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## Classicism and Colonial Retrenchment in W. B. Yeats's "No Second Troy"

*Martin McKinsey*

“From the moment I began *The Wanderings of Oisín*,” wrote W. B. Yeats of the title poem of his 1889 collection, “my subject-matter became Irish” (*Poems*<sup>1</sup> 589). By his own account, Yeats struck out in this new poetic direction largely at the urging of the returned Fenian exile John O’Leary, even though such a move meant leaving behind “Arcady and the India of romance,” which up until then he had “preferred to all countries” (Ellmann 13). In place of those well-thumbed tropes of British Hellenism and Orientalism, the young poet now began to avail himself of the rich but still largely untapped stock of legends and mythological figures out of Ireland’s own past. Thus the gleaming visions of Greek antiquity that had inspired so many of Yeats’s early models, especially his beloved Shelley, fell victim to the expediencies of cultural nationalism. Indeed, for the first two and a half decades of Yeats’s writing life, Hellenism left scarcely a trace in the poems he chose to publish and preserve.<sup>2</sup> “The woods of Arcady are dead,” begins the speaker of “The Song of the Happy Shepherd,” the inaugural utterance of Yeats’s poetic career as reconstructed in his *Collected Poems*, “And over are its antique joys.” Given the Irish poet’s polemics and artistic practice during these early years, it is easy to endow the shepherd’s words with the force of synecdoche. Though ancient Greece and, in particular, Homer continued as mainstays of Yeats’s journalism, his poetry was left to stand on its own.

The so-called “Helen poems” published in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* in 1910 therefore mark a significant departure. In a series of short lyrics issuing from his troubled relationship with Maud Gonne, Yeats for the first time brings ancient Greece into an important poetic dialogue

with modern Ireland. While the volume's stylistic innovations have frequently been commented on, and will figure prominently in the pages that follow, my primary focus in the present essay will be to register and assess this *thematic* development, that is, the reemergence of the Hellenic in Yeats's verse two full decades after the Celtic turn signaled by *The Wanderings of Oisín*. By returning the earliest and most important of these poems to the particularity and turbulence of its historical and biographical moment, I show how Yeats deployed Hellenism as an imaginative Third Space (to use Homi K. Bhabha's term) in which to mediate conflicting personal, political, ethnic, and artistic affiliations. Yeats's Homerism, I argue, encodes the crisscrossing social and sectarian fracture lines that characterize a colonized society swiftly moving toward national self-sovereignty. Recent critics have followed the lead of Seamus Deane and Edward Said in situating Yeats's poetry and the Celtic Revival generally within the broader theoretical framework of postcolonial studies.<sup>3</sup> My essay draws on their work, but perhaps its greatest debt is to R. F. Foster's 1997 biography, a major synthesis of new and old archival material handled with great historical acumen. My principal aim has been to open a familiar poem to fresh readings in the light of this recent scholarship, but I have two ancillary aims as well: first, to begin to define Hellenism—the classical Greek tradition as revived in the modern West—as a locus of postcolonial agon; and second, by tracing the interplay of politics and poetic form, to suggest heretofore neglected links between the particularized pressures and residues of cultural decolonization, and the emergence of Anglo-American literary modernism.

*The Wanderings of Oisín* was a symbolist lyric awakened to epic designs by the imperatives of cultural reconstruction. Thereafter, Yeats's nationalist and epic impulses were increasingly channeled into prose and verse dramas like *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) and *On Baile's Strand* (1904). Elsewhere I have argued that the earlier poem, like the later dramas, silently invokes Greek precedents (under the guise of Celtic myth) in order to bolster its claim to foundational authority (see McKinsey). When, 20 years after *Oisín*, Yeats did finally come to make overt use of Homeric motifs—partly, Brian Arkins suggests, under the influence of his friend Oliver St. John Gogarty (85)—it was not in epic form but in a form that would characterize virtually all his mature work: "lyric poetry . . . knit by dramatic tension" (*Essays* 521). Nevertheless the first-born and most dramatic of these Homeric poems, "No Second Troy," manages to achieve within its lyric constraints a certain compressed epic stature:

## No Second Troy

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,  
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? (Poems 91)

Yeats's poem allies itself with the epic tradition first and foremost through classical allusion, and through micropoetic effects that Elizabeth Cullingford labels "poetic 'manliness.'"<sup>4</sup> But it is also a matter of structure, the way the poem yokes together private and public turmoil, the individual and the transhistorical. The effect is something like a Renaissance portrait: in the foreground we see an aristocratic beauty possessed of classical poise; from the word *misery*, we surmise that this is Maud Gonne, the only woman, it appears, with the power so deeply to trouble the poet in life. Behind her, we distinguish angry mobs, burning cities. This seamless welding of domains is done so deliberately, and Yeats's case was so particular in its tumbling together of the personal and the political, that it makes little sense, for this poem, to speak of cultural or social allegory as Fredric Jameson describes it in a much-discussed essay:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private . . . necessarily project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory: the story of private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of public third-world culture and society. (69)

By 1908, Yeats and Gonne had already themselves become part allegory, part of Ireland's social imaginary. Yeats had envisioned Gonne in the title role of his *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, a play about an old crone (traditionally identified with Ireland itself) who during the Wolfe Tone Rising is magically transformed by the patriotism of Mayo peasants into "a young girl

[with] the walk of a queen" (*Collected Plays* 88). When *Gonne* acted the role in its 1902 debut, she *was* Ireland. Six years later, as the dark lady of "No Second Troy," she was arguably still Ireland, but a very different Ireland. As we shall see, the distance between these two visions of the poet's homeland can serve as a gauge of what those intervening years had meant for Yeats.

The mythological identification of the poem's female subject is withheld until the last line, then disclosed only by inference. Until that defining question—"Was there another Troy for her to burn?"—she is a classic Petrarchan object of male desire, as notable for "being what she is" as for what she does, and for her effect on the men around her: the misery she causes the poet (which in turn causes the poem to be written), and the violence she induces in others. It is a catalytic quality she shares with Cathleen ni Houlihan—and, of course, Helen of Troy<sup>5</sup>—but in terms of literary genealogies and nationalist implications, Yeats's 1902 and 1908 heroines could not be farther apart.

Yeats's Helen, like his Petrarchism generally, comes to him by way of Pierre Ronsard, author of the *Sonnets pour Hélène*. Yeats had already imitated one of these in "When You Are Old" (1891) and would soon do so again in "At the Abbey Theatre" (1911). In "No Second Troy," he borrows not only the figure of Helen but also something of Ronsard's classical restraint, that "severe discipline of [the] French" that earlier he had prescribed for Irish playwrights (*Explorations* 80). In place of the Shakespearean sonnet, Yeats offers us (as he had in "When You Are Old") a pared-down French variation, the douzaine. In place of the Elizabethan's jagged bipolarities, he offers the statuesque poise of the Pleiade, a kind of "grace under pressure" portending high modernist styles to come. In a definitional move we recognize from *Oisín*, Yeats routes himself around England in his quest to nationalize both the sonnet form and the Homeric inheritance.<sup>6</sup> After all, "the [Irish] national character," he had written in 1901, "is so essentially different from the English that Spanish and French influences may be the most healthy" (*Explorations* 76). Following in the footsteps of the insurrectionist Wolfe Tone, Yeats found it expedient to recruit allies from the Continent when mounting his challenge to English cultural domination.

This is not to deny that there were good circumstantial reasons for Yeats's literary imagination to gravitate toward France (rather than Spain or, indeed, Renaissance Italy, which would soon figure so prominently

in his thought), for it was in France that Maud Gonne herself was living. In the summer of 1908, and again the following December, Yeats had spent time with her in Paris. Gonne clearly supplied the poem's occasion, but some of its imagery may well have come from elsewhere in her Parisian household (possibly foreshadowing an infatuation to come). Foster writes:

[Gonne's daughter] Iseult was now a charming and precocious fourteen-year-old, appealing particularly to Yeats through *her passion for the classics (notably the "Ilead")*: "she all but *set the house on fire* by making a burnt offering on the mantelpiece to Artemis a few days ago." (Foster and Yeats qtd. in Foster 387; emphasis added)

The French capital also provided Yeats with a chance to indulge his own recent passion for classicism:

Ten years ago when I was last in Paris I loved all that was mysterious and gothic and hated all that was classic and severe . . . now I am all for David and above all Ingres whose Perseus is all classic romance—the poetry of . . . clear farsighted eyes.  
(qtd. in Foster 388–89)

Classicism, as it emerged in his poetry, supplied Yeats with a lens through which to reconsider and refurbish his image of Gonne—and through her of Ireland itself—as distilled in the figure of Helen of Troy. His Helen, however, is not the soft and fatally alluring beauty out of Homer but rather the very embodiment of classical severity, more a Greek goddess than Menelaus's all too human spouse. The question is, which goddess? In the late poem "Beautiful Lofty Things," Yeats compares the Gonne of his youth to "Pallas Athena in that straight back and arrogant head" (*Poems* 303). But in "No Second Troy," the allusion to a bow, coupled with attributes like "solitary" and "stern," takes us back to the object of Iseult's burnt offering: Artemis. As the goddess of the mountains and the wilds, Artemis was a deity of "high and solitary" places. A virgin goddess, she shared Gonne's professed "horror and terror of physical love" (Gonne qtd. in Foster 203), and was "most stern" in punishing male intruders like Acteon. As Edna Longley has observed, "Yeats was reluctantly compelled to recognize Gonne as Amazon rather than icon" (207)—Amazons being "mortal byforms" of Artemis (Pomeroy 5).

If markedly more warlike than *Oisín's* Niamh, that sensual emana-

tion of the Celtic Twilight, this Artemis is also notably more aristocratic than barefoot Cathleen ni Houlihan, itinerant among the Mayo cottages. Here, too, the goddess bears traces of her French sojourn where, Romanized as Diana, she acquired considerable refinement through her association in Ronsard's day with Diane de Poitiers, Henry II's favorite, and by her subsequent sculpting in marble or in bronze on the fountains, gates, and allées of countless Renaissance chateaus. Yeats had ample opportunity, during his own sojourns in Paris, to trace her classical lineaments in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century specimens on display in the Louvre. But his imagination also had access to literary models closer to home. If he bestowed on his heroine some of the "rock-nurtured" fire of his own Aoife ("The Grey Rock," *Poems* 105), he also gave her some of the queenly grace and "dread majesty" of Spenser's Belpheobe, who "[like] Diana . . . Wandereth alone with bow and arrows keen" (2.3.31.1, 31.4).<sup>7</sup> (Only a few years before, Yeats had edited a selection of Spenser's verse.) Yet however mixed and decidedly cosmopolitan her parentage, the multinational heroine of "No Second Troy" had an important Irish role to play in the poet's evolving mythology of his homeland.

In the 10 years since his return, in 1897, to "an active Irish life" (*Explorations* 235), Yeats had not been a stranger to the disillusionment and chagrin that can be the lot of a colonial idealist home from the metropole. His labors in Dublin as a playwright and theater manager, first with the Irish Literary Theater, then with the National Theater at the Abbey, brought him face to face with "those enemies of life, the chimeras of the Pulpit and the Press" (*Essays* 119). Then, in 1903, on the heels of her role in *Cathleen*, Maud Gonne had married the nationalist figure John MacBride, which had the effect of estranging Yeats not only from Gonne herself (temporarily) but also from the more militant forms of Irish nationalism like the IRB; in any case, his contact with these groups had been primarily for her sake. Yeats reacted to such chafings and ruptures not by retreating into a retrograde West Britonism nor, for all his growing fame, by escaping into cosmopolitan disengagement. Rather, he began inventing a new Irish identity for himself, one that reclaimed for Irish nationalism a tradition frequently demonized in the charged rhetoric of post-Famine politics. By 1907, according to Foster, Yeats "was becoming interested in the traditions of the [Anglo-Irish] caste and family background which he had been elaborately repudiating for twenty years"

(375). The cooling of his relations with Gonne and with nationalist Ireland had been amply compensated and perhaps even precipitated by his growing attachment to the socially more conservative culture of the Big House, as embodied for Yeats by Lady Gregory and her estate at Coole Park, where he was a frequent guest. Though the poet's apotheosis of Ascendency figures like Swift and Burke was still to come, the classicism of "No Second Troy" was substantially the classicism of their eighteenth century, "that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion" (*Explorations* 345).

In "No Second Troy," Maud Gonne is made willy-nilly to represent that tradition and to body forth its ideals. As a statuesque sister to the goddess Diana, the presiding deity of Renaissance pastorals, this most urban of women serves as emblem for the rural charms of the Anglo-Irish country estate. The tightened bow to which Gonne is likened invokes the hunt that was for Yeats an integral part of that culture. (Yeats first associated archery with Coole Park in the title poem of his previous collection, *In the Seven Woods*: "while that Great Archer / Who but awaits His hour to shoot, still hangs / a cloudy quiver over Pairc-na-lee" [*Poems* 77].)<sup>8</sup> In addition, Gonne's beauty is described in terms suggesting the aristocratic virtues of that class, as Yeats conceived it: self-control, elevation, nobility. As such, she represents for Yeats (as had, differently, Niamh and Cathleen before her) "that ideal Ireland, perhaps from this point out an imaginary Ireland, in whose service I labor," as he wrote in the 1907 essay "Poetry and Tradition" (*Essays* 246).

In the process of defining an ideal Ireland through its Helen-Gonne figure, "No Second Troy" simultaneously profiles the real (or "natural") Ireland that constitutes its opposite: if Helen-Gonne is "high," the latter must be "low"; if she is "solitary" (Yeats would later write of an "Anglo-Irish solitude"), it is populous; where she is "most stern," it, presumably, is "lax." Low, populous, lax of habit—one suspects that the portrait that emerges of the "natural" here owes something to Anglo-Irish stereotypes of those products of "mean rooftrees,"<sup>9</sup> the unwashed Catholic majority.

Yet like all such binomial schemata in Yeats, this opposition is riven with paradox. For even as Helen-Gonne defines her class, she betrays it. It is perhaps in keeping with the historical origins of that class that the poem's female protagonist has been engaged "of late" in the paradigmatic colonialist pastime: teaching the ignorant. Yeats's heroine, however, would instill in her pupils not what Edward Gibbon termed "the arts of

peace and civil policy" (442)—the highest achievement of European civilization—but "violent ways." It was not so much the violence that disturbed Yeats—he was well on his way to the philosophic militarism of his prime—as its misapplication: for like Artemis turning the hounds on Acteon, Gonne would unleash Ireland's little upon its great. To preach such Thyrstian insubordination was to threaten the social hierarchy and moral economy that governed Yeats's vision of both the Homeric world and the ideal Ireland for which it stood.

Of course the poem's blame, retracted but nevertheless persisting under erasure,<sup>10</sup> masks a deeper wounding than class. For Gonne had compounded her betrayal immeasurably by fraternizing with the commoners—or, as Yeats increasingly felt, consorting with the enemy. She had gone farther than the activist Gore-Booth sisters, against whom the poet inveighs elsewhere, by marrying a man like MacBride. Yeats's arguments with her on this point, the more pitiful for being too late, are again imbued with all the prejudices of his emergent Anglo-Irish identity. To marry MacBride, he told her, was to "fall into a lower order": "You come to the people from above. You represent a superior class." Catholicism, to which she had converted, represented "a lower order of faith" (Yeats qtd. in Foster 285). The guiding principle of the Ascendency—in Yeats's determined construction of it as a "Protestant aristocracy"—was the notion of "the best knit to the best." (The weakness for eugenics which looms so large in his later work was already well advanced.) Gonne's mismatched union with MacBride mirrored her perverted politics—hurling "the little streets upon the great"—by allowing his "low" to top her "high." It was an imagined scene of transgression that Yeats would revisit often—most centrally in the play *Purgatory*, published in the last year of his life:

This night she is no better than her man  
And does not mind that he is half drunk,  
She is mad about him. They mount the stairs  
She brings him into her own chamber.  
And that is the marriage-chamber now.

.....  
She should have known he was not her kind.  
(*Collected Plays* 686–87)

In the end, however, “No Second Troy” is Gonne’s writ of absolution. The blame is not hers, the poem tells us, but the times—or Time itself. For like Oisín in St. Patrick’s Ireland, Gonne was out of phase (as Yeats would come to think of it) with the world around her. “[B]red to be a hero’s wage,” her “eyes set upon far / magnificence / upon impossible heroism,” she found herself in a place and age bereft of heroes, with only a “drunken, vainglorious lout” like MacBride to claim her.<sup>11</sup> If she was now “solitary,” this was the reason. She was a Cathleen ní Houlihan lacking a Michael Gillane, the *spéirbhean* of a traditional *aisling* poem without Irishmen (however misdirected) whose courage might equal their desire.

If Yeats was able to sympathize and forgive, this was in large measure due to the way the predicament of his one-time Petrarchan tormentor mirrored his own as an artist. For just as there was no other Troy for a Helen to burn, so was there no other Troy for a would-be Homer to write about. The “brainless patriotic force” Yeats so often locked polemical horns with in Dublin was not the stuff of epic; here he could not hope to find “Character isolated by a deed / To engross the present and dominate memory” (Yeats qtd. in Foster 365; *Poems* 347). A few years later, in the poem “September 1913,” Yeats would pronounce Romantic Ireland “dead and gone” (*Poems* 108); in “No Second Troy” he had already buried heroic Ireland.

This judgment, registered first in the clipped, percussive finality of the title, is central to the poem’s morphology. In *Oisín* Yeats had presumed to speak in the voice of tradition, to transume the medieval Irish genre of Christian–pagan dialogue in a long poem with strong nationalist overtones; “No Second Troy” commences with an unmediated lyric “I”—the “I” of a thousand Petrarchan recriminations. The earlier poem had, in its epic modality, rehearsed the consolidation of the state; its textual extensiveness figured that of a free and independent polity. “No Second Troy,” by contrast, is an allegory of epic curtailment. Its verbal musculature records the Laocoönian effort to wrestle the epic impulse into a lyric mold. That this mold should consist of 12 rather than 14 iambic pentameter lines further accentuates the poem’s excruciating sense of limitation: “No Second Troy” is a sonnet in search of a concluding couplet, a poem about frustrated desire that enacts its own unfulfillment.

Hellenism performs a darker role within this straitened poetic economy. In his early articles and essays, particularly his *Letters to the New*

*Island*, Yeats had recruited Greece as inspiration and blueprint in his project of cultural uplift: Greece was pure potential, a symbol for all that Ireland might become. The analogy of Homer had underwritten *Oisín's* nationalist aspirations, investing with epic aura the raveled stories and dimmed historic destiny of a subject people. In *The Green Helmet* poems, Yeats dissolves this authorizing partnership. The comparison between Ireland and Greece henceforth will be one of unlikeness. The Greek frame of "No Second Troy"—title, last line—serves to damn rather than to redeem, heightening the contrast between then and now, here and there, ideal and actual. In the peculiar reverse perspective of classicism, what should be the temporal foreground—modern Ireland—is dwarfed by its classical parallel, reduced to a Lilliputian world of "little streets" inhabited by knaves and dolts, Paudeens and Biddys. Only Maud Gonne is magnified; she alone inhabits the mythic frame the poet has constructed in order to show her true dimensions as "a woman Homer sung." All else "at one common level lies."<sup>12</sup> In the relative universe into which Yeats's post-Nietzschean thought was advancing, each half of the analogy illuminated the other. Against Yeats's vision of present entropy, Homer stands as an unrepeatable poetic event: to say "No Second Troy" is to say of Ireland, in bitter retraction, that it is "No Second Greece." Colonial belatedness is affirmed.

This takes us close to the territory of epic foundering touched on in Tennyson's "The Epic."<sup>13</sup> What separates Yeats's poem from its Victorian antecedents is the insistence of its questioning, the furious intensity with which it burns through the fuse of its measures to detonate in the final line. It is a fury born of colonial disillusion and chagrin. Like his own *Oisín* 20 years earlier, Yeats had suffered a rocky homecoming. The 10 years of "embittered controversy" that attended his cultural activism in Dublin "rang down the curtain . . . on what was called 'The Celtic Movement'" (*Explorations* 72). It also rang in a distinctively new style that, in light of its subsequent influence, deserves a closer look.

The emergence of what for convenience I will label Yeats's "mature" style has been linked by recent critics to, alternately, the poet's involvement with the theater, his absorption in the writings of Nietzsche, and his need to sever the cultural apron strings binding him to "mother Britannia."<sup>14</sup> This last interpretation is surely correct in foregrounding the oppositional nature of this transformation and locating it within the family romance of colonialism; nevertheless it is important to remember

that the primary focus of Yeats's oppositional vigor at this formative stage was not the colonizer—though Yeats's "hatred" of the English nation continued unabated—but rather elements within his own "fool-driven land" ("All Things Can Tempt Me," *Poems* 97). Like many a lettered returnee to the colonial margin, filled with "many misconceptions" regarding his particular Ithaca,<sup>15</sup> Yeats was stricken by the gap between the Innisfree he was at liberty to imagine from abroad and the dingy disputatious fact of colonial reality in which he found himself mired; between (as he puts it in "The Fisherman") "What I had hoped t'would be / To write for my own race / And the reality" (*Poems* 148). In response to the trauma of reentry, he chose not Dedalian exile and cunning but (to shift Homeric paradigms) an Achilles-like wrath, born out of embattled pride and ambition.

Yeats refitted his verse to reflect this psychic reorientation. His poetry of "The Celtic Movement," under the influence of William Morris, had adopted as its aesthetic emblem the pacific and traditionally feminine art of weaving. Things were "wrought" (as if "wrought" were the past participle of "weave") "out of moonlit vapours" or "with silken thread" or "with glimmering hands" or "with music" (*Poems* 62, 66, 72, 369). Now Yeats sought a more resistive medium that would suggest the refractory national element in which he moved: something hammered, Hephaestean. The poetry that resulted was a fighting poetry, one suited to the skirmishes and standoffs of a nation being born. Yeats had made the characteristic high modernist move into the "masculine." Shorn of its Petrarchan passion and with a heavier measure of Gallic irony, the style would find an echo in younger contemporaries like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot (whose parallel political reaction and metropolitan exile are themselves open to postcolonial readings).<sup>16</sup> Given these later reverberations, and given high modernism's customary casting as a predominantly metropolitan enterprise, it is all the more essential to recognize the cultural specificity of Yeats's stylistic gesture, its genesis "amid [the] riot and great anger" of intracolonial contestation (*Explorations* 230). Little wonder that it struck a chord with later writers of decolonization like Chinua Achebe and Derek Walcott.

More narrowly, we can say that the prosodic constriction that typifies Yeats's style during this period embodies in verse the defensive reflex of a colonial elite made vulnerable by the gathering momentum of an exclusionary Irish Catholic nationalism. Yeats figures this threat of counter-

disenfranchisement in the Anglo-Irish solitude of his Helen, which is portrayed (with agency reversed) as a kind of sublime renunciation, akin to Gonne's foreswearing of her Catholic husband. Ramazani, following Yeats, correlates the poet's preference for "lyric poems that are tense and compact" to geographical factors: their origin on an island with "Great hatred. Little room" (86). In light of the foregoing, we can extend this formulation: in contrast to *Oisín's* symbolic assertion of territorial reach, "No Second Troy" represents a strategic retrenchment, a digging-in behind more defensible boundaries: the boundaries of the country demesne. (Twenty years later, this instinct would find its purest and most concentrated expression in the emblem—both textual and concrete—of a Norman tower.) We should not be fooled by this defensive posture, however. Contractility (to borrow a term from physiology) is a measure of strength: the implied violence of Artemis's tightened bow. Indeed, Yeats's new style did nothing so much as release for his poetry the combativeness and aggression that drives his early polemical prose.

Into this tense space Hellenism interposes itself. Whatever its class affiliations elsewhere—and for Yeats class and classicism were never far apart—here it serves to muffle such social divisions. Reversing the covert strategy of *Oisín*, "No Second Troy" uses Greece to disguise its origins in sectarian feuding, displacing social reality into myth. This subterfuge allows Yeats to advance his attack as universalist critique, and at the same time diffuses the object of that attack into an abstract function of history: "an age like this." Anglo-American critics intent on the transnational scope of literary modernism long took this tactical maneuver more or less at face value, a simplification that under the circumstances the poet might have welcomed. The truth is that Yeats's imagination continued to be enmeshed in the material "complexities of mire [and] blood" that defined the Irish culture wars at the start of the last century. If Yeats summoned the figure of Helen to his side, it was because he believed she (as opposed to Gonne, who by then had withdrawn from public life) might still have something to contribute in the struggle over his country's future.

In the ever-narrowing funnel of nationalist politics, the "Irishness" of the Anglo-Irish was a disputed issue. Efforts to define a Celtic essence that would justify and unify an independent Ireland were not always motivated to accommodate the Protestant minority, who were resented by many as a colonialist imposition. Yeats, the highly visible and vocal

leader of a movement and a theater company dominated by the Anglo-Irish, was often the target of what he termed the “Nationalist attacks . . . of ignorant men” (*Explorations* 239). There is both irony and poetic justice in this, for Yeats, along with his mostly Anglo-Irish associates in the Celtic Revival, had been instrumental in stoking this renewed nationalist fervor, while also supplying it (as Edward Said has pointed out) with many of its most forceful nativist tropes. To a degree, Yeats and to some extent even his class were now paying the price for this early zeal. But here Helen might intercede on their behalf, in the name of cultural diversity. This Latinized Anglo-Irish “half-Asiatic” Greek whom Yeats had evolved out of the strong personality of Maud Gonne came to Yeats’s countrymen with a message: that the surest way “to give Ireland a hardy and shapely national character [was] by opening the doors to the four winds of the world, instead of leaving the door that is towards the east wind [toward England] open alone” (*Explorations* 76). Indeed, one of the poem’s unvoiced questions, no less rhetorical than the rest, is whether an awareness of Homeric precedent might not give Ireland the fortitude—the “courage equal to desire”—to stand up to its English satraps. After all (as the young Yeats had written), “without her possibly mythical siege of Troy, perhaps, Greece would never have had her real Thermopylae” (Jeffares, *W. B. Yeats* xii). By such relatively quiet means, and for all her encoding of traditional prejudice, Helen made the case for cultural openness, for making room within Ireland’s narrow borders for the ethnically impure and the historically tainted. In pardoning Helen (“Why should I blame her . . . ?”) Yeats argued by analogy for the pardoning of his class.

And yet the kernel of bitterness around which the poem was formed came from Yeats’s pained foreknowledge that this was a deal unlikely to go through. The doubleness of the poem’s structure—Troy/No Troy—is exactly the gap between “What [he] had hoped . . . and the reality.” Helen stands first and foremost for the “imaginary Ireland” Yeats had undertaken, in romantic arrogance, to conjure into being. He had imagined Ireland’s reconstitution as a kind of Arnoldian cultural eugenics: a splicing of the best of Ireland with the best of Europe, the lion’s share of which he located in ancient Greece. The Celtic Twilight, that realm of infinite promise and deferral, provided a medium in which, for a time, Yeats was able to reconcile aspiration and actuality. But the centrifuge of Irish political discourse eventually isolated the individual strands. In “No Second Troy,” his vision reemerges in distilled form, strained of its Celtic

admixture. Now Greece became Ireland's spectre: a haunting by lost possibilities. Yet another two decades would elapse before Yeats had the courage to attempt a new rapprochement, a metaphysical merger of Hellas and Hibernia that would accommodate (even if it could not efface) the contradictions of his self and his world.

## Notes

1. References to *Poems* refer to *The Poems of W. B. Yeats* edited by Richard J. Finneran.
2. The lines "Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships / And proud as Priam murdered with his peers" in the poem "The Sorrow of Love," from *The Rose*, were added in 1922 (*Poems* 40). On the other hand, the line "Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam" in another poem from the same volume ("The Rose of the World") dates from the original 1892 edition (*Poems* 36).
3. In particular, see Kiberd, Lloyd, and Ramazani, and the essays collected in Fleming.
4. According to Cullingford, these include "elliptical condensation of syntax, the replacement of parataxis by subordination, stress-packed lines, colloquial diction, consonantal rather than vocalic emphasis" (78–79).
5. Helen is credited in the poem with having burned Ilium much as if she had wielded the torch herself—an ascription of passive agency in keeping with Homer; cf. the bitter accusation of the swineherd Eumaios that Helen "cut the legs from under troops of men" (*Odyssey* 14.80–81).
6. Helen Vendler has spoken of Yeats's "Irishing" of the English sonnet ("Sonnets"); "At the Abbey Theatre," written when the poet was 47 years old, was his first Shakespearean sonnet. But even there the poem proclaims its independence, both in its subtitle—" (after Ronsard)"—and in the Irish phrase with which it begins, unintelligible and unpronounceable to the uninitiated.
7. In *On Baile's Strand*, Cuchulain refers to the Highlander Aoife's "high, laughing, turbulent head . . . / thrown backward, and the bowstring at her ear" (*Collected Plays* 258). Belpheobe, on the other hand, Spenser's costume portrait of Elizabeth, shared Diana's low regard for "base desire":

In [her eyes] the blinded god his lustful fire  
To kindle oft assayed, but had no might,  
For with dread majesty and awful ire,  
She broke his wanton darts and quenched base desire.  
(2.3.23.6–9)

8. Ultimately, the image of the archer appears to go back to a vision Yeats experienced shortly before he first met Lady Gregory. While staying on Edward Martyn's estate in Galway, he visualized "a marvellous naked woman shooting an arrow at a star. She stood like a statue upon a stone pedestal" (*Memoirs* 100). Many years later, Yeats glosses this as follows: "She was, it seems, the Mother-Goddess. . . . *But she is also Artemis.*" (*Autobiography* 391; emphasis added).

9. "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation" (*Poems* 95).

10. Commentators have tended to gloss "of late" as if it meant "until recently," even though its most immediate implications are of an *ongoing* activity (see for example Jeffares, *Commentary* 87 and Albright 505 note to line 2). The "erasure" here is, in biographical terms, Yeats's reconciliation with Gonne in 1908, as reflected in the title of the lyric sequence to which "No Second Troy" originally belonged: "Raymond Lully and His Wife Pernella." For a thorough discussion of these textual and biographical issues, as well as a different account of the rise of Yeats's prosodic classicism, see Holdeman 161–67.

11. Quotations taken, in turn, from *Poems* 92, Yeats qtd. in Foster 239, and *Poems* 181.

12. See "A Woman Homer Sung" (90), "The Fascination of What's Difficult" (93), and "These Are the Clouds" (96), all from Yeats's *The Green Helmet*.

13. "The Epic" tells of Everard Hall, a poem who burned his Arthurian magnum opus in 12 books because it contained nothing but "faint Homeric echoes" (Tennyson 2).

14. Cf. Vendler 21, Cullingford 78, and Ramazani 85.

15. "I only escaped from many misconceptions when, in 1897, I began an active Irish life" (*Explorations* 235). The articles Yeats wrote for the theatrical supplement *Samhain* provide a vivid chronicle of his tribulations and evolving thought during the crucial first years of the century.

16. For stylistic comparison, see Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*, part 3, and Eliot's "Sweeney Erect," which use a similar double-frame technique. Both were written a good decade after Yeats's poem.

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