelais jokes about it in the fifth chapter of *Gargantua*, where the phrase is taken to mean 'We must have a drink.' Nevertheless the effect of Marvell's sentence is to pitch us, in a slightly dazed condition, into the world of Physics. The Physics into which we are pitched is not a place of cosmic Newtonian certainty. It too can instantly assume the form of a frustrating antinomy: on the one hand, nature cannot allow a vacuum but, meanwhile, on the other hand nature is even *less* able to allow two objects to occupy the same space at the same time. The paradox remains faintly asymmetrical. We are not given the exactly balanced contradiction of 'the irresistible force meeting the immovable object'. The difficulty is severe enough, however, to sustain the growing note of bewilderment. Then, as the poet develops the idea of penetration, the phrase 'greater spirits' introduces a further disorientation, on top of the physical *aporia*. The pace is warm. We are uncertain whether these are the quasi-physical spirits ('animal spirits') which were beginning to interest physiologists and philosophers in the seventeenth century or whether the word connotes an immaterial active essence. The important thing about this sentence (which is at once measured in tone and vertiginous in its effect) is that we should not know which. Marvell is not propounding a new theory. He is dismantling all the theories, removing the comfort of customary explanations.

Both these poems present, within a political field of reference, a transcending figure. Both associate that figure, in a manner which is more or less problematic, with the idea of the heroic, with Troy, with Caesar. The great difference between them is that by the end of Yeats's poem it has become conclusively plain that, do what she will, the transcending figure will always possess absolute splendour, while at the end of Marvell's poem the very greatness of Cromwell leaves us with no certainties at all. Yeats is appalled by beauty, Marvell by faceless fact. But in Yeats the horror (horror, that is in the old Latin sense—hair rising on the back of

¹¹ Giornata prima, in *Opere di Galileo Galilei*, 20 vols. (Florence, 1890–1909), viii. 59.

one's neck) is one with his love for the lady. In Marvell the shock issues in nothing stronger than acceptance—an acceptance that does not know what it is accepting. The republican Caesaricide becomes in his turn a Caesar; the *volta* is elegantly executed but there is no quietus in the thought. Cromwell's envisaged Caesarian progression—'A Caesar, he, ere long to Gaul' (101)—is a matter of uncertain futurity. The sentence continues, 'To Italy an Hannibal', subjecting the hero to a historiographical metamorphosis even before his imagined feats are achieved. In this new projected world, in which history itself has been undone, all is fluid. There is a momentary agoraphobia—perhaps we may say, given the earlier lines on 'emptiness', a new species of *horror vacui*. But at the very end the verse once more contracts to a familiar tone:

The same arts that did gain
A power, must it maintain.

One feels for a moment that the poet has recovered a tone of comfortable shrewdness, is in command, after all, of the situation. But of course at the same time the sentence is full of practical anxiety. What will this man actually do, in power? The air of recovered control is wafer-thin. Therefore, while the final effect of 'No Second Troy' is exaltation of the spirit, that of 'An Horatian Ode' is desolation.

Yeats was the serious aesthete of the twentieth century. He is not the kind of aesthete who says, with a giggle, that morality is nonsense and elegance is all. He found, I would suggest empirically, that intuitions of splendour cut across his existence with a strength which ethical discourse could not compass. In 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death' the airman did not do what he did for legal, moral or political reasons, nor was it for public reputation:

A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds

The unsparing acknowledgement of the strangeness of this—almost of the scandal of such a thought—marks out the poet as, at the last, morally serious in his very immoralism. It is shocking to a moral being that beauty, splendour, and delight can transfigure any dread, even the dread that the woman one loves may be a destroyer. For Marvell no such strange sustaining excitement is available. In 'To His Coy Mistress' he takes one of the strongest, most resplendent of Christian words and turns it grey, before our eyes:

Deserts of vast *eternity*.

The evacuation of all splendour, all significance, is complete. It is remarkable, technically, that it can be done so swiftly. We have heard much in the late twentieth century of deconstruction. It is not in general a notion that I warm to, but it fits certain moments in the poetry of Marvell. The poet of greenness is also the poet of greyness. The end of 'No Second Troy' is ablaze. In Marvell's 'Horatian Ode' history dislimns, light dies before the poet's uncreating word and the reader is left afraid.

