

THE ETHICS OF MODERNISM

Moral Ideas in Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett

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W. B. Yeats: out of nature

The moral ideas behind Yeats's early poems stand for inspection in his 1903 collection of essays, *Ideas of Good and Evil*. In one of the book's major expressions of doctrine, "William Blake and His Illustrations to *The Divine Comedy*," Yeats expounds Blake's "opinions" of Dante, which could not have been pleasing to the Catholic bishops of Ireland. He starts by splitting Dante in two. He admits by way of Blake that "Dante, because a great poet, was 'inspired by the Holy Ghost.'"¹ Quickly, though, he turns his attention to Dante's "worldly" philosophy, "established for the ordering of the body and the fallen will."² He calls Dante's ethics "the philosophy of soldiers, of men of the world, of priests busy with government, of all who, because of their absorption in active life, have been persuaded to judge and to punish . . ."³ Yeats's hostility to "the active life" has English and continental sources, for example, in Pater and Villiers. Yeats compounds this hostility with Blake's gnostic theory of the imagination, which he sums up in "The Moods": "Everything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over, is to the imaginative artist nothing more than a means, for he belongs to the invisible life . . ."⁴ As an active, worldly man, Dante is one of the fallen, the "drudges of time and space."⁵ He is a creature of "reason builded upon sensation."⁶

Espousing Blake's morality of "unlimited forgiveness," Yeats holds that "artists and poets . . . are taught by the nature of their craft to sympathise with all living things."⁷ Yeats would later discard the ideal of sympathy, but in his early work, imagination and sympathy are closely aligned. "Without a perfect sympathy there is no perfect imagination,"⁸ he writes. Likewise, "we enlarge our imagination by imaginative sympathy."⁹ The weakness of Yeats's romantic morality, as of all antinomianism, is that it lacks a principle of discernment. Blake is said to have stood for a "Christian command of unlimited forgiveness,"¹⁰ though he believed in the purifying violence of the French Revolution. Blake is said to have held

many "animosities,"¹¹ though in observing Blake's hatreds, Yeats never suggests that they seriously contradict Blake's Christian love. Blake is without sin, and Dante must simply be broken into halves, which, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, have no apparent connection.

Yeats was heir to a living romantic tradition where painters and poets supported each other against the orthodox. For Yeats, Pater's praise for Botticelli's illustrations of Dante would have mingled with Blake's opinions. Pater himself had noticed "an insoluble element of prose in the depths of Dante's poetry."¹² Yeats's Dante is the son of Pater's Aristotle, accused of "reducing all things to machinery."¹³ And Pater had already dismissed Aristotle as "the first of the Schoolmen."¹⁴ Yeats may also have remembered the reference to Aristotle in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where Blake characterizes "Aristotle's Analytics" as a skeleton in the dark Satanic mills.

In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats puts literary history in a personal light: "The revolt against Victorianism meant to the young poet a revolt against irrelevant descriptions of nature, the scientific and moral discursiveness of *In Memoriam* – 'when he should have been broken-hearted,' said Verlaine, 'he had many reminiscences' – the political eloquence of Swinburne, the psychological curiosity of Browning, and the poetical diction of everybody."¹⁵ This proud catalogue of prohibitions, a *via negativa* to the temple of art, memorializes Yeats's 1894 meeting in Paris with the symbolist poet Paul Verlaine. It was Verlaine who raised the cry, *Prends l'éloquence et tords-lui son cou*, rendered by Yeats as "Wring the neck of rhetoric."¹⁶ And what precisely was this prolix and contemptible rhetoric that Verlaine denounced? It was the opposite of "personal utterance."¹⁷ It was "the will trying to do the work of the imagination."¹⁸ It was the "impurities" of politics, science, history, and dogmatic religion. In short, it was the language of the world.

Yeats's symbolist affinities were strengthened through his friendship with Arthur Symons. In his book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which he dedicated to Yeats, Symons declared war on "the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority."¹⁹ *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* inspired Yeats to write "The Symbolism of Poetry," where he established a close rapport between English romanticism and the continental writers whom Symons championed:

All writers, all artists of any kind, in so far as they have had any philosophical or critical power, perhaps just in so far as they have been deliberate artists at all, have had some philosophy, some criticism of their art; and it has often been this philosophy, or this criticism, that has evoked their most startling inspiration,

calling into outer life some portion of the divine life, of the buried reality, which could alone extinguish in the emotions what their philosophy or their criticism would extinguish in the intellect.²⁰

It may take the reader a moment to digest the notion that Yeats is propounding here, that poetic inspiration should “extinguish” physical emotion, and that philosophy should “extinguish” the rational mind. What Yeats means by philosophy can be gathered from his essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry,” where “ruling symbols” take the place of system and logic: “The poet of essences and pure ideas must seek in the half-lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol as if to the ends of the earth, all that the epic and dramatic poet finds of mystery and shadow in the accidental circumstance of life.”²¹ As a guide to aesthetic and ethical perfection, a philosophy of symbols leads beyond the heat of emotion. The symbolist poet escapes “the accidental circumstance” of which physical emotion is a symptom. Symons, in his chapter on Verlaine, describes a movement away from the world and into the unconscious: “It is the very essence of poetry to be unconscious of anything between its own moment of flight and the supreme beauty which it will never attain.”²² Similarly, Yeats’s desire for “the buried reality” is a pursuit of perfection at the cost of the world. But while Yeats speaks of copying “the pure inspiration of early times,”²³ the old Platonic violence lurks in a poetic philosophy that rejects not only society but all ideas except its own. In the symbolist movement, primitivism and avant-gardism are indistinguishable.

In “Adam’s Curse,” we can judge the results of Yeats’s “deliberate” artistry:

We sat grown quiet at the name of love;
We saw the last embers of daylight die,
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time’s waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.²⁴

The technical skill is astonishing, as the poet achieves an effect of ecstasy, of being lifted out of body. One of the means employed is broken parallelism. The “moon” resists the pattern suggested by its syntactical relation to “the last embers of daylight,” where “last embers” carries the suggestion of fading emotion, of emotion’s being *extinguished*. Instead of an active verb paralleling “die,” the moon, by way of the extended metaphor of the shell, takes the passive participles “worn” and “washed,” only to be buoyed and sustained by the flowing syntax. It is a lovely surprise, an effect of defying gravity. Yeats exerts not a moral power, but a

power of enchantment, as he brings his reader to identify with his mood, which is itself an abstraction from reality, an advance by way of *eros* (“the name of love”) toward perfect beauty. But there can be no moral counterpoint, no dramatic irony, no humor, no other voice, for these would dispel the mood. And there is no longer any plot or action of the body among other human bodies to generate a more vivid and earthy emotion.

The visionary poet “must write or be of no account to any cause, good or evil . . .”²⁵ His feelings grow out of imaginative knowledge that is sympathetic and contemplative, not moral in any worldly sense. “The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes” is an early example of Yeats’s mystical morality. It begins:

‘What do you make so fair and bright?’
 ‘I make the cloak of Sorrow:
 O lovely to see in all men’s sight
 Shall be the cloak of Sorrow,
 In all men’s sight.’²⁶

Coleridge helps gloss the passage, with his definition in *The Statesman’s Manual* of a symbol as being “characterized . . . [a]bove all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal.”²⁷ In “The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes,” “the cloak” of appearances is translucent with the reality of Sorrow. Seen differently, Sorrow is swift and ubiquitous, it is pure as white wool. All men share the tragic delight in Sorrow. “All men’s ears” take pleasure in the English sapphics. Their haunting subtlety evokes the tender loss that is their subject. And this loss, this momentary blankness, touches a mystical verge. Yeats’s use of symbols as dramatic metaphors for sorrow is abstract. It enables him to gain a contemplative distance from emotion, and to establish a sympathetic largeness as he views the human scene. And yet the poet wants no distance between him and us. He is “the supreme Enchanter, or some one of His councils,” and his readers are the enchanted.²⁸ He draws us into his experience through the force of the sapphics, through the use of white space on the page, through the hypnotic repetition of the word “all,” through the repeated questioning. He applies his technique to suspend time. “The purpose of rhythm,” Yeats writes, “. . . is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us by waking variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols.”²⁹ Like a narcotic, poetry is made to serve an unworldly freedom. The poet administers his potion entirely to the mind.

In his essay "The Autumn of the Body," we can trace Yeats's developing interest in the tradition of European symbolism. Yeats approves Mallarmé's concern for "the horror of the forest or the silent thunder in the leaves, not the intense dense wood in the trees."³⁰ He connects Mallarmé's "poetry of essences" to "an ever more arduous search for an almost disembodied ecstasy."³¹ In "The Symbolism of Poetry," he refines his theory: "All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions . . ."³² The notion of "indefinable and yet precise emotions," like that of "disembodied . . . footsteps," defies "corporeal reason,"³³ but Yeats makes his point about the immediacy of the effect. In "Rosa Alchemica," an early tale in the manner of Pater, we learn that these "bodiless powers" are "what men called the moods."³⁴ Pater's *Renaissance* stands closely behind Yeats's theory of otherworldly moods: for Pater, the moods of the visionary artist distinguish him from the dramatic artist.³⁵ In "The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes," we can see that Sorrow is a mood. Moods and powers are in fact all "disembodied."

The symbolist dimension of Yeats's thought is a bodiless dimension. Without the body and its actions among other bodies, emotion becomes reflective, twilit and moody. The mysterious presence of beauty, even in so rarefied a form as a color – white or purple – must suffice as a spring of emotion. But the subtlety of the emotion does not negate its power. An erotic flight of the soul, the lyric drama of emotional ascent is similar to what we find in the *Phaedrus*. Desire for a particular object rises into ecstatic, incorporeal love of immutable beauty, which exists beyond space and time. "The silver apples of the moon / The golden apples of the sun" possess, as objects, much less particularity than Maud Gonne. But the symbolic apples, like Maud or Helen of Troy, bear a ghostly beauty, and it is always the same beauty they bear: "for there is only one perfection and only one search for perfection . . ."³⁶

The otherworldly strength of Yeats's symbolist tradition is that it forsakes ethics for a religious ideal. The epigraph to *The Rose* (1893) comes from Saint Augustine: *Sero te amavi, Pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova! Sero te amavi!*³⁷ "So late I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient and ever new! So late I loved you!" These Latin words, quoted again by Yeats in his 1910 essay "Ireland and the Arts," imply that the Good and the Beautiful are one. The artist who unites the Good and the Beautiful delivers them from human hands to the "Unseen Life." "In this matter," writes Yeats of the

heroic artist, "he must be without humility."³⁸ It is a suggestive choice of words, because humility comes from the Latin *humilis*, low or humble, which comes in turn from the Latin *humus*, earth or ground. The disembodied poet is without earth or ground. And given such circumstances, it is unsurprising that he garbs himself in priestly vestments and seeks to inspire cultic loyalty: "We who care deeply about the arts find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith, and we must, I think, if we would win the people again, take upon ourselves the method and the fervour of a priesthood."³⁹ With human content diminishing, the priestly quest for disembodied perfection grows more purely stylistic and occult, so much so that "continuous indefinable symbolism . . . is the substance of all style."⁴⁰ The bread of artistic transubstantiation, style is exalted before the public as a divine substance. It transforms reality into essence and symbol.

Challenged by Nietzsche's contempt for hypocritical "despisers of the body,"⁴¹ Yeats gradually returned his imagination to earth. His 1906 essay "Discoveries" is a Nietzschean critique of the symbolist movement. The author questions its diet of "states of mind, lyrical moments, intellectual essences."⁴² He wants to reclaim the "whole man – blood, imagination, intellect, running together . . ." He wants to heal the divided consciousness of romanticism. He declares, "I am orthodox and pray for a resurrection of the body . . ."⁴³ He begins to rehabilitate Dante: "emotion must be related to emotion by a system of ordered images, as in the *Divine Comedy*."⁴⁴ In *A Vision* he would go so far as to place Dante in his own company, the brightest men of the illustrious seventeenth phase, those who achieve "Unity of Being."

Nietzsche's presence in *Ideas of Good and Evil* is puzzling until we learn that it came about through secondary sources.⁴⁵ In "William Blake and His Illustrations to *The Divine Comedy*," Yeats likens Blake both to Shelley and to Nietzsche on the basis of their revolutionary morals – their transvaluation of values. One thinks, for instance, of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *The Genealogy of Morals*, works characterized by shrewd psychological insights. "The weak in courage is strong in cunning" is Blake's version of *ressentiment*.⁴⁶ Blake also looks forward to Nietzsche in the darting brilliance of his aphorisms, which stake the self to a restless, surging energy. Kindred spirits, Blake and Nietzsche have nothing but contempt for "that tuning down of the affects to a harmless mean according to which they may be satisfied, the Aristotelianism of morals."⁴⁷

But how could the roadway of excess lead to anything like Dantean order? The passionate exuberance of Blake and Nietzsche might be

defended along the lines of Shelley's interest – itself an expansion of Coleridge's theory of supernatural literature – in affording “a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield.” Reflecting on *Frankenstein*, his wife's extraordinary novel, Shelley saw an effort to “preserve the truth of the elementary principles of human nature” while expanding their application beyond the bounds of reality.⁴⁸ But it is hard to deny that *Frankenstein* presents a picture of man as a creature bereft of “elementary principles” and ruled by demonic passions. In Victor Frankenstein's world, nature dwindles as a source of moral value, becoming either dead matter for exploitation, or a pre-social source of pleasure. “Human nature,” repeated throughout the work like a mad chorus, is riddled with darkness.

In fact it is Mary Shelley's daemonism in *Frankenstein*, and not her husband's rationalization, that is prophetic of Yeats – though it is unclear how well, if at all, Yeats knew the novel. The daemon understands Victor Frankenstein better than any friend or beloved. It separates Frankenstein from other men. It is his own creation, which destroys him. Yeats is exploring the subconscious in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* when he writes, “The Daemon, by using his mediatorial shades, brings man again and again to the place of choice, heightening temptation that the choice may be as final as possible, imposing his own lucidity upon events, leading his victim to whatever among works not impossible is the most difficult.”⁴⁹ As “mediatorial shades,” figures like Maud Gonne or Frankenstein's beloved Elizabeth turn – away from nature – into psychological figures and ultimately figures of speech for the daemonic oracle. For Yeats and Mary Shelley, the daemon of excess is the creative medium of fate.

Nietzsche had the prescience to equate “spirits” and “demons” with psychological “drives” in section six of *Beyond Good and Evil*. And what was especially fertile about Nietzsche's demonic thinking, and timely from Yeats's point of view, was its moral fire. Yeats's romantic tradition had never clearly answered the charge of moral inconsequence. Shelley was Arnold's “beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.”⁵⁰ It is helpful to recall the original basis of the charge. When, for example, the Shelleyan poet in *Alastor* dreams of an encounter with his ideal lover, she takes a moment to moralize:

Her voice was like the voice of his own soul
 Heard in the calm of thought . . .
 Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,

And lofty hopes of divine liberty,
Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,
Herself a poet.⁵¹

Unless we are rapt beyond speech, we are likely to notice that the dream-
maiden's insights into her difficult subject are simply lost to us. We
will never know her lesson on the relation of knowledge to virtue. And
though virtue is a thought "most dear" to her lover, she soon abandons
the "solemn tones" of philosophy for the "wild numbers" of passion, a
prelude to the pair's love-making. Virtue and sex go together, somehow.
It is not far off to call Shelley's morality a beautiful promise in a wet dream.
Only his lovesickness, the pathos of his desire, pulls us up with a shock.

Yeats's "Daimon," "daemon," "antithetical self," or "anti-self" (the
multiplication of names reflects obsessive psychologizing) is Nietzsche's
self-transcending man in the grip of his obsessions: "Inexpressible and
nameless is that which gives my soul agony and sweetness and is even the
hunger of my entrails."⁵² Wilde had developed much the same theme
when, discussing Wagner's music, he referred to "that ΕΡΩΣ ΤΩΝ
ΑΔΥΝΑΤΩΝ, that *Amour de l'Impossible*, which falls like madness on
many who think they live securely out of the reach of harm, so that they
sicken suddenly with the poison of unlimited desire, and, in the infinite
pursuit of what they may not obtain, grow faint and swoon or stumble."⁵³
In "The Celtic Element in Literature," Yeats had praised the "unbounded"
passion of "a love poem in *The Songs of Connacht* that is like a death-cry:
'My love, O she is my love, the woman who is most for destroying
me . . .'"⁵⁴ But it was Nietzsche who converted the passionate theme into
the moral drama of psychomachia. "There is much that is difficult for the
spirit," says Zarathustra, "the strong *reverent* spirit that would bear much:
but the difficult and the most difficult are what its strength demands."⁵⁵

Certainly there were other influences behind Yeats's development, but
here I am concerned with the moral psychology that shaped Yeats's
modernist poetic. Nietzsche had taken the Faustian dynamic of self-
transcendence and self-affirmation, and recast it as a division within the
self between master and slave, the "two *opposing* values . . . 'good and
evil.'"⁵⁶ "Evil," writes Yeats, "is the strain one upon another of oppos-
ites."⁵⁷ This is positive evil, an assertion of moral choice and "value."
When Yeats refers to "the vision of evil" he means more than a privation
of good. Evil is an Augustinian consent of the will, but with a Nietzschean
twist: Yeats locates creativity itself in the discord of moral conflict. Love
can conquer justice, and justice prove the weaker. To quote Zarathustra,
"necessary are the envy and mistrust and calumny among your virtues.

Behold how each of your virtues covets what is highest: each wants your whole spirit that it might become *her* herald; each wants your whole strength in wrath, hatred, and love . . . Man is something that must be overcome; and therefore you shall love your virtues, for you will perish of them.”⁵⁸

At the supreme height of the daemon’s influence, the man of fate “overcomes” human nature, “the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast.” He achieves a mask or perfection of style: “he has been re-born as an idea, something intended, complete.”⁵⁹ One can compare Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, where “all the celebrated figures of the Greek stage – Prometheus, Oedipus, etc. – are masks of . . . Dionysus.”⁶⁰ Yeats sees the same phenomenon in the lives of the “supreme masters of tragedy,” who, through a final triumph of predestinated will, “become conjoint to their buried selves,” and “turn all to Mask and Image.”⁶¹ The buried self or daimon is the God, Dionysus living in modern times in the subconscious. The “Mask” is the new self forged by the will. The “Image” is the object of desire, when contemplation and desire unite in “the condition of fire,” the spiritual harmony where all is made simple for a time.⁶²

Nietzsche observed that “the Greeks . . . could not endure individuals on the tragic stage.”⁶³ Similarly, Yeats’s tragic heroes are “phantoms in their own eyes.”⁶⁴ What counts is the mask. A late example is “Long-legged Fly,” where Caesar, Helen, and Michael Angelo are superhuman presences, scarcely human beings. Likewise, the tragic heroes of “Easter, 1916” “went out to die calling upon Cuchulain.”⁶⁵ They were governed, and ennobled, by fate, which mastered them through the psychological force of the Daimon or anti-self; in their case, the half-divine Cuchulain. Their consummate achievement was to overcome human nature by wearing the divine mask.

Yeats prefers his tragic theory to Aristotle’s when he writes, “Tragedy is passion alone, and rejecting character, it gets form from motives, from the wandering of passion . . .”⁶⁶ For Aristotle, “passion alone” is not sufficient, and character is not rejected. The fine arts imitate action, says Aristotle, understanding action in the larger sense of *praxis*: “an inward process, a psychical energy working outwards; deeds, incidents, events, situations, being included under it so far as these spring from an inward act of will, or elicit some activity of thought or feeling.”⁶⁷ But Aristotle never suggests that the tragic hero or the audience is capable of pure passion, for *human* nature cannot entirely separate passion from reason. (It follows that Agave is not a tragic hero, she is a tragic dupe.) This is not

to say that reason always prevails, or that morality is harmonious, or that the tragic flaw should be moralized. It is to say that emotion retains some cast of thought for people who are not acting like beasts. A rational, human element survives in the moral impression of tragedy, even if the profoundness of the impression leads beyond language toward the ineffable or God.

Yeats's antipathy to character reflects the goal of his tragic art: the incorporeal ecstasy of vision. In *A Full Moon in March*, the Swineherd cannot consummate his love for the Queen. He is the dung and she the ideal. No living man can besmirch the full moon. But after his beheading, the Swineherd's passionate destiny is realized through an act of ventriloquism that recalls the religious origin of drama, at least as Nietzsche pictured it: "to see oneself transformed before one's own eyes and to begin to act as if one had actually entered into another body, another character."⁶⁸ Yeats's Dionysianism, like his long turn to the East, expresses a need for greater passion and stranger vision than Christian Europe was willing to countenance. "The Eastern poet," Yeats writes with Dionysian yearning, "saw the Moon as the Sun's bride; now in solitude; now offered to her Bridegroom in a self-abandonment unknown to our poetry."⁶⁹ At the new moon and the full, the soul enters a state of incorporeal purity, of potency and act, respectively, that overcomes the fleshy individuality of the Renaissance. The sense of disembodied perception, which Yeats pursues throughout his work, is an effect of stylistic abstraction from the human substance – from the body's ethical gravity.⁷⁰

Only a generation ago, Yeats was given an enthusiastic reception that generally took him at his word. He was widely reported to have achieved Unity of Being, to have joined soul and body, image and rhetoric, vision and nature.⁷¹ But all that – or nearly all of it – has gone by the board. Poetry has lost its timeless aura, and Yeats and other poets have proven extremely vulnerable to ideological critique. That Yeats's metaphysic has not aged well is an understatement. That it is worth no more than a fly in a snowstorm is a live hypothesis. But while I do not share Yeats's religious faith in the imagination, I do not want to debunk the imagination, which would be like debunking that doubtful organ, the mind. Yeats saw that we can no more escape the metaphysical issues of art than we can escape our own shadows. His younger contemporary Aldous Huxley put the matter this way: "It is impossible to live without a metaphysics. The choice that is given us is not between some kind of metaphysic and no metaphysic; it is always between a good metaphysic and a bad metaphysic, a metaphysic that corresponds reasonably closely with observed and inferred

reality and one that doesn't." ⁷² By pursuing his intuitions to their farthest reach, Yeats confronted the metaphysical questions that rule over art and history.

Yeats refers to Unity of Being as "of all states of mind not impossible, the most difficult to . . . man, race, or nation; because only the greatest obstacle that can be contemplated without despair, rouses the will to full intensity." ⁷³ Since Unity of Being is not the obstacle but the goal, what could the obstacle be, given what we know about Yeats's philosophy? Let us return to his theory of the emotions. Despite the reformation announced in "Discoveries," the theory never departs from the early essay "The Moods," with its Neoplatonic descent of passionate "messengers." ⁷⁴ In *The Trembling of the Veil*, Yeats says of the Anima Mundi that it "has a memory independent of embodied individual memories." ⁷⁵ A disembodied mind, it is described as the source of all images – a theme that goes back to "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," if not earlier. As for the transition from the Great Memory to consciousness in historical time, "there is no meeting of spirit and sense but only change upon the instant, and it is by the perception of a change, like the sudden 'blacking out' of the lights of the stage, that passion creates its most violent sensation." ⁷⁶ "Lapis Lazuli" describes the "Black out" as nature's eclipse: "Heaven blazing into the head . . ." ⁷⁷ How, then, can spirit and sense interpenetrate and join in Unity of Being? The obstacle facing Yeats presents itself as the obstacle that Descartes answered with the *conarium* or pineal gland. I refer to the classic metaphysical conundrum of putting a ghostly, Platonic type of soul into a human body.

It is true that in "The Wild Swans at Coole," "A Prayer for My Daughter," and *Meditations in Time of Civil War*, an ideal of beauty finds its home in the natural world. It is a lesser ideal by Yeats's intensest daemonic standards. Yeats settles for pastoral and the country house, where he nurses his imagination, in these and other poems of aristocratic nostalgia, going back to "In the Seven Woods." Such poems are undialectical with respect to nature and vision, or action and thought. They are metaphysical, but they do not reveal the actualizing of human potential. In the *Meditations*, for example, the poet must dream and not act, and the soldiers must act and not dream, all being driven by the "Primum Mobile that fashioned us." ⁷⁸

In some of Yeats's greatest poems, including "The Second Coming," "Among School Children," and "Leda and the Swan," the body is an image, an aesthetic body expressing a transcendent vision. It follows that the aesthetic body's governing agent or soul is a vision, which has its

source outside the body. Even in those poems that are emphatically of the body, like the Crazy Jane poems, the body is sacrificed for ecstatic passion:

I had wild Jack for a lover;
 Though like a road
 That men pass over
 My body makes no moan
 But sings on:
*All things remain in God.*⁷⁹

Jane has her own theology, an affront to the Bishop's Catholicism. Her body is "like a road" to her, for her vision is directed, like the saint's, wholly elsewhere. As a poet of sublime refrains, Yeats trafficks in oppositions between the common sight and the choric insight. In "Crazy Jane on God," the soul leaps up to heaven. In "Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers," heaven moves the body. In neither case does the refrain support the union of body and soul.⁸⁰

But the obstacles I have just outlined do not necessarily overthrow the quest for Unity of Being. They can be understood as elements in an unfolding drama, with its background in the Byzantium of *A Vision*. It is the core of the myth around which Yeats worked his later revisions and refinements: "The first version of this book, *A Vision*, except the section on the twenty-eight Phases, and that called 'Dove or Swan,' which I repeat without change, fills me with shame."⁸¹ The well-known description from "Dove or Swan" offers an Irish answer to *The Stones of Venice*:

I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic, and practical life were one, that architect and artificers – though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract – spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject matter and that the vision of a whole people. They could copy out of old Gospel books those pictures that seemed as sacred as the text, and yet weave all into a vast design, the work of many that seemed the work of one, that made building, picture, pattern, metal-work of rail and lamp, seem but a single image; and this vision, this proclamation of their invisible master, had the Greek nobility, Satan always the still half-divine serpent, never the horned scarecrow of the didactic Middle Ages.⁸²

In Yeats's visionary Byzantium, the middle class and its gray rationalism are banished. Christianity is purged of its dross, chiefly the "didactic" matter of sin. The people are impersonal, semi-conscious. Realizing the will of "their invisible master," who is Yeats's version of Nietzsche's

“amoral artist-god,”⁸³ they are blessed with the gift of crafting eternity. They are incapable of abstraction. Here, then, is something like Unity of Being: reconciliation of the many and the one, of spirit and matter, of the practical life and the religious life. Only the presence of religious controversy threatens the whole fabric. It disturbs the Neoplatonic descent of images, moods, and emotions from the few to the multitude – what Yeats in *The Trembling of the Veil* calls “nation-wide multiform reverie,” “stream of suggestion,” and “Unity of Image.”⁸⁴

The poet of “Sailing to Byzantium” aspires to Unity of Being through a powerful dialectic of nature and vision. His journey begins with the “birds in the trees – those dying generations” and ends with an undying image, a golden bird, prophetic consciousness of the heaven of art. The arc of the poem is away from the bustle of nature, much as Byzantine art forsakes Hellenistic realism for timeless religious vision. And yet the golden bird requires the dying generations for the dialectic to happen.

Sturge Moore’s objection to “Sailing to Byzantium,” that the “goldsmith’s bird is as much nature as a man’s body,”⁸⁵ is a crux in the interpretive tradition.⁸⁶ It proceeds, in a letter to Yeats dated April 16, 1930, from Moore’s agreeing with Wittgenstein that “nothing at all can be said about ultimates, or reality in the ultimate sense.”⁸⁷ It is from this sphere of concern that he offers his remark. And in his response to Moore, Yeats makes a fine distinction. He writes, “You objected to the last verse of *Sailing to Byzantium* (*sic*) because a bird made by a goldsmith was just as natural as anything else. That showed me that the idea needed exposition.”⁸⁸ Yeats did not find grounds for objection in the golden bird’s having a relation to nature. The point, after all, was to ascend the Great Chain of Being from nature to the heaven of art. Yeats found grounds for objection in the golden bird’s being *just as natural as anything else*. It is not a matter of Yeats’s establishing “the absolute difference, as of different orders of reality, between the Image, and what is, in the usual sense, alive.”⁸⁹ It is a matter of relating body to image, and nature to vision, for metaphysics must bow to faith if differences are non-relational and “absolute.” The soul goes “out of nature” to achieve its supernatural existence, and there are gaps in the dialectic, but there is not a sudden leap, as we often see in Yeats. Instead, there is a crossing from the natural to the supernatural, including mediatorial shades (“the singing masters”), and a dialectical interplay of nature and vision.

“Byzantium,” generally interpreted along the lines of “Kubla Khan” as an allegory of the creative process, is more fragmentary and difficult. But it does reflect Yeats’s effort to achieve Unity of Being. It begins with the

“drunken soldiery abed” under a “starlit or a moonlit dome,” and it concludes with “the dolphin-torn, the gong-tormented sea.”⁹⁰ The gong is lunar. It refreshes the symbolism of the dome, while illustrating and sounding (like a gong) the metamorphic fecundity or self-begetting power of the imagination. In the final stanza, the sea of nature is manifested as a sea of symbols. But the natural sea remains a force in the poem. It is “torn” and “tormented” in a perpetual state of becoming. It is a source of tension and creativity, a spur, a particular reality. My point here is that nature is mastered and spiritualized as art, but it is not simply evacuated. The Emperor requires his soldiery and his sea. The “disdain” and “scorn” that art expresses for “all complexities of mire or blood” does *not* betoken their complete elimination.

The Byzantium poems were a promise of something higher, which Yeats could not achieve. Through his dialectical interplay of perspectives, he wanted to be true to the earth, the realm of becoming, while rising to the knowledge of being. Inspired more by *The Birth of Tragedy* than by *The Renaissance*, for Nietzsche’s sense of the visionary is more active than Pater’s, he was laboring to attain an omni-vision, but he could approach it only in stops and starts. In 1928 he wrote achingly of Plato and Plotinus: “. . . it is something in our own eyes that makes us see them as all transcendence.” The problem, he confessed, was with himself: the soul should have all nature under its dominion.⁹¹

Bent on his impossible quest, the later Yeats drew increasing support from Bishop Berkeley. He especially liked the interpretation of Berkeley put forth by Wyndham Lewis in the Conclusion to *Time and Western Man*, published in 1927. Lewis believed in the objective vision of the individual artist. He connected the rise of modern scientific philosophy to the rise of “mass-democracy” and “its *group-mind*.”⁹² In “our present situation,” he argued, “science and art should be kept rigidly apart.”⁹³ Yeats zealously agreed. He told Moore: “I have read *Time and Western Man* with gratitude, the last chapters again and again.”⁹⁴

In his Conclusion, Lewis commanded Yeats’s attention with the remark that “berkeleyan idealism is by no means incompatible with the kind of vivid realism that is being advocated in these pages.”⁹⁵ Lewis was attempting an admittedly imperfect synthesis of the idealist Berkeley and the realist G. E. Moore, judged to be “much nearer” to each other philosophically than either was to the “idealo-realism” of Alexander, Whitehead, Cassirer, and Gentile. Yeats would soon describe Berkeley as “idealist and realist alike.”⁹⁶ But when the poet tried his newfound synthesis out on Sturge Moore, the philosopher’s brother wasn’t buying:

“He [Lewis] finds my brother’s realism very much to his mind but seems to think this can consist with Berkeley’s ideas about things existing only in his mind, in which, if he really thinks this, he is certainly wrong.”⁹⁷ Like his brother, Sturge Moore believed in scientific objectivity. His candid replies to Yeats on this point provide much of the drama in their correspondence. Yeats saw idealism as an alternative to science, and somehow took heart from the writings of G. E. Moore. Sturge Moore protested: “If it were proved that the objective view hitherto held by science were untenable [Moore is thinking of Einstein’s supplanting Newton] the alternative would not be ‘idealism,’ I conceive, but merely a larger admission of ignorance. ‘Idealism’ has to explain away science.”⁹⁸ This required yet a blunter follow-up: “You have no inkling of my brother’s argument.”⁹⁹

Never mind! Berkeley gave Yeats an Irish answer to Locke, to “English empirical genius, English sense of reality.”¹⁰⁰ “And God-appointed Berkeley proved all things a dream,” Yeats writes in “Blood and the Moon,” the statement serving, strangely, to moor Yeats to Ireland, the historical and material Ireland.¹⁰¹ Lewis describes in Berkeley a movement of thought from the common-sense view, that objects of the external world are “unthinking things,” to the ultimate truth of reality. We live in a world of “dead, inanimate matter” until we start to reflect, and common sense discovers its fulfillment in idealism.¹⁰² Likewise, Yeats moves from the common-sense forms of nature to idealized supernaturalism: “An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.”¹⁰³ He can claim to do epistemological justice to the matter of nature because nature and image are separated only by the dialectical play, or power, of perspective.

Lewis’s version of Berkeley remained central to Yeats as he again looked eastward for what he believed the West had lost: “heroic ecstatic passion” that could overcome the body’s limits and triumph over materialism.¹⁰⁴ The method of Yeats’s writings on Brahminism is syncretic. He is full of surprising correspondences between East and West: “In one of the Patanjali commentaries there is a detailed analysis of the stages of concentration that would be Hegelian did they include the self in their dialectic.”¹⁰⁵ The object of these writings – and of Yeats’s passion – is to overcome the divided consciousness, the romantic dualism of self and not-self, of vision and nature. And instead of crying *Eureka!*, Yeats cries *Chitta!*: “It is *Chitta*, perhaps, which most separates Indian from European thought.”¹⁰⁶ *Chitta* is “mental substance” or “mind-stuff.” It supplies an eastern revision of Berkeleyan idealism: “If I shut my eyes and try to recall table and chair, I see them as transformations of the *Chitta*. Indeed, the actual table and chair are but the *Chitta* posited by the mind, the personality, in space, where, because

two things cannot occupy the same place, there is discord and suffering.”¹⁰⁷ The great difference between Berkeley and Brahma is that Berkeley’s God remains strictly transcendent, while Hinduism allows Yeats a direct conjunction with the Divine Self: “By withdrawing into our own mind we discover the *Chitta* united to Heart and therefore pure.”¹⁰⁸ Yeats had found his Holy Grail: *Chitta* dispels the Newtonian vacuum of space and thereby joins spirit and matter.

In his Introduction to the second edition of *A Vision*, in 1937, Yeats is coy in his seeming modesty, questioning his own success as the cosmic safe-cracker. In the name of “reason,” he denies believing “in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon.” He seems, if we like, to dismiss some parts of his book as “plainly symbolical.” He then concludes, in the name of “imagination,” that the work’s cosmology helped him “to hold in a single thought reality and justice.”¹⁰⁹ Now, where did Yeats do his banking, with reason or imagination? And what a modest little claim: holding in a single thought reality and justice. At any rate I do not think we can say with certainty that Yeats thought *A Vision* just a myth.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche connects reality and justice in his famous remark, “it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and world are eternally *justified* . . .”¹¹⁰ He calls for a rebirth of myth: “a concentrated image of the world that, as a condensation of phenomena, cannot dispense with miracles.”¹¹¹ But Nietzsche, in the Yeatsian view, did not know enough. Nietzsche’s philosophy, in the astrological verdict of Phase Twelve of the twenty-eight incarnations, is “subjective.”¹¹² Yeats wanted to include the subjective in a higher synthesis. He wanted a unified theory of knowledge, not just the appearances or “phenomena,” but the whole shebang, inside and out, a mystical reality. He wanted the mask as flesh. In the end, he would outdo Aristotle and Dante, and crown himself *il Maestro di color che sanno*.

Yeats admitted doubts only when he was unable to “work out” the details of his prophecy for Europe’s death and rebirth. His method was obsessively to test the facts before him against his system, “to substitute particulars for an abstraction like that of algebra.”¹¹³ The facts did not fit. All seemed lost, when Yeats declared victory anyway:

But nothing comes – though this moment was to reward me for all my toil. Perhaps I am too old . . . Then I understand. I have already said all that can be said. The particulars are the work of the *thirteenth sphere* or cycle which is in every man and called by every man his freedom. Doubtless, for it can do all things and knows all things, it knows what it will do with its own freedom but it has kept the secret.¹¹⁴

This is to beat a hasty retreat from “of all states of mind not impossible, the most difficult” to the transcendence and mystery of God. It is a moment, like the Ulysses episode in Dante, when the self confronts that which is outside its circle and its powers. But it is a moment bereft of any moral attention, tragic or comical, of any real feeling at all.

At this awkward juncture, let us consider the responses of two influential critics. In Yeats’s system, Richard Ellmann explains, “Each lifetime is the scene of a tug-of-war between four ‘faculties’ of the human mind, the daimon, the dead, certain miscellaneous spirits, the Thirteenth Cycle, and other voices. The contest is so intricate, and its outcome so unpredictable, that what starts out . . . as a deterministic system is reframed . . . until it contains a large measure of free will . . .” And if we are still unconvinced, Ellmann says frankly, Yeats “felt . . . free to believe and disbelieve in free will . . .”¹¹⁵ A generous faith in the creative imagination is essential to the poet. And not only the poet, the critic too is entitled to negative capability, even if Ellmann seems to go whistling past the metaphysical nightmare that feeds Yeats’s mesmerizing art. Harold Bloom is less deferential: “The desperate freedom Yeats imported into *A Vision* as the Thirteenth Sphere . . . does not alter the irony that *A Vision* remains only another example of . . . ‘the dogma of gradual process,’ by which the quasi-historical thought of our time has worked to establish a more tenacious and oppressive belief in fate than has ever before existed.”¹¹⁶ Bloom appears to have warmed to his subject. He is, in any case, dead-on accurate about the irony, which hoists Yeats smack into the company of the dialectical materialists, crushing the individual’s subjectivity and strength in the moon’s final quarter.

I connect the ethical collapse of *A Vision* to Yeats’s denial of science. But there is, I think, much in his position that commands respect. “Fragments” shows the strength of Yeats’s argument, which harkens back to Blake’s contempt for deism:

I

Locke sank into a swoon;
The Garden died;
God took the spinning-jenny
Out of his side.

II

Where got I that truth?
Out of a medium’s mouth,
Out of nothing it came,

Out of the forest loam,
 Out of the dark night where lay
 The crowns of Nineveh.¹¹⁷

Locke as Adam, the spinning-jenny as Eve, and a clipped farewell to Eden: the poet makes up for in gnomic intensity what he lacks in discursive reason – the language of Locke. He argues that Locke’s machinery has betrayed God himself, reducing him to a master machine. At the same time, he suggests that Locke’s view is incomplete, one of many “fragments,” only “his side” of things. Although the “Garden” dies in history, its godlike perfection, alluded to with the alliterative capital “G,” exists beyond space and time in the Anima Mundi. Locke’s disintegrated psyche has brought about a catastrophic fall from Unity of Being, but “truth” is larger than Locke, and larger than the poet himself, who must also speak in fragments. In Part II, Yeats answers his self-consciousness with a riddle. In effect, he meditates on his poem as an utterance from “out of” unknown depths, where the Lockean mind, closed to innate ideas, cannot penetrate. Whitmanian anaphora suggest the endless creativity of the divine mystery, while the slant rhymes (especially in the pronounced flatness of the last line) convey a strange facticity that challenges science. The poem is a rebuke of scientific truths that, to quote Nietzsche, “obviously do *not* come from the depths.” *Wissenschaft* cannot speak to our souls’ desire for high passion and Unity of Being, because it “has absolutely *no* belief in itself, let alone an ideal above it . . .”¹¹⁸

At the turn of the century, Yeats stood among a small vanguard of post-Nietzschean writers who detested the cosmological vision of seventeenth-century scientific rationalism. He, Whitehead, and Husserl (soon to be followed by Weber and Heidegger), were among the first to learn from Nietzsche’s grave doubts about the basis and value of science. “Is the resolve to be scientific about everything,” Nietzsche asked, “. . . [a] subtle last resort against – *truth*? And, morally speaking, a sort of cowardice and falseness?”¹¹⁹ But Nietzsche was not interested in further metaphysics. A creative skeptic, he abandoned the search for the unity of knowledge, and left a later generation to resume it.

In the event, a metaphysical gold rush ensued that lasted until the Second World War, with modernism participating in the frenzy of speculation. Yeats’s letters to Moore show his particular appreciation for Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World*. In his important book, Whitehead defends poetry as a form of knowledge, while outlining a metaphysical synthesis that rivals “the philosophical situation as expressed by Descartes.”¹²⁰ To supply an example of science’s legitimate concern

with the natural order, Whitehead quotes William James, who paused from his labors over the *Principles of Psychology* to grumble to his brother Henry: "I have to forge every sentence in the teeth of irreducible and stubborn facts."¹²¹ Whitehead remarks: "All the world over and at all times there have been practical men, absorbed in 'irreducible and stubborn facts': all the world over there have been men of philosophical temperament who have been absorbed in the weaving of general principles. It is this union of passionate interest in the detailed facts with equal devotion to abstract generalisation which forms the novelty in our present society."¹²² At the furnace of knowledge, James resembles Yeats in his effort to adjust "particulars" to "general principles." But James's respect for matter is foreign to the poet's enterprise. Yeats forged an aesthetic, ethical, and religious unity, a vision of the wholeness of being. But unlike James and Whitehead, he stubbornly dismissed the "irreducible and stubborn facts" of natural science in favor of his independent subjectivity. He knew that facts could be faked and that science lacked a foundation, but he dissolved matter with the idealizing force of his own mind.

It is a theme of this book that you cannot put the mind back into nature unless you respect them both. And that respect, an act, it may be, worthy of discipline and love, protects the moral life. Yeats pursued the great metaphysical goal of relating mind to matter, but his type of imagination was part of the problem and therefore incapable of the solution. He must have noticed Whitehead's warning that Cartesianism "leads directly not merely to private worlds of experience, but also to private worlds of morals."¹²³ He certainly fitted the description, for his ideas about reality made him a most unusual philosopher: a determinist who denied science the power to "instruct or persuade about its own particular subject-matter" (*Rhet.* 1355b28). He put art before nature, and understood nature only in terms of art. It follows that the private world of his mind became the universe of his work. He inverted the scientific universe, where a colossal vacuum had displaced the spirit. All became spirit, but matter was lost. Yeats never saw his own face on that daemon of the modern age – science.

T. S. Eliot: the modernist Aristotle

A completely ironic poet passes beyond the realm of poetry into an inscrutable solipsism. After discovering the master ironist Jules Laforgue, the young Eliot grew more and more inscrutable himself. From the start of the manuscript poems in *Inventions of the March Hare*, objects and routines pile up, without the possibility of an action to resolve their significance. The ironically titled “Convictions (Curtain Raiser)” opens the collection with scenes of marionettes, including some knightly marionettes who discourse on moral philosophy:

And over there my Paladins
Are talking of effect and cause,
With “learn to live by nature’s laws!”
And “strive for social happiness
And contact with your fellow-men
In reason: nothing to excess!”
As one leaves off, the other begins.¹

Funny as it is to hear “learn to live by nature’s laws!” from the mouth of a puppet, the joke comes at a high cost to the poet. He dwells in a world of suffocating convention, from which he is liberated only in mind. His mindless cast airs its “convictions,” overheated platitudes recorded by the poet with an occasional parenthesis, which marks the small difference of his freedom: “My marionettes (or so they say) / Have these keen moments every day.”² Trapped by the same formalities of meter and manner, the poet and his marionettes bear a family resemblance. They dramatize his dilemma of what to say and do, as he studies the human mechanism and its moral repertoire. Certainly Eliot takes from Laforgue “the elegant posturings of the poet-in-disguise,”³ but the disguise weighs on him with the dismal force of habit.

Laforgue was tubercular, so was his wife, and the disease claimed his mother when he was very young. No wonder he regarded his body with resignation:

*Encore un de mes pierrots est mort;
Mort d'un chronique orphelinisme;
C'était un coeur plein de dandysme
Lunaire, en un drôle de corps.*⁴

Another of my pierrots is dead,
Dead from being chronically orphaned;
He had a heart full of dandyism
From the moon, in a bizarre body.

Symons refers to these verses from *Locutions des Pierrots* as “a kind of mockery of prose.”⁵ He quotes them in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which Eliot discovered in 1908, when he was a Harvard junior composing slender lyrics. The jangling wit (*encore, mort, mort, or phelinisme, coeur, and corps*), the expectorating gutturals, and the elaborate conceit would have resonated with Eliot’s interest in the metaphysical poets, especially Donne. But the metaphysical element is compounded with a later type of romantic psychology, a theatrical self-consciousness that Eliot imitates in “Convictions (Curtain Raiser).” Laforgue ridicules his own feelings through a parody of the human form, which he presents as a white-masked clown, a pierrot adapted from the French pantomime.

In his Clark Lectures of 1926, Eliot views Laforgue through the medium of Schopenhauer and his disciple Hartmann. Taken together, Schopenhauer and Laforgue reveal a good deal about Eliot’s formation as a poet. For example, here is the passage with which Eliot, in his 1921 essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” introduces his English readership to Laforgue:

*O géraniums diaphanes, guerroyeurs sortilèges,
Sacrilèges monomanes!
Emballages, dévergondages, douches! O pressoirs
Des vendanges des grands soirs!
Layettes aux abois,
Thyrses au fond des bois,
Transfusions, représailles,
Relevailles, compresses et l'éternel potion,
Angélus! n'en pouvoir plus
De débâcles nuptiales! de débâcles nuptiales!*⁶

O diaphanous geraniums, warriors casting spells,
Obsessive sacrileges!
Excitements, debaucheries, refreshing showers! O wine-presses
For the harvests of grand evenings!
Layettes at bay,
Thyrses in the deep wood!

Stiff drinks, reprisals,
 Church going, compresses and the eternal potion,
Angelus! Let there be no more power over us
 For the marriage debacle, the marriage debacle!

To read this torrential catalogue as a metaphysical conceit, one must grasp the Schopenhauerian matrix behind it. The geraniums are diaphanous because we are seeing through appearances to the reality underlying romance and courtship. The endangered layettes, the Dionysian thyrses in the deep wood, the Wagnerian potion or love philtre, are allusions to romance and sexual madness, pregnancies in crisis and unspeakable urges. Then there are the conventional responses, the bells, prayers, and compresses, ending in a mock "*Angélus!*" and the final exasperated shudder of "*n'en pouvoir plus / De débâcles nuptiales! de débâcles nuptiales!*" For Schopenhauer and Laforgue, romantic love and the sacrament of marriage are a trap: they are the means by which the cosmic will tricks two people into making a particular baby.

Eliot learned from Laforgue how to distance his emotion. He observes that in Laforgue's poetry "the system of Schopenhauer collapses, but in a different wreck from that of *Tristan und Isolde*."⁷ For Schopenhauer, art offers "a solution to the problem of existence" by freeing the intellect from "the aims of the will."⁸ For Laforgue, Schopenhauer offers no balm for the sufferer, but only a spectacle of self-division, an ironic state of watching oneself – as a phenomenon of the will – being split into a thinking person and a feeling person.⁹ Laforgue is a tortured romantic whose recurring symbolism pits the deadly sun of generation against the kindly moon (or moonshine) of imagination. Wagner, by contrast, celebrates the emotional tumult of noble figures overwhelmed by magic and wrecked by their aching sexuality. Eliot is ambivalent about Wagner, by turns worshipful and cynical.¹⁰ In *The Waste Land*, he pays tribute to *Tristan und Isolde*. But Laforguean irony intrudes in Eliot's manuscript poem "Opera," which takes the same work as its subject:

We have the tragic? oh no!
 Life departs with a feeble smile
 Into the indifferent.
 These emotional experiences
 Do not hold good at all,
 And I feel like the ghost of youth
 At the undertakers' ball.¹¹

To deny "the tragic" is to deny the physical pleasures of catharsis. It is a move Eliot would repeat in his drama. The poet passes moral judgment

on his feelings: "These emotional experiences / Do not hold good at all." They do not survive inspection, they have no "good" in them, and their abstraction results in his "indifferent" and divided state. Eliot would continue to refine and vary such expressions of moral solitude, but what we can see with stark clarity in "Opera" is his Laforguean self-consciousness at work. He disengages his mind from the physical world of form and convention, even as he adapts Laforgue to the probity of the strict New Englander, the force of conscience and spiritual independence. What remains is an abstract reflection of the moment at hand, a "ghost" with a voice.

Unlike Eliot, Laforgue can be arrogantly sexual. His poetry simmers with sex-puns. He is much more frank than Eliot, who called him "immature" and "rough."¹² And yet, in moments that Eliot laid stress upon, Laforgue expressed the sincerest longing for true erotic companionship:

*L'âme et la chair, la chair et l'âme,
C'est l'Esprit édénique et fier
D'être un peu l'Homme avec la Femme.*¹³

The soul and the flesh, the flesh and the soul,
It is the proud spirit of Eden
A little bit to be a Man with a Woman.

For a brief tercet, Laforgue's metaphysic of spirit and flesh veers closer to Dante than to Schopenhauer. "The Metaphysical Poets" has Eliot quoting another *cri de coeur*:

*Elle est bien loin, elle pleure,
Le grand vent se lamente aussi . . .*¹⁴

She is far away, she weeps,
The high wind laments also . . .

Symons said of Laforgue: "He will not permit himself, at any moment, the luxury of dropping the mask: not at any moment."¹⁵ But Eliot noticed exceptions that gave the French poet a heart-wrenching pathos. In this respect, Eliot's argument is surely right: "in Laforgue there is continuous war between the feelings implied by his ideas, and the ideas implied by his feelings."¹⁶ Laforgue, as Eliot suggests, is a sufferer, whose irony is "an expression of suffering."¹⁷

With a truly farcical lack of success, Arnold in 1853 warned against poetry "in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continual state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to

be done.”¹⁸ Arnold had left the altar of aesthetic consciousness because he did not want literature to be a “true allegory of the state of one’s own mind.”¹⁹ His counter-thrust was as follows: “The poet . . . has in the first place to select an excellent action; and what actions are the most excellent? Those, certainly, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time. These feelings are permanent and the same; that which interests them is permanent and the same also.”²⁰ The basis of Arnold’s argument is threefold: first, human nature exists; second, it is universal and permanent; and third, it connects the poetry of action to “the great primary affections.” In short, Arnold’s premises betoken a synthesis of Aristotle’s thought on ethics and the arts.

No one will raise an eyebrow if I say that Eliot’s poetry owes much to Laforgue’s poetry and little to Arnold’s criticism. As a modernist poet, Eliot is a sufferer, whose irony is relieved, not by incident or hope, but by moments of intense sincerity. Like Laforgue, he sets emotion and intellect at odds. He divorces the thinkers from the doers, the life of the mind from the life of the body, erotic visions from brutal facts. Absurd physiques are typical of the pre-conversion poems, from Prufrock “pinned and wriggling on the wall” to “the hollow men . . . / Headpiece filled with straw.” Sweeney is human nature, nasty, brutish, and “broadbottomed.” Eliot’s great poems, from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to *Four Quartets*, are theaters of self-consciousness, allegories of the state of his mind.

So how could Eliot possibly reconcile his criticism with either Arnold or Aristotle? Judged solely by its opening pages, *The Sacred Wood* appears to be Arnoldian. Here, for instance, is one of Arnold’s signature passages as quoted by Eliot in his Introduction:

In the Greece of Pindar and Sophocles, in the England of Shakespeare, the poet lived in a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power; society was, in the fullest measure, permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive; and this state of things is the true basis for the creative power’s exercise, in this it finds its data, its materials, truly ready for its hand; all the books and reading in the world are only valuable as they are helps to this.²¹

But Eliot – once we get to know him – has really nothing to do with this. The true Eliotic note is quite different:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism.²²

Eliot is more truly at home “among the dead,” in a hermetic space of “staring forms / . . . leaning, hushing the room enclosed.”²³ His aesthetic proclivities owe more to Pater than to Arnold. In Eliot’s poetry of fragments, the elision of connecting matter suggests a corollary elision of social matter. The bridge between self and community collapses: “London bridge is falling down falling down falling down.”²⁴ The individual waits “in his prison,”²⁵ the Fisher King waits in his desert. With little trust in human nature or in society, Eliot seeks to overcome his distance from Sophocles and from Shakespeare on the solitary wings of genius. He takes to the aesthetic ether, where pure mind meets the “ideal order” of “existing monuments.” The “historical sense” serves his purpose insofar as it is a faculty of the aesthetic mind.²⁶

History itself, as opposed either to the “historical sense” or to the “mythical method,” is a body of facts awaiting comparison and analysis – which “need only the cadavers on the table . . .”²⁷ In his 1923 essay “The Function of Criticism,” Eliot revisits the theme of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” while applauding the “complete development” of “the sense of fact” as “perhaps the very pinnacle of civilisation.”²⁸ By contrast, when Arnold discusses “tradition,” he lacks the specialist’s zeal for excavating fact from the soil of value. He adopts Aristotle’s dictum that “poetry is something more philosophic and [more serious] than history” (*Poet.* 1451b5). Aristotle bases this observation on general human nature, and Arnold finds its confirmation in “the superiority of diction and movement” that marks the best poetry.²⁹

As it happened, Eliot confided to a friend he was using Arnold as a “stalking horse, or as a cloak of invisibility-respectability to protect me from the elderly . . . [Or] as a scarecrow with a real gun under his arm.”³⁰ Within his own circle, “the mantle of Matthew Arnold” was anathema.³¹ And yet the Eliot of *The Sacred Wood* raises the Arnoldian standard of disinterestedness,³² and endorses seeing “the object as it really is,”³³ after snubbing Arnold as “a propagandist for criticism.”³⁴ It was at best a marriage of convenience, which would darken and intensify as Eliot grew religious.

Aristotle manages to appear more often in *The Sacred Wood* than any other philosopher, ancient or modern.³⁵ He is the closest approximation to “the perfect critic.” His “scientific mind” is the counterpoint to Hegel’s emotional mind.³⁶ He is said to have “looked solely and steadfastly at the object.”³⁷ His status as “a moral pilot of Europe” is at issue.³⁸ Eliot quotes *On the Soul* above the third section of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” implying a connection between Aristotle’s *nous* and the mind of

Europe. More generally, *The Sacred Wood* bristles with a philosophical command not seen in English criticism since the *Biographia Literaria*. Eliot is serious and resourceful in his use of Aristotle, but his project is attended by insurmountable difficulties.

What Eliot tried to do was to accommodate his own kind of scrupulous writing, an Anglo-American obsession with *le mot juste* that assumes the skeptical epistemology of linguistic idealism,³⁹ to an ethical tradition linking Aristotle and Dante. Allying himself with the analytic intelligence of Aristotle, the author of *The Sacred Wood* battles against critics who “substitute emotion for thoughts.”⁴⁰ F. H. Bradley, the subject of Eliot’s Harvard dissertation, had fought for identical reasons against Arnold and Mill in *Ethical Studies*. And like Bradley in his censure of Mill, Eliot focuses on a loose definition of poetry:

The sentence [“poetry is the most highly organized form of intellectual activity”] . . . may be profitably contrasted with the opening phrases of the *Posterior Analytics*. Not only all knowledge, but all feeling, is in perception. The inventor of poetry as the most highly organized form of intellectual activity was not engaged in perceiving when he composed this definition; he had nothing to be aware of except his own emotion about “poetry.” He was, in fact, absorbed in a very different “activity” . . . from that of Aristotle.⁴¹

The grounds are empirical and individualistic: if “all knowledge . . . is in perception,” then we can rule out innate ideas and anamnesis (i.e., recollection of knowledge from a previous existence). Aristotle is often empirical. But as a point of Aristotelian anthropology, *all* feeling is not in perception: feeling, by virtue of its interpersonal character, by its very depth, precedes the self. Hazlitt says of Shakespeare and Milton: “They owe their power over the human mind to their having had a deeper sense than others of what was grand in the objects of nature, or affecting in the events of human life.”⁴² Eliot, in a lightning stroke, changes Aristotle into a modernist. And this change is accompanied by an almost imperceptible revision of the *Posterior Analytics*. Aristotle had said: “All instruction given or received by way of argument proceeds from pre-existent knowledge” (71a1). There is no reference to “feeling” or “perception,” words that bear an association, in Eliot’s learned usage, with “aesthetics,” a word that derives from a Greek verb (αἰσθάνομαι) meaning “to sense” or “to perceive.”

Under the guise of literary criticism, Eliot in *The Sacred Wood* enters the continuing debate in modern philosophy about the relation between aesthetics and ethics, a field of discourse dominated by Kant’s third *Critique*. In his theory of aesthetic judgment, Kant had opened the possibility, which he himself did not endorse, of a full-fledged departure

of the beautiful from the good.⁴³ A crucial question in the field is how the feelings and emotions aroused by the art object (i.e. “art emotions”) connect to the broader life of feeling and emotion. The meaning of art is at stake in the question.

Bernard Bosanquet offers a precedent for Eliot in his well-known work *A History of Aesthetic: From the Greeks to the Twentieth Century*, especially the section “Aristotle on Tragedy,” which speaks eloquently of the religion of art.⁴⁴ Bosanquet exalts the aesthetic in the high nineteenth-century manner, which describes the historical triumph of the aesthetic consciousness. It is known that Joyce used the book while writing *Ulysses*. I have not found evidence that Eliot consulted it (other works by Bosanquet feature in his dissertation), but Bosanquet’s high aestheticism, which readily adapts Aristotle to the aesthetic cause, making the tragic catharsis an art emotion, is congenial to the mood of *The Sacred Wood*.

William James’s approach differs markedly from Bosanquet’s. Writes James: “In the aesthetic emotions the bodily reverberation and the feeling may both be faint. A connoisseur is apt to judge a work of art dryly and intellectually, and with no bodily thrill. On the other hand, works of art may arouse intense emotion; and whenever they do so, the experience is completely covered by the terms of our theory.”⁴⁵ James’s theory places unusual emphasis on the body’s role in the emotional life.⁴⁶ Prior to James, there arose an immovable barrier between vision and morality for romantic writers on both sides of the Atlantic. Despite the work of James, Eliot restores the barrier and protects the nineteenth-century religion of art. In remarking that “all feeling . . . is in perception,” Eliot privileges “the intelligence itself swiftly operating the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition.”⁴⁷ It may be replied that he has in mind “some quality of sensuous thought, or of thinking through the senses, or of the senses thinking, of which the exact formula remains to be defined.”⁴⁸ But “sensuous thought” for Eliot is not embodied. His praise for the poet Jean de Bosschère is deployed in his own cause: “M. de Bosschère is in fact almost a pure intellectual; leaving, as if disdainfully, our emotions to form as they will around the situation which his brain has selected . . . Instead of refining ordinary human emotion (and I do not mean tepid human emotion, but human however intense – in the crude living state) he aims direct at emotions of art.”⁴⁹ Likewise: “What constitutes the terrible authority of Villon’s testaments is that he saw his feelings, watched them, as coldly as an astronomer watches a comet; and without this cold and scientific observation he could never have given his feelings their permanent intensity.”⁵⁰ Aristotle and James do not lend

their authority to Eliot's isolation of the aesthetic,⁵¹ simply because the nature of feeling does not allow it: feeling begins in the body and then comes to consciousness.

As we absorb the following superb passage from Tourneur's *Revenger's Tragedy*, the author of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" would ask us to distinguish between the "structural emotion . . . provided by the drama" and the "new art emotion" that coheres in the affinity between the "structural emotion" itself and "a number of floating feelings" that are specific to the poetry:⁵²

And now methinks I could e'en chide myself
 For doating on her beauty, though her death
 Shall be revenged after no common action.
 Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours
 For thee? For thee does she undo herself?
 Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
 For the poor benefit of a bewildering minute?
 Why does yon fellow falsify highways,
 And put his life between the judge's lips,
 To refine such a thing – keeps horse and men
 To beat their valours for her? . . .⁵³

Eliot sees the passage in terms of its form: he sees an organic unity comprising numerous emotional parts, all of which he holds at a certain self-conscious distance. To recall James, one may conclude that Eliot falls, along with his impeccable taste, into the category of "a connoisseur . . . apt to judge a work of art drily and intellectually, and with no bodily thrill." Fear for oneself, pity for the tragic victim, lose their immediacy in the analysis, though possibly they are accounted for by the "structural emotion." Then Eliot formulates a new doctrine: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion . . ." ⁵⁴ To make this escape, is it not to escape the relationship between aesthetic interest and real interest, the very relationship on which the tragic effect depends?

It will be remembered that Arnold was concerned with "primary affections" and "elementary feelings," not with "art emotions" that sharply divide the aesthetic from the ethical. The classical hero is a paragon for Arnold, because classical authors appeal to the "permanent elements" of our nature. In Homer, for instance, the Greek mind discerns a difference between heroic excellence (virtue in the earliest sense) and social justice.⁵⁵ Achilles's momentous choice, between anonymous old age and glorious early death, awakens his self-consciousness and enriches the moral drama and pathos of his meeting with the aged Priam. Having

chosen to enter the world of action, Achilles inhabits the mean between extreme self-consciousness and complete unselfconsciousness. Prufrock and Gerontion at one extreme, and Sweeney at the other, are like the damned, dwelling outside any living tradition of moral life.

For Eliot, the hero had to be transformed. In "What the Thunder Said," the poet undergoes a trial of mystical heroism, a quest for perfection that can be achieved only through selfless dedication to God. The poet-priest, through his apocalyptic struggle, tries to revive a dead world; in his Notes to *The Waste Land*, Eliot documents some examples of this attempt in myth and religion. The focus of his effort is the ego. He sacrifices the ego by estranging the normal life of emotion from aesthetic feelings (art emotions). Eclipsing the ego, he creates a lyric halo or corona around the culture of the West. However, Eliot does not deny the individual. The myriad voices of *The Waste Land* admit of many readings, but the egocentric feeling of lyric control is never absent.

Literature, I am arguing, shows its social nature in a wide variety of ways. It shows its social nature in the nervous system and the blood stream, when it affects the feelings of the author and the reader. The physiological link between art and ethics is the key. Through the presence or absence of this link, the artist declares himself to be either a literary citizen or a literary exile. Either he locates himself in the giving and receiving of a community, or he enters into different exilic modes, be it the barbarism of Sweeney, or the skeptical self-consciousness of Prufrock, or the mystical questing of *The Waste Land*. But in no case can the artist wholly escape the moral life. He has only a choice of approach.

Eliot prepared his Clark Lectures by studying neo-Thomism, which spoke to problems of social order that had "preoccupied him since his first acquaintance with the work of Babbitt and Maurras."⁵⁶ At Cambridge he went on to state that what Laforgue "wants . . . is either a *Vita Nuova* to justify, dignify and integrate his sentiments toward the jeune fille in a system of the universe, or else some system of thought which shall keep a place [for and] even enhance these feelings and at the same time enable him to feel as intensely the abstract world."⁵⁷ It is a nimble remark, for it sidesteps Eliot's own caveat: "in creation you are responsible for what you can do with material which you must simply accept. And in this material I include the emotions and feelings of the writer himself, which, for that writer, are simply material which he must accept – not virtues to be enlarged or vices to be diminished."⁵⁸ What good is "some system of thought," if you are seized by emotional "material which you must simply accept?" The system of thought may have historical, philosophical, or

religious interest, but it may simply be foreign to your slice of life – your *tranche de vie*, in Remy de Gourmont’s phrase. Laforgue, as we have seen, could sound a Dantean note to effect. But to a man of Laforgue’s sensibility, with respect to questions of sex and politics and God, Dante was too remote to be a model.

Prior to the Clark Lectures, Eliot had championed tradition in a way that had avant-garde possibilities. He had defended the authority of genius and avoided the supposed Arnoldian *faux pas* of the *a priori*. In *The Sacred Wood*, he had tactfully grouped Arnold with the dons: “Arnold, it must be admitted, gives us often the impression of seeing the masters, whom he quotes, as canonical literature, rather than as masters.”⁵⁹ In “The Function of Criticism,” he had echoed Arnold’s injunction against “doing as one likes,” proclaimed a Tory bias, and added some avant-gardist refinements. But now he was closing off the avant-garde possibilities of his earlier position. Having outgrown Laforgue, he was measuring the French poet with the yardstick of Dante. And he was citing Dante for his moral ideas.

In less than two decades, Eliot had gone from being an iconoclastic American disciple of Laforgue to being an English luminary, “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion.”⁶⁰ When he looked for a way of explaining the unity of his *oeuvre*, of explaining himself over and against Arnold, he turned once more to Bradley and to philosophy, which he considered to be Arnold’s weakness. Bradley’s genius had nourished many of Eliot’s ideas and formulations, and Bradley’s words glossed line 412 in Eliot’s Notes to *The Waste Land*.⁶¹ Moreover, Bradley’s resemblance to Arnold both in style and in point of view offered a close parallel to Eliot’s own problem.

Eliot concludes his 1927 essay “Francis Herbert Bradley” with a judgment that, if we read it aright, might justify the many paradoxes of his career: “. . . Bradley, like Aristotle, is distinguished by his scrupulous respect for words, that their meaning should be neither vague nor exaggerated; and the tendency of his labours is to bring British philosophy closer to the great Greek tradition.”⁶² The closing comment makes a connection between philosophy and style. Bradley had welcomed the insights of Kant and Hegel into British thought, and he had done so with unusual clarity, precision, and wit. But Eliot is advancing a larger claim about Bradley’s work, and about *Ethical Studies* in particular. He is arguing that Bradley’s “common sense,” allied with his verbal accuracy, places him in the tradition of Aristotle.⁶³

The strongest basis for Eliot’s claim is the peculiar likeness between *Ethical Studies* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. As moral philosophers, both

Aristotle and Bradley describe human beings as political animals faced with individual choices. Both approach society as more than the aggregate of its parts. And both assume the reality of human nature.

But view it from a different angle, and the resemblance between Aristotle and Bradley begins to waver. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, self-consciousness is important. It is the means to comprehending friendship. For Bradley, self-consciousness is the means to comprehending social life in its entirety. Where “whole” denotes the “social organism,” he writes: “‘Realize yourself as the self-conscious member of an infinite whole’ means ‘Realize yourself as the self-conscious member of an infinite whole, by realizing that whole in yourself.’”⁶⁴ The self situated in this way is defined with the term *concrete universal*. Its moral nature owes more to Kant and Hegel than to Aristotle. Bradley offers a Hegelian way of overcoming the Kantian divide that separates one’s *inclination* to act out of personal advantage or thoughtless habit, from one’s moral *duty* to act out of respect for the law. Kant had overcome this divide through the “categorical imperative,” the lofty cosmic harmony of a subjective principle (the maxim) and an objective principle (the practical law). Bradley improves on Kant by setting the self in the organic context of “my station and its duties.”

In words that recall Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Bradley maintains that “nothing is good but a good will.”⁶⁵ But having repeated Kant’s move, central to the Enlightenment, of bringing the self-conscious will into the ethical foreground, Bradley struggles to dislodge it. He has a dialectic in his thinking that enables the “mere private self” to blend into the moral life of the community.⁶⁶ And though the word *duty* has a denatured and Kantian sound to it, Bradley stresses that our common moral judgments are accomplished by habit and practical wisdom – in an Aristotelian fashion.

One would be tempted to call *Ethical Studies* a synthesis of ancient and modern philosophy, except that its tensions and fault lines are unmistakably modern. Under the broad influence of Hegel, Bradley advances a doctrine of historical relativism. Like Leslie Stephen in this respect, he seeks to reconcile “Mr. Darwin’s conjecture as to the development of man from a social animal”⁶⁷ with a scheme of teleological progress and moral evolution:

history is the working out of the true human nature through various incomplete stages towards completion, and “my station” is the one satisfactory view of morals. Here . . . all morality is and must be relative . . . Yet . . . the morality of every stage is justified for that stage; and the demand for a code right in itself, apart from any stage, is seen to be asking for an impossibility.⁶⁸

It can be argued that Bradley's relativism weakens the law by calling into question its permanence. The effect was foreseen by Hegel: a widening of the distance between the law and the self-conscious individual. Since the moral code belongs only to a stage of development, the artist and poet, "however obscurely," are virtually called upon to anticipate the next stage. It follows that, by evoking the metaphysical heights, Bradley diminishes his own argument. He reveals the main doctrine of *Ethical Studies* to be earnestly and provincially Victorian: "There is nothing better than my station and its duties, nor anything higher or more truly beautiful."⁶⁹

Aristotle, in a famous passage near the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1177b32), proposes a view of the contemplative life, the life according to reason, as conative or striving. We strive on earth to realize what is divine in our nature, to become our true or best selves. Because the contemplative or philosophical life participates in the activity of God, it surpasses all other activities in happiness. It is not opposed to the life of the city, though it is separated from political and military affairs.⁷⁰ Bradley, by contrast, follows Luther in holding that God is "alienated" at a polar extreme from the common life. His solution is "to put your whole self, your entire will, into the will of the divine."⁷¹ The passage is quoted by Eliot in his essay on Bradley,⁷² and it accords with the mystical heroism of *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*. To be conscious of one's will in this way is, as Bradley affirms, to make one's life a Protestant act of faith. This kind of intense self-consciousness straining to be wholly good is limited to religion: "In mere morality this faith is impossible."⁷³ Bradley divides the ordinary morality of my station and its duties from the morality of religious consciousness, incidentally refusing Hegel's belief in the nation-state as the organic unity responsible for guiding the spirit. His dual aim is to protect the base of ordinary ethics from the utilitarians, while allowing religion to minister to the sick soul, which exists in a state of alienated self-consciousness that my station and its duties cannot cure.

It is while abusing Arnold that Bradley hurls a stick or two in Aristotle's direction. Eliot quotes Bradley's "Arnold-baiting" in the essay I quoted earlier, "Francis Herbert Bradley." The passage comes from a footnote in the last chapter of *Ethical Studies*:

"Is there a God?" asks the reader. "Oh yes," replies Mr. Arnold, "and I can verify him in experience." "And what is he then?" cries the reader. "Be virtuous, and as a rule you will be happy," is the answer. "Well, and God?" "That is God," says Mr. Arnold; "there is no deception, and what more do you want?" I suppose we do want a good deal more. Most of us, certainly the public which Mr. Arnold addresses, want something they can worship; and they will not find that in an

hypostasized copy-book heading, which is not much more adorable than “Honesty is the best policy,” or “Handsome is that handsome does,” or various other edifying maxims, which have not yet come to an apotheosis.⁷⁴

As a satirist, Bradley is preceded by Voltaire, whose Panglossian “best of all possible worlds” exploits the unreasonableness of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason. “Be virtuous, and as a rule you will be happy” is less fortuitous. It is true that Arnold, like Aristotle, connects virtue to happiness. But Arnold does not want to reduce virtue or happiness to a “rule.” And neither, by a long shot, does Aristotle. Arnold’s model is the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a book where Aristotle explicitly refrains from rule-making. Eliot, for his part, extols the passage: “Such criticism is final. It is patently a great triumph of wit and a great delight to watch when a man’s methods, almost his tricks of speech, are thus turned against himself.”⁷⁵ And so the foremost Anglo-American critic of his time, in a eulogy for the last great English metaphysician, stamps on the grave of the last great English critic.

Eliot’s 1930 essay “Arnold and Pater” renewed the long attack on Arnold. “‘Art for art’s sake,’” Eliot comments, “is the offspring of Arnold’s Culture; and we can hardly venture to say that it is even a perversion of Arnold’s doctrine, considering how very vague and ambiguous that doctrine is.”⁷⁶ Eliot is right that Arnold and Pater were moralists, and he displays his religious concerns by slighting the differences between them. He is right that Arnold and Pater put culture ahead of religion – Arnold departs from Aristotle in doing so (*Pol.* 1328b13). But Eliot exceeds the bounds of reasonable argument by imputing to Arnold “the Stoicism and Cyrenaicism of the amateur classical scholar.”⁷⁷ Throughout his career, Eliot’s demands for expertise and specialization run counter to Arnold’s broad and living humanism. A. E. Housman is more trustworthy: “when it comes to literary criticism, heap up in one scale all the literary criticism that the whole nation of professed scholars ever wrote, and drop into the other the thin green volume of Matthew Arnold’s Lectures on Translating Homer . . . and the first scale, as Milton says, will straight fly up and kick the beam.”⁷⁸

Eliot berates his rival to gain one central point: “The total effect of Arnold’s philosophy is to set up Culture in the place of Religion, and to leave Religion to be laid waste by the anarchy of feeling.”⁷⁹ Rejecting any ethical basis that is not an act of revelation or faith, Eliot denigrates Arnold’s claim that “the religious side in man . . . is not the whole of man,” a statement he interprets as meaning that religion “must be kept in its place.”⁸⁰ Let it be said that Eliot is acutely perceptive in spotting the coercive elements in Arnold’s liberal program, which is unfriendly to

religion. The romantic effort to set up culture in the place of religion, Eliot's own effort in *The Sacred Wood* (rescinded in the 1928 Preface), was deeply misguided – nightmarish is not too strong a word. But Arnold's cultural standards, his desire to bring classical ethics into the democratic world, do not promote “anarchy of feeling.”⁸¹ The truth is that Eliot's religious definition of man clashes with Arnold's humanism.⁸² The ethics of *After Strange Gods* (the Page-Barbour Lectures of 1933) is grounded upon revelation, quite unlike the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Twenty years later, Eliot would maintain his position, when he commended Josef Pieper for “affirming the dependence of philosophy upon revelation.”⁸³ This is basically an echo of Bradley's remark, in *Essays on Truth and Reality*: “Philosophy demands, and in the end it rests on, what may fairly be termed faith. It has, we may say, to presuppose its conclusion in order to prove it.”⁸⁴ Bradley's thinking grows out of a distinctly modern skepticism that is alien to the Greek mind, which is instinctively and not self-consciously religious. My point is that Eliot's skepticism, deeper and fiercer than Bradley's, bars the individual from the affections of human nature and dissolves the practical wisdom necessary for building communities other than theocracies. For Eliot, the only answers were church and faith.

Lecturing at Harvard in the 1930s, not long after the publication of “Arnold and Pater,” Eliot dug up Arnold for a last farewell – I picture Cromwell's corpse, swinging for the crows and the King. In his talk, Eliot scuttles the notion of “primary affections” because they are vague. His critique grows more precise, however, as he considers the “boredom and sense of restriction in the simple primary affections . . .”⁸⁵ Eliot continues his neglect of Arnold's Aristotelian ethics, of Arnold's Wordsworthian ethics, of any depth in Arnold beyond the Victorian moralism that Eliot finds tedious and repulsive. He condemns “boredom” as the product of routine, habit, and suffocating convention – the environment of his anomic youth. He craves emotion based on a poetic vision, denied to Arnold, of “the boredom, the horror, and the glory.”⁸⁶ In the latter case, “boredom” is the introspective *ennui* of Baudelaire, the modern discovery of terrible self-knowledge.

Eliot goes on to revise his earlier charge of pedantry, saying that Arnold “was apt to think of the greatness of poetry rather than of its genuineness.”⁸⁷ His trumping Arnold with “genuineness” shows the clear advantage that accrues to the living critic over his dead counterpart, since Arnold, when he could breathe and talk and defend himself with the finest critical intelligence in England, had likewise upheld the standard of

“genuine poetry” that “is conceived and composed in the soul.”⁸⁸ Like authenticity, genuineness is a psychological and an aesthetic criterion. It fills the ethical breach when nothing solidier is available. The religious poet appeals to his own kind of genuineness: “That there is an analogy between mystical experience and some of the ways in which poetry is written I do not deny . . .”⁸⁹ After the war, such thoughts would further define Eliot against rival critics: “Esthetic sensibility must be extended into spiritual perception, and spiritual perception must be extended into esthetic sensibility and disciplined taste before we are qualified to pass judgment upon decadence or diabolism or nihilism in art.”⁹⁰ It is a fulfillment that Arnold lacked the religious grounds to pursue.

Be that as it may, Bradley’s attack on Arnold has had lasting effects. Extended by Eliot, it combined with a general hostility against Aristotle (for example in Schopenhauer, Marx, Nietzsche, Pater, Tolstoy, Wilde, Dewey, G. E. Moore, and Russell) to ensure that Aristotle faded from the Arnoldian literary culture that we associate in America with Lionel Trilling. In his *Matthew Arnold*, Trilling echoes Bradley’s scorn for Arnold’s “clap-trap,” “that to be virtuous is always to be happy, or that happiness must always come from virtue.”⁹¹ It is fairly obvious that Trilling regards the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a Greek fossil. Underscoring what W. J. Bate would call “the more strictly Victorian side of Arnold,”⁹² Trilling diagnoses “the overemphasis on sex in Arnold’s theory of morality.”⁹³ It is impossible here to do justice to Trilling’s highly refined psychology of the arts. But his rough treatment of Aristotle, and his attack on the ethics of Arnold (and of William James) as an “*Aberglaupe* [superstition] of morality,” invite a moment’s consideration.⁹⁴

In his influential book, Trilling divorces Arnold from Aristotle by arguing that Arnold misread him. Housman ranked Arnold among “the great critics of the classical literatures.”⁹⁵ No less an authority on the *Poetics* than S. H. Butcher echoed Arnold to summarize Aristotle’s view of poetry as “a criticism of life.”⁹⁶ But Trilling refused to credit Arnold’s understanding of Aristotle. He comments on the 1853 Preface:

Arnold’s basic insight is a sound one – that the most invigorating literature is that which *resolves* itself, and that action is the best means of resolution. Only so is Aristotle’s tragic *catharsis* secured and the tragic *catharsis* is still the fullest literary emotion. The tragic *catharsis*, however, even if it be the richest, is not the only literary emotion, nor the only one that gives Joy. Arnold, reiterating the Aristotelean poetic, betrays the Aristotelean method, for where Aristotle is inductive, discovering psychological principles in the study of literature, Arnold argues *a priori*, discovering principles of literature in his conception of psychology.⁹⁷

The tragic effect of *catharsis* is relevant to the 1853 Preface, but Arnold does not actually mention the word. He says, "a cultivated Athenian . . . required that the permanent elements of his nature should be moved."⁹⁸ Trilling either misses or simply discounts the gist of this remark. His deployment of the term "tragic *catharsis*" indicates that, like Eliot, he saw "literary emotion" as being different in kind from normal emotion. His conclusion that Arnold "argues *a priori*" takes up the familiar burden of Pater.

Trilling appears to have followed Eliot to Bradley, and to have received some timely instruction along the way. Remembering the sneers of the aesthetic movement, which had converted *Culture and Anarchy* into a judgment against its author, Eliot commented: "In Arnold . . . there is a powerful element of Puritan morality . . ."⁹⁹ Trilling, we have seen, drew from the same well of opinion: "For Arnold . . . morality is essentially a check, a bridle, a renunciation."¹⁰⁰ Between Bradley, Eliot, and Trilling, Arnold's belief in virtue as an intrinsic good, in the emotional and moral life as having a natural basis, is entirely obscured. Trilling made so bold as to doubt whether the author of *St. Paul and Protestantism* knew what he was talking about: ". . . at the risk of impugning the Aristotelian definition, which makes morality an act of consciousness, will and habit, Arnold introduces a power from without so that the moral play of man and universe may be reciprocal."¹⁰¹ Though Trilling finds that Arnold is being superstitious, there is clear metaphysical sanction for Arnold's "power from without" in the teleological framework of Aristotle's thought (*Meta.* 1072b). Secure in his work of partial representation, Trilling assails *Literature and Dogma* as the work of an "absolute moralist," the advocate of "an *a priori* morality intuitively perceived . . ."¹⁰² In support of this damnifying judgment, he cites Arnold's remark: "We did not make ourselves and our nature, or conduct as the object of three-fourths of that nature; we did not provide that happiness should follow conduct, as it undeniably does."¹⁰³ "The sentence unleashed all of Bradley's thunder," writes Trilling. But Trilling is mistaken. Bradley did *not* cite that particular sentence, which is basically Aristotelian in character, with a gravity not so easily dismissed. More important, Arnold did not say "that to be virtuous is always to be happy, or that happiness must always come from virtue."¹⁰⁴ Arnold had read the Book of Job. Those are Bradley's words, from his attack on Arnold in *Ethical Studies*. Trilling's uncritical adoption of them perpetuates an abuse: like Bradley, he implies that Arnold did not intend *conduct* in its primary (and Johnsonian) sense of "general practice."¹⁰⁵ One cannot escape the impression that Bradley and Trilling put words in Arnold's mouth.

When Trilling quotes Bradley's thunder, it is thunder directed at Arnold's phalanx of abstractions (e.g. "righteousness," "law," and "Power"). Neither Bradley nor Trilling goes to the philosophical core of the matter in *Literature and Dogma*, where Arnold directs us to his source in Aristotle:

... [Aristotle] does not appeal to a speculative theory of the system of things, and deduce conclusions from it. And he shows his greatness in this, because the law of our being is *not* something which is already definitively known and can be exhibited as part of a speculative theory of the system of things; it is something which discovers itself and *becomes*, as we follow (among other things) the rule of renouncement.¹⁰⁶

This simply does not fit Trilling's description of Arnold's "*a priori* morality." To be sure, Arnold's "rule of renouncement" has a stern puritanical ring. Arnold explains it as the rule of the soul over the body, but his unhappy phrase-making does little to illuminate whatever good might attend a habit of renunciation. I am not cheering for *Literature and Dogma*. But it should be acknowledged that Arnold's understanding of human nature is naturalistic and Aristotelian. Arnold's is not the dead, scholastic idol whom Francis Bacon long ago demolished – it is quite explicitly the empirical Aristotle whom, according to Trilling, Arnold had misappropriated in the 1853 Preface.

It is an historical irony that Eliot, in the late 1920s and 1930s, rejected Arnoldian liberalism for the sake of High Church Anglo-Catholicism, royalism, and a conservative, anti-democratic version of Athens, while Trilling, a decade later, transformed Arnoldian liberalism so as to rid it of suspicious-looking conservative elements. In our current period, Michael Levenson has interpreted Bradley's attack on Arnold as an attack "on the notion that we can construct all that we require of religion, morality, politics and philosophy on the basis of individual psychology."¹⁰⁷ Levenson's *Genealogy of Modernism* fixes the last strap on Arnold's Victorian straitjacket. Following Trilling, Levenson overlooks the Aristotelian side of Arnold's thinking, which is not solely a matter of "individual psychology," and without which Arnold's literary criticism loses much of its "basis." Yet more recently, James Wood dusts off the Bradleyan caricature of Arnold for the haughty title essay of *The Broken Estate*.¹⁰⁸

Eliot's poetry demanded a rejection of the demotic or vulgar virtues with their purchase on the primary emotions, but his cultural criticism tells a different story.¹⁰⁹ In *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot introduces his "political philosophy" by way of Aristotle, who "wrote studies full of universal wisdom."¹¹⁰ Like Bradley, Eliot returns to the ethical premises of

Aristotle, but he follows the example of Aquinas in connecting Christianity to classical ethics: “*virtuosa . . . vita est congregationis humanae finis.*”¹¹¹ *The Idea of a Christian Society* calls for a “Christian organization of society . . . in which the natural end of man – virtue and well-being in community is acknowledged for all, and the supernatural end – beatitude – for those who have the eyes to see it.”¹¹² Nonetheless, it would be somewhat superficial to remark that religion healed the division of thought and feeling that characterized Eliot from the first. Of the later Eliot, one might more truly say that his heart was in Salem while his head was in Rome.

The Cocktail Party is Eliot’s last major effort to fuse together his creative material and his Christian ethics. First performed in 1949, the play is a superb piece of writing, dramatically unified and richly inventive in its symbolic texture. Eliot breaks from his past as a dramatist by pursuing a connection between the two ends of man: the natural and the supernatural.¹¹³ Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, Julia, and Alex are the Guardians. Like Plato’s guardians, they exert a wise influence over their charges; like Calvin’s elders, they preside over the passage from earthly life to holiness. Reilly, the witch doctor of the tribe, is a counter-Freudian analyst, debunking the pretensions of the modern psyche. Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne are adulterous lackloves, the bourgeois party-goers whom the Guardians rescue. Until the final act, theirs is a marriage in hell; the intensely sad scene (Act I, sc. 3) of Edward’s and Lavinia’s mutual recriminations is prophetic of a rising divorce rate. Poet and socialite Celia Coplestone begins the play as Edward’s lover, but ends it a Protestant saint.

After her affair with Edward, Celia, haunted by intimations of God, comes to Reilly seeking advice:

REILLY: I can reconcile you to the human condition,
 The condition to which some who have gone as far as you
 Have succeeded in returning. They may remember
 The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,
 Maintain themselves by the common routine,
 Learn to avoid excessive expectation,
 Become tolerant of themselves and others,
 Giving and taking, in the usual actions
 What there is to give and take. They do not repine;
 Are contented with the morning that separates
 And with the evening that brings together
 For casual talk before the fire
 Two people who know they do not understand each other,
 Breeding children whom they do not understand
 And who will never understand them.

CELIA: Is that the best life?
 REILLY: It is a good life. Though you will not know how good
 Till you come to the end. But you will want nothing else,
 And the other life will be only like a book
 You have read once, and lost. In a world of lunacy,
 Violence, stupidity, and greed . . . it is a good life.¹¹⁴

The style shows those qualities that Eliot prized in Hooker and Andrewes: “determination to stick to essentials, . . . the desire for clarity and precision on matters of importance.”¹¹⁵ Yet the deliberate and orderly manner is shot through with symbolist effects. The alliteration of “reconcile,” “returning,” “remember,” “regret,” “routine,” and “repine” creates a canine undertone that suggests Reilly’s knowledge of human savageness. With the reiteration of “understand,” a *conduplicatio* that hollows out the word like a chime, Eliot teases us into sensing the limits of our usual round of thoughts and phrases. Then there is the metaphorical reference to a visionary “book.” Like the Bible, the book binds together the natural and the supernatural. It enhances Reilly’s mystical authority, much as the Bible bestows authority on a preacher. And it enables Eliot to strengthen a central motif: the largeness of Reilly’s perceptions and the smallness of our own.

Reilly’s speech recalls Bradley’s *Ethical Studies* by combining an active idea of ethics with a visionary disdain for morality. The shared life can be a “good life,” but it is still alienated, in Bradley’s sense of the word, from the divine. Eliot upholds the ethical integrity of persons in the community of “giving and taking” that is the source, in Aristotelian terms, of our shared life of feeling. People become “tolerant,” the increase of tolerance being for Eliot a benefit of humanism in a religious society.¹¹⁶ In a 1986 production of *The Cocktail Party* in London, the actor playing Reilly thumped his desk to accentuate the phrase “It is a good life.”¹¹⁷ But the community huddles before a fire that evokes Plato’s cave. Owing to sin, giving and taking lose much of their affective weight. Sinners fool themselves about their desires and passions. The life of virtue falters under the combined pressure of Eliot’s insatiable skepticism and his implacable faith. In the speech, “casual” harbors an etymological play on a Latin word for “fall,” and “breeding” recalls the opening lines of *The Waste Land*. Celia has already come to the conclusion that “one is always alone”¹¹⁸: the more self-conscious the person, the greater the sense of spiritual struggle and estrangement from one’s community.

What happens in *The Cocktail Party* – what happens in much of Eliot’s Christian art – is that Eliot transforms an aesthetics of exile into a theology of exile. His exilic mode enacts what he lamented as a

Cartesian distance between the self and its emotions. The fall of western culture into modernity is the theme of Eliot's Clark Lectures, where Eliot writes, "I insist on a general line of descent from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth," a line of "intellectual psychologism" that connects Descartes to Bradley.¹¹⁹ It is a point both of ethics and of science that Cartesianism warps the physiology of our emotional responses by imposing too great a distance between the mind and the body. In the play's final act, Lavinia and Edward save their marriage *and* Celia is reported to "have been crucified / Very near an ant-hill."¹²⁰ Our response to these outcomes, as spectators of the drama, is flattened and confused by their absurd discord. From start to finish, Eliot applies an art of interruption, of fragmented action, not only for certain comic effects, but to disrupt our emotional investment in the characters, so that we cannot escape our spiritual burden. When Alex uncorks the news about Celia's death, the spectator can register his response only through a filter of self-consciousness, because the broken plot has alienated the audience members from the nominal community on the stage.

I come back to Bradley in order to affirm the moral coherence of *The Cocktail Party*, such as it is. As in *Ethical Studies*, self-consciousness ultimately transcends the mutual consciousness of friendship, and directs the self on its lonely journey to God. As in *Ethical Studies*, the community has a moral basis, though a higher, religious morality exists for a select few. But the play's divisions may have less to do with Bradley than with the *dual perspective* that attends us as individuals who are political animals. It is arduously difficult, with little reward for the effort, to fathom both these viewpoints within a single consciousness. More, we express our dual nature, which is sometimes in our deepest experience contradictory, in a host of ways. We glimpse our inherent duality behind Bradley's two levels of moral life, common and religious, physical and spiritual, with their escalating demands on the self. The same rival emphases distinguish Plato from Aristotle: Plato's vision is for the elect, the Guardians, the philosophers capable of leaving the Cave; Aristotle, as Arnold recognized, speaks to practical questions of democratic life. Likewise, we may observe the duality of human perspective in yet another Eliotic tension, between the private covenant of grace (a compact between God and the individual saint) and the public covenant of the people to build a city of God. The comedy of *The Cocktail Party* is metaphysical: it is the theoretical resolution of ethical and spiritual problems that, on the stage of life, challenge our sanity and our civilization.