

National Myth and Global Aesthetics: Reading Yeats alongside Chinese Poetic Modernism

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1 Introduction: Yeats's Modernism from the Margins

One of the conundrums of modern Chinese literary studies is how to navigate the tortuous road through the particular cultural heritage from which it arises, global trends such as modernism, and the individual creative voice. Some scholars take the position that indigenous cultures and Westernization are mutually exclusive. Others emphasize the need to view Chinese modernism as part of a global trend in which cultural and national specificities are at best superficial, cosmetic, and incidental. In carrying out such discussions, scholars in the first camp tend to eschew comparative discussions of Chinese and Western authors. Scholars who are more internationalist in their approach embrace such comparisons. Underlying the broad assumption is the subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, attitude that those who readily adopt from the West are not authentically Chinese, and that those who exclusively tap their own tradition for creative inspiration must be antagonistic to modernism. In investigating this problem, it helps to look at the one true model from English poetic modernism who blended the broad panoply of images from the mainstream European cultural reservoir with the more particular and idiosyncratic mythic lore of his Irish homeland: William Butler Yeats (1865–1939).

Of the three towering figures of modernism in English poetry—William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound (1885–1972), and T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)—it was not solely years that separated Yeats from the latter two. Of course, as the one who preceded the others by about a generation, Yeats indeed was different from Pound and Eliot in terms of age. As such, he served not quite like a contemporary but as more of a transitional figure between the Victorian era (he actually referred to himself as one of the last Romantics) and the Modernist era. But what really distinguished him was his country of origin and the way the vexing relationship between his Irish national identity and his residence in the more cosmopolitan, and politically powerful, London, still the seat in the early twentieth century of a vast empire, weighed upon him. Yeats's Ireland may have been fertile ground for the poetry of myth and richly bucolic scenery. It was

close to a third world entity, however, existing in the shadow of the wealthy and militarized British empire. Pound and Eliot, despite whatever disappointment or contempt they may have held for the United States, perceived at the time as devoid of the kind of cultural sophistication that Europe held, were fleeing a rising political power that was on the threshold of global dominance. Yeats could legitimately argue that he hailed from a politically weak and, in fact, colonized state, and several scholars in the past generation have remarked upon this.

Yeats's insecurity with respect to national identity in the face of the transnational literary phenomenon that modernism came to be is much closer to the experience of non-Western poets such as Aimé Césaire, Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott, Pablo Neruda, and Mahmoud Darwish than to that of Pound and Eliot.¹ I argue here that the same can be said of modern Chinese poets: the sense of the abject in the face of an expanding global, Western/capitalist social envelopment that paralleled modernism, and the resultant paradoxical and confused relationship with "the tradition" that this genuinely new phenomenon forced upon Chinese intellectuals of the twentieth century had some affinities on both the thematic and formal level with William Butler Yeats. From the beginning, Yeats was preoccupied with fine technique, and it could well have been this fact that prompted Pound to opine that Yeats was the only poet in London of interest when he arrived there. "Adam's Curse," published in 1904 as part of a collection of poems generally thought to mark the transition between his early and middle poetry, chooses the Biblical allusion of Adam's fall as a metaphor for the labor one must undertake in order to bring beauty to poetic expression. It is not exactly clear why that allusion worked for Yeats, but perhaps it is because bestowing knowledge on humans, as the Biblical story goes, became a burden for them. The toil the craft of poetry presents, which Yeats laments in the lines "I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught,'" is "certain," because "there is no fine thing / Since Adam's fall but needs much laboring."² All fine things are begotten from the hard work of forging them, and poetry is no exception. Helen Vendler, one of the most prolific scholars of poetic form in recent decades, invokes this poem to illustrate how "the poet's sedulous stitching and unstitching" became a blueprint for Yeats's development over the balance of his career: "It is in the later poetry [of Yeats] that the verse that seems but a moment's thought becomes

1 See in particular Martin McKinsey, "Classicism and Colonial Retrenchment in W. B. Yeats's 'No Second Troy,'" 181.

2 Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 204–205.