

“A Noble Vernacular?”

Yeats, Hellenism and the Anglo-Irish Nation

With “the failure of the Irish people in recent times” on his mind, Douglas Hyde, an Irish translator and later the first president of the fledgling Gaelic League, took the stage at the Leinster Lecture Hall in Dublin late in the autumn of 1892.¹ Having been well publicized weeks before in *The Freeman’s Journal* and in *United Ireland*, Hyde entitled the address he planned to make before the newly formed National Literary Society, “The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland.” In anticipation, Hyde had spent days revising the lecture, believing he could illustrate Ireland’s present cultural crisis, namely why it was that a “nation which was once, as every one admits, one of the most classically learned and cultured nations in Europe, is now one of the least so.”² As Hyde saw it, Irish civilization had declined to such an extent that “one of the most reading and literary peoples has become one of the *least* studious and most *un-literary*,” and on that account, the aesthetic sensibilities of the country at large had been degraded, “the present art products of one of the quickest, most sensitive, and most artistic races on earth” having become “only distinguished for their hideousness.”³ The erosion in learning and the arts in particular, he claimed, had emerged from a paradox plaguing popular “sentiment,” sentiment that, he explained, “sticks in this half-way house ... imitating England and yet apparently hating it. How can [Ireland] produce anything good in literature, art, or institutions as long as it is actuated by motives so contradictory?”⁴ For Hyde, the “half-way house” was most evident in the dominant yet alien language he saw spoken across nearly all social classes of contemporary

¹ Hyde (1986) 153. Hyde’s speech was later published in the 1894 monograph *The Revival of Irish Literature, Addresses by Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, K.C.M.G., Dr. George Sigerson, and Dr. Douglas Hyde*. The quotation in the chapter title is taken from Hill (1998) 62.

² Hyde (1986) 153. See Dunleavy and Dunleavy (1991) 182–86.

³ Hyde (1986) 153.

⁴ Hyde (1986) 154.

society. The prominence of English in Irish public life had, he believed, served one purpose alone: to advance the cultural supremacy of England while fostering in the Irish confusion about what he called “the principle of nationality, rightly understood.”⁵ Pressed by strange customs and a tongue that was never fully familiar, the Irish people had learned to deny their own native genius, a genius Hyde thought most prominently expressed within their own language, Irish Gaelic. Now, Hyde argued, having tacitly exchanged a native language for a foreign one, the Irish were slowly adopting “pell-mell, and indiscriminately, everything that is English, simply because it *is* English.”⁶ While many nationalist sympathizers bemoaned the political dominance of England, too few, Hyde thought, had proved bold enough to scrutinize the linguistic origin of their own cultural captivity.⁷ With no forceful action taken against the spread of English, there was little reason to expect anything but the further entrenchment of British control in Irish affairs. Soon, he lamented, the last remnants of Irish would be extinct, the language compromised by too many factors, not least among them its unofficial prohibition in the national schools and the devastation brought by the Great Famine, 1845–52.

While the stylistic character of Douglas Hyde’s own English translations of Irish folklore was largely conventional for the period, the claims he made in “De-Anglicising Ireland” proved intellectually provocative and creatively suggestive to his contemporaries. As Michael Cronin has observed, Hyde saw “translation as an agent of aesthetic and political renewal” capable of not only bearing “witness to the past” but actively shaping the future of Ireland as a nation as well.⁸ That desire for sweeping renewal pervaded Hyde’s address of 1892, enmeshing his radical reflections about the growth of English with the varied historical receptions then given to both Gaelic and Greek antiquity during the era of Revival. In so doing, Hyde pushed other scholars and writers sympathetic to his views – Yeats above all – to consider the invention of any so-called Hiberno-English vernacular comparatively, in the wider contexts of not only other literary traditions that were living but those that were then dying and dead as well.⁹ Indeed it was Yeats’ own powerful responses to

⁵ *Gaelic League Pamphlet* no. 13 [1901?] 5. See Introduction, pp. 17–24.

⁶ Hyde (1894) 117.

⁷ See Hyde (1986) 155–60.

⁸ Cronin (1996) 136.

Hyde's address – with its implication that Ireland remained ghost-ridden, haunted by what Laura O'Connor has called “idealized notions of lost organic unity” – that came to engage these contexts broadly.¹⁰ Eager to develop a new, suitably ‘classical’ body of contemporary Irish writing – one that could ably compete with modern literatures of Europe – Yeats strove to untether his own idiom of Hiberno-English from the ‘main line’ of English literature, thereby “unfolding and developing ... an Irish tradition” that would give “perfect expression to itself in literature.”¹¹ In so doing, Yeats' early work also began, in oblique fashion, to sow in ‘Anglo-Celtic’ literary expression the seeds of further multilingual interference and greater stylistic experiment. These seeds would later flower demonstrably in the eccentric forms of Celtic literary modernism by James Joyce, David Jones and Hugh MacDiarmid.

As fluency and the broad social and political fortunes of the Irish language declined throughout the 1800s, many remained aware of “the leakage, the internal translation” that still was at work “between the island's two languages,” English and the manifold varieties of demotic Irish.¹² That very leakage was, moreover, further subject to “parallel social and linguistic hierarchies” that made classical Greek and Latin ascendant among the country's educated elite.¹³ Fertile contact between English and Irish fostered growth in bilingualism, and that phenomenon offered to those fluent among the “porous and interactive” language communities of Ireland what Nicholas Wolf has called “a mastery of the linguistic landscape not available to either Irish or English monoglots.”¹⁴ However, as the institutional power of both the state and the Catholic Church

⁹ As O'Connor notes, the “close proximity of English to Gaelic and Scots (and Welsh ...) ... and the long history of their interaction, generated substantial direct and oblique discourse about the impact of Anglicization on British multilingual culture.” O'Connor (2006) xvii.

¹⁰ O'Connor (2006) xvii. See also Cronin (1996) 185–88.

¹¹ Yeats, “Irish National Literature, I: From Callanan to Carleton” (1895) in Yeats *CW9* (2004) 264.

¹² Cronin (1996) 4. On the various ‘leakages’ between Irish and other languages, see also Ó Dochartaigh (2000) 6–36.

¹³ Stray (1998) 74. On the complex narratives of decline that have long surrounded scholarly accounts of Irish in the nineteenth century, and the fact that for the “Irish-speaking community of this period, decline and obsolescence were not the all-encompassing considerations that they have been for modern historians,” see Wolf (2014) 20. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Irish never comprised “a single language” but rather a number of “regional variations.” On this point, see O'Higgins (2017) 2–12.

¹⁴ O'Higgins (2017) 3. Wolf (2014) 18. On the politics of translation in late nineteenth-century Ireland, see Cronin (1996) 131–46.

expanded, prominent national leaders and some clergymen, men such as Daniel O’Connell (1775–1847); James Warren Doyle (1786–1834), bishop of Kildare; and Paul Cardinal Cullen (1803–1878), archbishop of Dublin, deliberately ignored promoting the Irish language and instead encouraged the taking up of English, anglicization having become central to a broadly held vision of a new and powerful Irish Catholic middle class.¹⁵ In much the same way as knowledge of Latin and Greek had once offered Victorian men of Britain and Ireland the possibility of greater civic entitlement in the empire, English was then presented as a central means by which greater social and political capital could be acquired. For that very reason, though, Douglas Hyde feared its spread, decrying the adoption of English as a mass form of cultural debasement and imitation. “[E]very external that at present differentiates us from the English” will be, he insisted,

lost or dropped; all our Irish names of places and people turned into English names; the Irish language completely extinct; the O’s and the Macs dropped; our Irish intonation changed, as far as possible by English schoolmasters into something English; our history no longer remembered or taught; the names of our rebels and martyrs blotted out; our battlefields and traditions forgotten; the fact we were not of Saxon origin dropped out of sight and memory, and let me now put the question – How many Irishmen are there who would purchase material prosperity at such a price?¹⁶

Knowing that many Irish might, in fact, buy material prosperity at this price, Hyde rejected the claim of some that an authentic national literature for Ireland could be forged in the common language of Spenser, Shakespeare, Pope and Shelley.¹⁷ Even an English hybridized or cross-fertilized with Irish Gaelic, a reputedly Anglo-Irish vernacular would, he believed, betray the roots of Ireland’s history and polity.¹⁸ Traffic in English in any form could only enfeeble the last vestiges of “our once great national tongue,” he argued, and further corrupt Ireland along

¹⁵ On the evolution of the Roman Catholic Church’s regard for Irish, see Wolf (2014) 223–67, and Ellis (1972) 96–121.

¹⁶ Hyde (1986) 155.

¹⁷ “I have often heard people thank God that if the English gave us nothing else they gave us at least their language. In this way they put a bold face upon the matter, and pretend that the Irish language *is* not worth knowing, and has no literature.” Hyde (1986) 160.

¹⁸ Hyde (1986) 158.

“racial lines,” encouraging English imitation, the phenomenon Hyde called “West-Britonism.”¹⁹

[W]e must create a strong feeling against West-Britonism, for it – if we give it the least chance, or show it the smallest quarter – will overwhelm us like a flood, and we shall find ourselves toiling painfully behind the English at each step following the same fashions, only six months behind the English ones ... We will become, what, I fear, we are largely at present, a nation of imitators, the Japanese of Western Europe, lost to the power of native initiative and alive only to second-hand assimilation.²⁰

Unless Ireland was willing to accept the irrevocable loss of its Gaelic past, and at present the further degradation of the race itself, English could have no place in public life. On this ground, Hyde predicated the development of a new national literature for Ireland on the revitalization of its native language as well as the annihilation of all further anglicizing impulses in Irish society.²¹

On hearing Hyde speak, W. B. Yeats confessed he was moved by his “learning,” “profound sincerity” and the “passionate conviction” with which his words had been delivered.²² On leaving the lecture hall that day, he reportedly overheard great enthusiasm for a speech that some there had thought “the most important utterance of its kind since ’48.”²³ Yet, though Hyde’s words seemed “the best possible augury for the success of the movement we are trying to create,” Yeats was “depressed” by the translator’s suggestions regarding the revitalization of a new modern literature in Ireland.²⁴ The next month, he responded with a letter of his own to the editor of *United Ireland*, in which Yeats admitted that the extinction of Irish seemed an inevitable but regrettable fact: “Alas, I fear he spoke the truth,” he observed, “and that the Gaelic

¹⁹ Hyde (1986) 160, 169. On Hyde’s view of “West-Britonism,” see Crowley (2005) 136–40; and O’Connor (2006) 39–53.

²⁰ Hyde (1986) 169.

²¹ Looking back in 1905, Hyde remained unmoved: any attempt at an English vernacular in Ireland, no matter how hybridized, could not sustain a national literature. “English gum is no substitute,” he declared, “and never can be a substitute for Irish sap. Fifty years of bitter experience have taught us that the Young Ireland heroes did not arrest, and to my thinking could not arrest, the denationalization of Ireland by a literature which, rousing and admirable as it was, was still only a literature written in the English language and largely founded upon English models.” Douglas Hyde, “The Gaelic Revival” (1905) in Hyde (1986) 184–85.

²² Yeats, “To the Editor of *United Ireland*, 17 December 1892,” in Yeats *CLI* (1986) 338. On Yeats’ reaction to Hyde’s address, see Foster (1997) 125–27.

²³ Yeats *CLI* (1986) 338. See also Dunleavy and Dunleavy (1991) 182–83.

²⁴ Yeats *CLI* (1986) 338.

language will soon be no more heard, except here and there in remote villages, and on the wind-beaten shores of Connaught.”²⁵ At all costs, what remained of the language needed preservation, for Irish was still, he thought, “a fountain of nationality in our midst.”²⁶ However, as the common vernacular for the country’s emerging “hopes of nationhood,” Yeats felt Irish would not do.²⁷ Therefore, rather than encourage a form of language purism, Yeats insisted that the best chance for inventing a new national literature lay in the development of an Anglo-Irish hybrid, a literary vernacular rooted in the translation and creative adaptation of ancient Gaelic poetry and Irish folklore.

Is there, then, no hope for the de-Anglicising of our people? Can we not build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English in language? Can we not keep the continuity of the nation’s life, not by trying to do what Dr. Hyde has practically pronounced impossible, but by translating or retelling in English, which shall have an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm [*sic*] and style, all that is best of the ancient literature?²⁸

According to Yeats, the success of Hyde and other contemporary writers in anglicizing Irish folklore had demonstrated the viability of this new idiom. Modern literary work, he explained, work that sounded distinctively Irish (though in English), could be forged with an Anglo-Irish vernacular, a vernacular that would build “a golden bridge between the old and the new.”²⁹

Mr. Hyde, Lady Wilde in her recent books, and Mr. Curtin, and the editor of the just-published “Vision of M’Comaile,” are setting before us a table spread with strange Gaelic fruits, from which an ever-growing band of makers of song and story shall draw food for their souls.³⁰

The English employed throughout these stories and translations had laid the foundation for new creative work, which Yeats envisioned as a “great school of ballad poetry in Ireland.”³¹ “I thought one day,” he recalled years later,

²⁵ Yeats *CLT* (1986) 338.

²⁶ Yeats *CLT* (1986) 340.

²⁷ Yeats *CLT* (1986) 340.

²⁸ Yeats *CLT* (1986) 338. See Introduction, pp. 2–3; Chapter 2, pp. 105–08, Chapter 4, pp. 163–65.

²⁹ Yeats *CLT* (1986) 338.

³⁰ Yeats *CLT* (1986) 339.

³¹ Yeats, “What Is ‘Popular Poetry?’” (1901) in Yeats *CW4* (2007) 5.

I can remember the very day when I thought it – “If somebody could make a style which would not be an English style and yet would be musical and full of colour, many others would catch fire from him.” ... I set to work to find a style and things to write about that the ballad writers might be the better.³²

Since beginning the narrative poem, *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889), Yeats himself had been at work on such a style, believing his poetic idiom could be submerged in “that wild Celtic blood, the most un-English of all things under heaven.”³³ Yet, possessing no fluency in the Irish language, Yeats faced a practical difficulty in achieving the fusion between Irish and English that he had admired in Hyde’s *The Love Songs of Connaught* (1893). Its “prose parts” were, he confessed, “the coming of a new power into literature.”³⁴ Unlike Hyde, however, Yeats had, from a young age, failed to master any foreign language, whether ancient or modern. Although he was exposed to French, German, Greek and Latin, especially at The High School at Harcourt Street, Dublin, from 1881 to 1883, he was considered “constitutionally incapable of learning” these languages.³⁵ Now, however, he was undeterred by ignorance. Yet if an Anglo-Irish idiom were to be forged without actual interference from Irish, Yeats had to invent other ways of approximating a syntax and diction that could sound, by impression at least to readers of English, ancient, foreign and persuasively Celtic. With or without knowledge of Irish, the moment had come, he believed, for Irish poetry to separate from the mainstream of English literature – for writers to make their own mark as the country’s hope for nationhood gained popular favor. The country was “at the outset of a literary epoch” and the movement he envisioned would not be seen, he hoped, as “merely a little eddy cast up by the advancing tide of English literature.”³⁶

Yet a sense of unease persisted for Yeats. Concerned that a national revival of Irish writing in English might be regarded as a fraudulent invention, a ‘neo-romantic’ movement born from the popular taste for the ‘Celtic note’ in England, Yeats set out in Dublin in May 1893 to lecture on “Nationality and Literature” and to establish a categorical

³² Yeats *CW4* (2007) 5, 6.

³³ Yeats *CL1* (1986) 339. On the poem’s composition and publication, see Yeats (1994a) vol. 2: 3–10.

³⁴ Yeats, “*Sambain: 1902*,” in Yeats *CW8* (2003) 16.

³⁵ Foster (1997) 74. On Yeats’ inadequate knowledge of foreign languages, see Arkins (1990) 2–5, Liebrechts (1993) 7–21 and Foster (1997) 33–34. See Introduction, pp. 5–7, especially n28; Chapter 3, pp. 131–32, especially n60.

³⁶ Yeats, “Nationality and Literature” (May 19, 1893) in Yeats *UP1* (1970) 273.

difference in the contemporary character of Irish writing.³⁷ With no recourse – indeed, no desire – to use the Irish language as the defining trait for a new national movement, Yeats did not savage the influence of West-Britonism, nor did he condemn the English language with the expectation of restoring Gaelic purity. Instead, he intended to classify both Irish and English letters, comparing them against the most exalted literary traditions of the past, most notably that of Greek antiquity. Drawing on a critical method once employed by Matthew Arnold, Yeats hoped to “talk a little philosophy,” to rationalize from Greek history a “general law” of literary development that might, in turn, be used to upset a central tenet in Arnold’s criticism.³⁸ In his inaugural 1857 lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry – a lecture Arnold entitled, “On the Modern Element in Literature” – he contrasted the present moment in English writing with what he called “the absolute, the enduring interest of Greek literature, and, above all, of Greek poetry.”³⁹ In Arnold’s view, the literature of Greece, specifically the work of fifth-century Athens, had emerged in a parallel modernity: Athens was a highly developed society marked by what he called the “manifestation of a critical spirit, the endeavour after a rational arrangement and appreciation of facts.”⁴⁰ “[T]he culminating age in the life of ancient Greece” was, Arnold declared,

beyond question, a great epoch; the life of Athens in the fifth century before our era I call one of the highly developed, one of the marking, one of the modern periods in the life of the whole human race. It has been said that the “Athens of Pericles was a vigorous man, at the summit of his bodily strength and mental energy.” There was the utmost energy of life there, public and private; the most entire freedom, the most unprejudiced and intelligent observation of human affairs.⁴¹

³⁷ Yeats himself first used the term ‘neo-romantic’ to describe the ambitions of his early work: “we shall have a school of Irish poetry,” he told Katharine Tynan (1861–1931) in 1887, “founded on Irish myth and History – a neo-romantic [*sic*] movement.” See Yeats, Letter to Katharine Tynan (27 [April 1887]) in Yeats *CLT* (1986) 10–12. Fraud and the ‘Celtic note’ had been popularly linked in Britain, at least since James Macpherson falsified his discovery of the Gaelic bard, Ossian (Irish: Oisín) in Scotland in 1761. Macpherson’s finding of this ‘Northern Homer’, the epic poet of the ancient Gaelic world, was met with great fanfare at the time, but it was soon exposed as a hoax, first by the antiquarian Charles O’Conor (1710–91) and then by Samuel Johnson (1709–84). On the Ossian controversy, see Curley (2009) as well as Simonsuuri (1979) 108–42. More than a century later, Yeats remained anxious about Celtic forgery in English, fearing that contemporary poets might follow a path similar to the one Macpherson first cut. On the impact of the Ossian controversy on the Literary Revival, see Curley (2009) 123–55 and Watson (1998) 216–25.

³⁸ Yeats *UPI* (1970) 268.

³⁹ Arnold (1960) 37.

⁴⁰ Arnold (1960) 25.

⁴¹ Arnold (1960) 23.

Despite the allegedly parallel modernities of Greece and England, contemporary writers had thus far failed, Arnold claimed, to interpret English modernity “unprejudiced” in the same way their Athenian predecessors had done so effectively for their own time: England possessed no “comprehensive,” “commensurate” or “adequate literature” that could meet the demands of “a copious and complex present, and behind it a copious and complex past.”⁴² There was no “intellectual deliverance” on offer in modern English literature, no relief from that “spectacle of a vast multitude of facts” that awaited, invited and indeed demanded “comprehension.”⁴³ With that in mind, Arnold encouraged writers of English to study Attic literature – a literature he thought “commensurate with its epoch,” most especially in “the poetry of Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes” – and to apply “to other ages, nations, and literatures the same method of inquiry” so as to clarify the “intellectual history of our race.”⁴⁴ To apprehend “the legitimate demands of our age,” he insisted, “the literature of ancient Greece is, even for modern times, a mighty agent of intellectual deliverance; even for modern times, therefore, an object of indestructible interest.”⁴⁵

Far from Oxford and well over thirty years later, Yeats laid claim to something of the “same method of inquiry” that Arnold had urged on his contemporaries, stressing in his own lecture the “indestructible interest” of Greek literature in Ireland – not expressly to find an intellectual deliverance from modernity but rather to expose the broad chasm he saw between Irish literature and the diminishing intensity of English letters.⁴⁶ With Greece as a model, Yeats wished “to separate the general course of literary development,” he wrote,

and set it apart from mere historical accident and circumstance, and having so done, to examine the stages it passes through, and then to try and point out in what stage the literature of England is, and in what stage the literature of Ireland is. I will have to go far a-field before I come to the case of Ireland, for it is necessary, in this first instance, to find this general law of development.⁴⁷

Scrutiny of classical antiquity, he thought, was essential to establishing a universal account of literary history, a history somehow raised above the

⁴² Arnold (1960) 23, 22, 20.

⁴³ Arnold (1960) 20.

⁴⁴ Arnold (1960) 31, 37.

⁴⁵ Arnold (1960) 20.

⁴⁶ Arnold (1960) 37, 20.

⁴⁷ Yeats *UPI* (1970) 268.

vicissitudes of taste, language and changing fashion. Even a cursory examination of ancient history showed that Greek literature and civilization was divided into “three clearly-marked periods” of political and artistic development, each of which had been defined by the rise of a dominant literary genre.⁴⁸ These periods were, Yeats contended, “the period of narrative poetry, the epic or ballad period; next the dramatic period; and after that the period of lyric poetry.”⁴⁹ Success in any of these forms, he argued, was dependent not solely on the talent of an individual writer but rather on the way in which that writer’s work met the contemporary moment in national history, each genre expressing aspects of the nation’s evolution. “In Greece,” he explained,

the first period is represented by Homer, who describes great racial or national movements and events, and sings of the Greek race rather than of any particular member of it. After him come Aeschulus [*sic*] and Sophocles, who subdivide these great movements and events into the characters who lived and wrought in them. The Siege of Troy is now no longer the theme, for Agamemnon and Clytemnestra and Oedipus dominate the stage. After the dramatists come the lyric poets, who are known to us through the Greek anthology. And now not only have the racial events disappeared but the great personages themselves, for literature has begun to centre itself about this or that emotion or mood, about the Love or Hatred, the Hope or Fear which were to Aeschulus and Sophocles merely parts of Oedipus or Agamemnon or Clytemnestra, or of some other great tragic man or woman.⁵⁰

As discrete shifts in the political evolution of a country emerged, literary expression changed in a similar fashion, developing slowly to reflect the collective consciousness of the nation. Over time it was clear, Yeats argued, that formal expression always became less expansive, moving from the broad themes and grandeur of epic to the subtlety and refined emotion of lyric. As the national character itself underwent transformation, the particular genius expressed in a country’s literature became ever more subdivided, he explained, turning “from unity to multiplicity, from simplicity to complexity.”⁵¹ “The poets had at the beginning for their material,” Yeats declared,

the national character, and the national history, and the national circumstances, and having found an expression of the first in the second, they

⁴⁸ Yeats *UP1* (1970) 269.

⁴⁹ Yeats *UP1* (1970) 269.

⁵⁰ Yeats *UP1* (1970) 269.

⁵¹ Yeats *UP1* (1970) 268.

divided and sub-divided the national imagination, for there was nought else for them to do. They could not suddenly become Turks, or Englishmen, or Frenchmen, and so start with a new character and a new history. They could but investigate and express ever more minutely and subtly the character, and history, and circumstance of climate and scenery, that they had got.⁵²

When applying this law of development to English history, Yeats believed it was plain: England had long been mired in an “age of lyric poetry” where “every kind of subtlety, obscurity, and intricate utterance prevails.”⁵³ English writers employed “an ever more elaborate language,” to express a “growing complexity of language and thought.”⁵⁴ Yet, because of that, the idioms of Byron (1788–1824), of Keats and, above all, of Shelley appeared “too fine, too subjective, too impalpable” and broken, as though “scattered into a thousand iridescent fragments, flashing and flickering” to articulate only bits of the general life then alive in England.⁵⁵ Stressing “ideas and feelings apart from their effects upon action,” the Romantics had explored aspects of subjective existence in their work – what Yeats called “every phase of human consciousness no matter how subtle, how vague” – rather than the broad collective themes of race, nation and heroic action.⁵⁶ For this reason, he thought, English poetry had stepped “out of the market-place, out of the general tide of life” and become instead “a mysterious cult, as it were, an almost secret religion made by the few for the few.”⁵⁷

Eager that Ireland would not imitate that “almost secret religion,” Yeats insisted that national development across both countries had been different, so much so that a central generic difference could easily be discerned in their respective literary histories. “[N]ot only is this literature of England different in character from the literature of Ireland,” he wrote, “as different as the beach tree from the oak ... the two literatures are in quite different stages of their development.”⁵⁸ As Yeats envisioned it, Ireland’s growth into a nation had been abruptly halted during the Middle Ages. “[W]hen the day of battle came,” he wrote, Ireland

⁵² Yeats *UPr* (1970) 269–70.

⁵³ Yeats *UPr* (1970) 271.

⁵⁴ Yeats *UPr* (1970) 271.

⁵⁵ Yeats *UPr* (1970) 271, 270.

⁵⁶ Yeats *UPr* (1970) 271.

⁵⁷ Yeats *UPr* (1970) 271.

⁵⁸ Yeats *UPr* (1970) 271, 269.

could not combine against the invader. Each province had its own assembly and its own king. There was no focus to draw the tribes into one. The national order perished at the moment when other countries like Germany and Iceland were beginning to write out their sagas and epics in deliberate form.⁵⁹

Mired in political disarray the country had no outlet in which to express its national imagination. Rather than see its folklore emerge as the foundation for a developing literary tradition in Irish, the tales of early Irish myth and history never found their first necessary form in the “epic or ballad period.”⁶⁰ Instead, the country’s legends languished in relative obscurity and soon became what Yeats called

a vast pell-mell of monstrous shapes: huge demons driving swine on the hill-tops; beautiful shadows whose hair has a peculiar life and moves responsive to their thought; and here and there some great hero like Cuchulain, some epic needing only deliberate craft to be scarce less than Homer. There behind the Ireland of to-day, lost in the ages, this chaos murmurs like a dark and stormy sea full of the sounds of lamentation.⁶¹

With no deliberate craft, there had been no Irish Homer. After 700 years of colonial subjugation – subjugation that Yeats and Hyde both regarded as political, linguistic and cultural – fragments of the country’s folklore had survived; but where once a tree might have emerged, there were only “seeds that never bore stems, stems that never wore flowers, flowers that knew no fruitage,” he lamented.⁶² “The literature of ancient Ireland is a literature of vast, half-dumb conceptions ... Instead of the well-made poems we might have had, there remains but a wild anarchy of legends.”⁶³

Yet from the anarchy of Ireland’s Gaelic past, Yeats believed that modern Irish literature needed merely formal rigor, indeed “only deliberate craft” for its work “to be scarce less than Homer.”⁶⁴ A new national epic composed in Anglo-Irish would emerge, for “we are a young nation,” Yeats explained,

with unexhausted material lying within us in our still unexpressed national character, about us in our scenery, and in the clearly marked outlines of our life, and behind us in our multitude of legends. Look at our literature

⁵⁹ Yeats, “Bardic Ireland” (January 4, 1890) in Yeats *CW9* (2004) 111.

⁶⁰ Yeats *UP1* (1970) 269.

⁶¹ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 112.

⁶² Yeats *CW9* (2004) 112.

⁶³ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 112.

⁶⁴ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 112.

and you will see that we are still in our epic or ballad period. All that is greatest in that literature is based upon legend.⁶⁵

Already the 1865 publication of *Lays of the Western Gael, and Other Poems*, Samuel Ferguson's "truly bardic" versions of Irish ballads, had helped advance the cause of a national vernacular in Ireland, a literature composed in the hybrid writing of Anglo-Irish.⁶⁶ Unlike his contemporaries in England, Ferguson was, Yeats insisted, "like the ancients; not that he was an imitator, as Matthew Arnold in *Sobrab and Rustum*, but for a much better reason; he was *like* them – like them in nature, for his spirit had sat with the old heroes of his country."⁶⁷ Rather than mimic the neoclassical impulse that had motivated Arnold, Ferguson cultivated in translation the original genius of the Irish language, and in so doing had begun to clear "the pathway" towards a new discovery of Irish epic, unearthing in his poem, *Deirdre*, what Yeats called "a fragment of the buried Odyssey of Ireland."⁶⁸ Through Ferguson's work "living waters for the healing of our nation" were rising, Yeats alleged, and if modern poets were to follow his example, gathering the remaining ballads and folk legends scattered throughout the country, they too might employ these in composing a new national poem.⁶⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century, it had long been theorized across the academy in Europe that Homeric epic had first emerged in archaic Greece not as the work of a single creative genius but rather as a synthetic invention, an amalgamation of disparate songs, legends and folk ballads slowly emended and arranged into form by later rhapsodists and grammarians. "Habemus nunc Homerum in manibus, non qui viguit in ore Graecorum suorum," the German philologist, Friedrich August Wolf (1759–1824) declared in 1795,

sed inde a Solonis temporibus usque ad haec Alexandrina mutatum varie, interpolatum, castigatum et emendatum. Id e disiectis quibusdam indicia iam dudum obscure colligebant homines docti et sollertes; nunc in unum coniunctae voces omnium temporum testantur, et loquitur historia.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Yeats *UPr* (1970) 273.

⁶⁶ Yeats, "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson – II" (November 1886) in Yeats *CW9* (2004) 24.

⁶⁷ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 14.

⁶⁸ Yeats, "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson – I" (October 9, 1886) in Yeats *CW9* (2004) 4; Yeats *CW9* (2004) 14.

⁶⁹ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 4.

⁷⁰ Wolfius (1795) 264–65. "The Homer that we hold in our hands now is not the one who flourished in the mouths of the Greeks of his own day, but one variously altered, interpolated, corrected, and emended from the times of Solon down to those of the Alexandrians. Learned and clever men have long felt their way to this conclusion by using various scattered bits of evidence; but now the voices of all periods joined together bear witness, and history speaks." Wolf (1985) 209.

With the publication of Wolf's *Prolegomena Ad Homerum*, a historicist approach to Greek epic – based specifically around the notion that both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* first existed simply as a series of songs or folk ballads – “swept the field.”⁷¹ Over time the poems had taken shape, Wolf argued, adapted by scholiasts whose task “in emending the text” was not “to consider what Homer sang, but what he ought to have sung.”⁷² Wolf's unorthodox views – his *abweichenden Gedanken über den Homer* – gave credence to the view that the poet's work was much less a monument to a single era in ancient Greek civilization and more, in fact, “like an archaeological site, with layers of history built into them in a palpable stratigraphy: the disparate effects of multiple compositional layers (some, including Jebb, would actually call them ‘strata’) and the intrusive hands of editors could all be felt in the poems.”⁷³ In the Anglophone world, this view influenced not only further scholarly inquiry into the Homeric world but the practice of translation and composition of new English poetry as well. It was thought that if “the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had been produced by a preliterate oral culture, then there might be similar cultural monuments preserved in obscure manuscript collections or still alive in oral traditions in remote parts of Europe.”⁷⁴ Already, antiquarians, scholars and writers had for some time been searching for monuments of classical significance in the broadly Celtic past of the British Isles, hoping the achievements of some ‘northern’ bard might emerge, a bard whose genius paralleled the accomplishments of Homeric verse. James Macpherson's notorious and fraudulent discovery of Ossian in Scotland in 1760 – a third-century Gaelic poet whom the Scottish rhetorician Hugh Blair (1718–1800) proclaimed the “Homer of the Highlands” – was a watershed moment in that search, implicating folk ballads in what became a wider “romantic exploration of primitivity, modernity, and historicity.”⁷⁵ With the publication of these translations, *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763), Ossian claimed a “resemblance to Homer,” a similarity that was said to have proceeded from “nature, as the original from which both drew their ideas.”⁷⁶ Having allegedly detected Homeric qualities in the ballad style and vulgar diction of “our rude Celtic bard,” Macpherson transposed these elements in his

⁷¹ Porter (2004) 336.

⁷² Wolf (1985) 204.

⁷³ F. A. Wolf, Letter to Heyne, November 18, 1795, in Wolf (1797) 5; Porter (2004) 336.

⁷⁴ Graver (2007) 76.

⁷⁵ Hugh Blair, “Appendix to *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, The Son of Fingal*” (1765) 450, as in Macpherson (1996) 403; McLane (2001) 424.

⁷⁶ Macpherson (1805) vol. 2: 8, 9.

English forgery, a version whose “pervasive sense of melancholy for a lost past” was met with popular acclaim in Britain.⁷⁷ *Ossian*, as has been noted, allowed readers to indulge all at once “in the taste for the sentimentalism and gothicism that characterized contemporary poems and novels, in the grand style of melodramatic drama, in the solemnity of English Bible rhetoric, and in the epic seriousness of Dryden’s Vergil and Pope’s Homer.”⁷⁸

The impact of both Wolf and Macpherson was lasting.⁷⁹ There emerged throughout the nineteenth century the desire to see Homer translated into a ballad-style English comparable in texture and spirit to the original Greek. William Maginn’s translation of sixteen ballads, *Homeric Ballads* (1838–1842, published again posthumously in 1850), Francis Newman’s 1856 unrhymed version of the *Iliad* and, later, the criticism of Thomas Macaulay as well as the historical writings of England’s most prominent Wolfian, George Grote (1794–1871), all helped advance the then unorthodox view that Homer was not an individual poet but rather representative of “the national genius of the Greek people itself, as it articulates its vision of its own experiences over the centuries.”⁸⁰ To imitate that genius in English meant that “no English model” could be followed in translating Homer: the work required what Francis Newman called a “more antiquated style,” one that was “fundamentally musical and popular” at the same time.⁸¹ The “moral qualities of Homer’s style” in the original, he argued, seemed “like to those of the English ballad.”⁸² For Newman, therefore, ballad meters would best replicate the “direct, popular, forcible, quaint, flowing, garrulous” qualities of Homeric verse, even if “those metres which, by the very possession of these qualities,” might be “liable to degenerate into doggerel.”⁸³

Matthew Arnold, for his part, despised Newman’s vision of Homer. Whatever caricature he made of the original Greek, the fact remained, Arnold thought, that Newman’s translation had achieved little: the “eminently noble” qualities of the *Iliad* had no parallel in his English idiom.⁸⁴ Instead, Newman had joined “to a bad rhythm” what Arnold

⁷⁷ Blair (1763) 23; Curley (2009) 24.

⁷⁸ Curley (2009) 24.

⁷⁹ See Jenkyns (1980) 197–99, and Armstrong (2005) 177–78.

⁸⁰ Berlin (1976) 55.

⁸¹ Newman (1856) x, ix, v.

⁸² Newman (1856) v.

⁸³ Newman (1856) iv, v. See also Venuti (2008) 99–107.

⁸⁴ Matthew Arnold “On Translating Homer,” in Arnold (1960) 102. See Venuti (2008) 107–20 and Reynolds (2006) 67–70. On Wolf’s impact on Arnold’s thinking, see Porter (2004) 338–41. See also Turner (1981) 178–81.

called “so bad a diction that it is difficult to distinguish exactly whether in any given passage it is his words or his measure which produces a total impression of such an unpleasant kind.”⁸⁵ Maginn’s work, he asserted, “just because they are ballads in their manner and movement,” were “not at all Homeric,” having nothing “in the world [of] the manner of Homer.”⁸⁶ The journalist had constructed his *Odyssey* as twelve separate folk ballads, believing one could creatively roll back the evolution of the epic, returning the poem to its alleged origin as a set of loosely sequenced stories and myths. Arnold, however, believed that Maginn had managed only a “true ballad-slang” in his poem, a “detestable dance ... jiggling in my ears, to spoil the effect of Homer, and to torture me. To apply that manner and that rhythm to Homer’s incidents, is not to imitate Homer, but to travesty him.”⁸⁷ For Arnold, the *grand style* of Homeric verse was, practically speaking, inimitable in its plainness, directness, simplicity and nobility. Only a translator willing to immerse himself, to “penetrate himself with a sense of the plainness and directness of Homer’s style; of the simplicity with which Homer’s thought is evolved and expressed” might, he thought, avoid the seemingly inevitable dissolution of these qualities in English, a dissolution one could find even in the most sublime English versions of Homer.⁸⁸ Even George Chapman’s seventeenth-century version was unfaithful in that regard; it was, Arnold argued, “too active,” interposing on the original Greek a “mist of the fancifulness of the Elizabethan age, entirely alien to the plain directness of Homer’s thought and feeling.”⁸⁹ That fanciful character was, for its time, a significant literary achievement – certainly when compared with the lackluster ballad-style translations of the mid-nineteenth century – but still “a cloud of more than Egyptian thickness” remained over Homer, a thickness that had kept from English the four most notable qualities of his Greek.⁹⁰ Thus while the “proposition that Homer’s poetry is *ballad-poetry*, analogous to the well-known ballad-poetry of the English and other nations, has a certain small portion of truth in it” – it being useful in discrediting “the artificial and literary manner in which Pope and his school rendered Homer” – Arnold insisted this view had been “extravagantly over-used.”⁹¹ Maginn’s and Newman’s failures proved that

⁸⁵ Arnold (1960) 132–33.

⁸⁶ Arnold (1960) 131.

⁸⁷ Arnold (1960) 131, 132.

⁸⁸ Arnold (1960) 111.

⁸⁹ Arnold (1960) 113, 103 (emphasis in the original).

⁹⁰ Arnold (1960) 103.

⁹¹ Arnold (1960) 126.

one could not effectively anglicize Homer by simply equating the nobility and directness of his Greek with the ignoble and vulgar rusticity of English folk. "It is time to say plainly," Arnold declared, "that, whatever the admirers of our old ballads may think, the supreme form of epic poetry, the genuine Homeric mould, is not the form of the Ballad of Lord Bateman."⁹²

With little to no fluency in Greek, Yeats himself showed no interest in translating Homer or weighing in on Arnold's opinion of Newman and Maginn. Yet the presence of the English 'ballad-style' Homer so despised by Arnold still held sway in his imagination, for Yeats believed – as he often discussed in his essays and private letters – that what still remained of Gaelic folklore was akin to the source material Homer himself had used when composing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. "[T]he celtic races love the soil of their countries vehemently," Yeats told a friend in 1897,

& have as great a mass of legends about that soil as Homer had about his ... the true foundation of literature is folklore, which was the foundation of Homer & of <more than half> Shakespeare but has not been the foundation of more modern writers ... The life of drawing rooms will be altogether [*sic*] changed in a few years the life of the poor, & the life that is in legends is still the life of Homers [*sic*] people.⁹³

The "mass of legends" still present in contemporary Ireland was evidence, Yeats thought, that the country was now – like archaic Greece had been before Homer – on the cusp of articulating its genius in its first literary form.⁹⁴ Ready for a national epic, the Irish possessed the necessary folk stories, those "tales which are made by no one man, but by the nation itself through a slow process of modification and adaptation, to express its loves and its hates, its likes and its dislikes."⁹⁵ With this abundance of folklore, its "unexhausted material," the modern poet could write collectively, Yeats thought, drawing on myth and history to define the racial character of a new Irish nation.⁹⁶ Already he explained,

⁹² Arnold (1960) 126. A popular song sung in taverns and pubs, *The Loving Ballad of Lord Bateman* was published in an 1839 edition with illustrations by George Cruikshank (1792–1878) and a preface written anonymously by Charles Dickens (1812–70).

⁹³ Yeats, "To Richard Ashe King, 5 August [1897]," in Yeats *CL2* (1997) 129–30. Elsewhere Yeats claimed in like fashion that, "There is still in truth upon these great level plains a people, a community bound together by imaginative possessions, by stories and poems which have grown out of its own life, and by a past of great passions which can still waken the heart to imaginative action. One could still, if one had the genius, and had been born to Irish, write for these people plays and poems like those of Greece." Yeats, "The Galway Plains" (1903) in Yeats *CW4* (2007) 158.

⁹⁴ Yeats *CL2* (1997) 129.

⁹⁵ Yeats *UPr* (1970) 273.

⁹⁶ Yeats *UPr* (1970) 273.

Our best writers, De Vere, Ferguson, Allingham, Mangan, Davis, O'Grady, are all either ballad or epic writers, and all base their greatest work, if I except a song or two of Mangan's and Allingham's, upon legends and upon the fortunes of the nation. Alone, perhaps, among the nations of Europe we are in our ballad or epic age.⁹⁷

Though Ireland stood in its epic period, Yeats was quick to insist that Homeric poetry and Greek mythology were worthy only of emulation, not imitation, adaptation or direct translation. As he saw it, writers could only effectively compose an Irish epic by employing in verse native myths, stories of Ireland's own invention. The centuries-long tedium of recycling in English the same heroes, gods and goddesses from Greek and Roman antiquity was over. "The folk-lore of Greece and Rome lasted us a long time," he wrote,

but having ceased to be a living tradition, it became both worn out and unmanageable, like an old servant. We can now no more get up a great interest in the gods of Olympus than we can in the stories told by the showman of a travelling waxwork company.⁹⁸

To use such 'waxwork' across Irish literature would be tantamount, Yeats argued, to imitating the Romantic poets, in particular Shelley who, rather than cultivate Britain's own native folk life, had saturated his verse with mythological elements drawn from the classics. It was for this reason that Shelley "lacked the true symbols and types and stories," Yeats explained.⁹⁹ Engrossed in the foreign, his verse did not have "adequate folk-lore" so "as to unite man more closely to the woods and hills and waters about him, and to the birds and animals that live in them."¹⁰⁰ "Shelley had but mythology," Yeats wrote,

and a mythology which had been passing for long through literary minds without any new inflow from living tradition loses all the incalculable instinctive and convincing quality of the popular traditions. No conscious invention can take the place of tradition, for he who would write a folk tale, and thereby bring a new life into literature, must have the fatigue of the spade in his hands and the stupor of the fields in his heart.¹⁰¹

In cultivating classical sources – the knowledge of which would be understood largely by only an educated elite in Britain and in Ireland – Shelley

⁹⁷ Yeats *UP1* (1970) 273.

⁹⁸ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 210.

⁹⁹ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 212.

¹⁰⁰ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 212.

¹⁰¹ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 212–13.

had, according to Yeats, traded folklore for a foreignizing substitute whose tenuous connection to Britain's native character had made it impossible to ventriloquize what Yeats called "the voice of some race celebrating itself, embalming for ever what it hated and loved."¹⁰²

With that in mind, Yeats eschewed allusions to Greek and Roman antiquity in his earliest published poetry: to adopt that material would not advance the kind of undeniable Irish epic he hoped to invent in Anglo-Irish; and yet, though he heaped scorn on the classicism of Shelley's poetry, Yeats insisted that Irish poets still had "to go where Homer went if we are to sing a new song."¹⁰³ That discipleship, however, demanded no abandonment of Irish for Greek but rather a return to the native, to the "great banquet on an earthen floor and under a broken roof" where Homer himself had likewise found inspiration.¹⁰⁴ That return, Yeats thought, would bring about an authentic rediscovery of the Homeric in Ireland, for by 1893 many notable Celtic philologists – scholars such as Marie Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville (1827–1910), John Rhys (1840–1915) and Alfred Trübner Nutt – believed that Gaelic folklore and the mythology of Homeric Greece had emerged from a common Indo-European source.¹⁰⁵ That "Greek kinship," as Synge later defined it, was at work in Ireland's folk culture; it was a kinship that had made the Celtic past indispensable to understanding the primitive world out of which Homer and the Greek classics had been born.¹⁰⁶ "Celtic legends are," Yeats wrote (when praising *The Voyage of Bran*, edited by Kuno Meyer and Alfred Nutt),

according to certain scholars, our principal way to an understanding of the beliefs out of which the beliefs of the Greeks and other Europeans races arose ... "Greek and Irish alone have preserved the early stages of the happy other world conception with any fulness" and ... Ireland has preserved them "with greater fulness and precision" than the Greeks.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Yeats *CW9* (2004) 3.

¹⁰³ Yeats, "Thoughts on Lady Gregory's Translations: Prefaces" (1902, 1903; rev. 1905, 1908, 1912) in Yeats *CW6* (1989) 132.

¹⁰⁴ Yeats *CW6* (1989) 131.

¹⁰⁵ The popularity surrounding d'Arbois de Jubainville's scholarship led to the 1903 translation, *The Irish Mythological Cycle & Celtic Mythology*, by Richard Irvine Best (1872–1959).

¹⁰⁶ Synge, "Celtic Mythology" (April 2, 1904) in Synge (1966) 365.

¹⁰⁷ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 416. In a like manner, the scholar of Irish, Richard Henebry, often insisted that, while "all civilizations in Europe to-day" represented "a development from a Roman or Latin source, Irish civilization, or what remains of it, goes back to a Keltic original," an original commonly thought to have preserved more fully primitive beliefs shared with ancient Greece. Henebry (1902) 295.

Still untapped, the potency of the Gaelic appeared to Yeats and to many advocates of revival as Greek in essence, classical at heart. The accuracy of such claims mattered little: scholarly sources positing a common origin of the Greek classics and the unexpressed potential latent in Irish could be used successfully to advance Yeats' vision of Anglo-Irish, a hybrid vernacular whose connection to classical antiquity remained unbroken, thus promising a return to what Yeats called "the habit of mind that created the religion of the muses."¹⁰⁸ Amid the ruin of English Romanticism, with the extinction of Irish Gaelic impending, Irish writers still held "ancient salt" in their grasp, a salt with which they could pack and preserve the past while still inventing the future in vernacular.¹⁰⁹ Forged by the creative adoption of folklore, and reputedly infused with the foreign accent of Irish, this new style of writing would sustain, Yeats believed, the exceptional kinship the Gael had long shared with the Greek.¹¹⁰

Years later, as he looked back on his youth, Yeats admitted that, despite his reservations, he aspired – like many other poets of his circle then – to the vision that Shelley had forged from the ancient Greek world. "Might I not," he reflected,

with health and good luck to aid me, create some new *Prometheus Unbound*; Patrick or Columcille, Oisín or Finn, in Prometheus' stead; and, instead of Caucasus, Cro-Patrick or Ben Bulbin? Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?¹¹¹

Although Yeats disliked the artificial character of Shelley's classicism, he did admire the *Prometheus Unbound*, the 1820 lyrical drama that he once declared the "sacred book" of his youth.¹¹² What attracted Yeats was not the use of Greek mythology but rather Shelley's attempt to translate and reinvigorate the ancient world in an English context. The *Prometheus Unbound* had been unsuccessful, he thought, only because its story was too inadequately married to the "rock and hill" of Britain, to the known imaginative landscape present in British literature.¹¹³ "[I]f Shelley had nailed his Prometheus," Yeats explained,

or some equal symbol, upon some Welsh or Scottish rock, [his] art would have entered more intimately, more microscopically, as it were, into our

¹⁰⁸ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 467.

¹⁰⁹ Yeats, "Introduction" (1937) in Yeats *CW5* (1994) 213.

¹¹⁰ Synge (1966) 365.

¹¹¹ Yeats *CW3* (1999) 166–67.

¹¹² Yeats *CW3* (1999) 95.

¹¹³ Yeats *CW3* (1999) 167.

thought and given perhaps to modern poetry a breadth and stability like that of ancient poetry.¹¹⁴

With no native setting, Shelley had failed to recapture the pathos, the passionate authority of Aeschylean tragedy in English. Moreover, through his dependence on foreign myth, Shelley's work could not speak for the whole race in Britain: *Prometheus* appealed only, Yeats argued, to an elite educated in the classics. In these failures, however, Yeats still recognized a model of composition that would steer his own first attempts to forge an Anglo-Irish epic, an epic powered by his own adaptation and re-stylization of Gaelic legend. From an early age, Yeats admired Shelley, confessing later that he had written many bad imitations of him all through youth.¹¹⁵

With the 1889 publication of his narrative poem *The Wanderings of Oisín*, Yeats believed he had at last freed his verse from juvenile flaws and grasped something of the "breadth and stability" that previously eluded Shelley.¹¹⁶ In *Oisín*, he was intent on reclaiming what Herbert Tucker has called

two originary moments in the history of Western epic: first, the Ossianic matter that Macpherson had confiscated for Scotland a century earlier; then, back behind that ... the primitive of glory of Homer, the bard of archaic wanderings whose pre-classical vigor metropolitan Victorians like W. E. Gladstone and Matthew Arnold had done their best to recruit into the institutional service of an imperial Englishness.¹¹⁷

When beginning work on *Oisín*, Yeats consulted two prior English versions of the legend, translations that, while conveying the substance of the hero's journey to the Celtic Otherworld, were stylistically conventional. Simple and literal, Bryan O'Looney's 1859 translation, *Lay of Oisín on the Land of Youth*, did not sacrifice clarity in English for the strange nuances of Irish.¹¹⁸ Yeats' second source, David Comyn's *Laoidh Oisín air Thír na n-Óg* (1880), was likewise prepared as an "exactly literal rather

¹¹⁴ Yeats *CW*₃ (1999) 137.

¹¹⁵ "I had begun to write poetry in imitation of Shelley and of Edmund Spenser, play after play – for my father exalted dramatic poetry above all other kinds – and I invented fantastic and incoherent plots. My lines but seldom scanned, for I could not understand the prosody in the books, although there were many lines that taken by themselves had music. I spoke them slowly as I wrote and only discovered when I read them to somebody else that there was no common music, no prosody." Yeats *CW*₃ (1999) 81. See also Bornstein (1970) 13–27.

¹¹⁶ Yeats *CW*₃ (1999) 137.

¹¹⁷ Tucker (2008) 541.

¹¹⁸ O'Looney (1859) 227–80.

than elegant” translation to be used especially for instruction in Irish Gaelic.¹¹⁹ Comyn possessed a certain regard for the art of translation, believing it could be used to enrich and expand the semantic register of the target language. “Translation from one language into another,” he wrote,

enriches the language into which the translation is made, in ways other than by the actual worth of the work translated. The language is rendered more copious and pliable by being, as it were, put through a process of expansion to render it more capable of transmitting clearly the ideas conceived and expressed at first in a different idiom. English has been enriched in this way from many sources.¹²⁰

Nonetheless, Comyn’s own anglicization of Oisín did little to infuse English with expressly Gaelic strains, his verse being a crib for students and readers ignorant of the Irish original. Where he could not easily produce an English rendering of the Gaelic, Comyn marked the passage with parentheses and then employed “words required to bring out clearly in English the meaning of each clause ... and when, in addition to this, the literal meaning requires still further to be idiomatically explained, a second version of the clause is given in italic.”¹²¹ This method, he claimed, gave preeminence to the aesthetic achievements of the original text, offering in English no stylistic surrogate, no ornate substitute for the Irish it replaced. Yeats, however, was dissatisfied with the uninspired vision of the Celtic Otherworld in these versions, and he would not, moreover, adopt the literalist approach of Comyn and O’Looney. Instead, he drew on recent English verse, mixing conventions from the Romantic and Victorian poetry he knew well with the Arcadian themes he had admired in Spenser.¹²² To further advance the “new power” of ‘Irish Gaelic-in-English’ that Yeats had first seen coming in Hyde’s *The Love Songs of Connacht* (1893), Yeats disguised conventions that Arnold and Shelley had earlier used to register the impression of Greek interference in English.¹²³ With no knowledge of Irish, he adopted these, believing he could evoke an ‘ancient’ resonance in his verse, replicating a ‘stability’ whose seemingly Gaelic accent would, moreover, distinguish Anglo-Irish epic from the recent subjectivism of English Romanticism.

¹¹⁹ Comyn (1880) vii.

¹²⁰ Comyn (1881) 14.

¹²¹ Comyn (1880) viii.

¹²² Yeats *CW3* (1999) 98.

¹²³ Yeats *CW8* (2003) 16.

Yeats' aspirations notwithstanding, contemporary critics were largely unimpressed with the finished poem. On publication, *Oisín* met mixed critical success: early reviews noted the apparent confusion, the "besetting sins" from which Yeats had suffered as he formulated the poem's elaborate style.¹²⁴ "Mr. Yeats has yet to rid his mind of the delusion," one critic wrote in *The Freeman's Journal*,

that obscurity is an acceptable substitute for strenuous thought and sound judgment. People who desire to occupy their time in solving riddles and similar exercises can buy riddle books or mechanical puzzles; Mr. Yeats does justice neither to himself nor to his readers when he hides a jumble of confused ideas in a maze of verbiage and calls it all "The Wanderings of Oisín."¹²⁵

Even sympathetic reviewers, like Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) and John Todhunter (1839–1916), also noted "strange crudities and irritating conceits" present in *Oisín's* syntax and diction.¹²⁶ The poem possessed, Todhunter exclaimed, "real flaws of execution – slovenly lines, awkward and uncouth constructions, exuberances which are not beauties, concentrations of expression which are crude and stiff rather than powerful."¹²⁷ Yet, in spite these of imperfections, Yeats had achieved, Wilde argued, "at least something of that largeness of vision that belongs to the epical temper," even if the poem as a whole failed to effect "the grand simplicity of epic treatment."¹²⁸

Oisín's "epical temper" was also not lost on Yeats' friend, the classicist and poet Lionel Pigot Johnson (1867–1902), who in praising "his ability to write Celtic poetry, with all the Celtic notes of style and imagination" suggested further that a "classical manner" was at work in Yeats' style.¹²⁹ "Like all men of the true poetical spirit, he is not overcome by the apparent antagonism of the classical and the romantic in art. Like the fine

¹²⁴ "Literature: Some Recent Poetry," *The Freeman's Journal* (February 1, 1889) 2.

¹²⁵ "Literature: Some Recent Poetry," *The Freeman's Journal* (February 1, 1889) 2.

¹²⁶ Oscar Wilde, "Three New Poets: Yeats, Fitzgerald, Le Gallienne," *Pall Mall Gazette* (July 12, 1889), as in Jeffares (1977) 73.

¹²⁷ John Todhunter, Review of *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*. *The Academy* 882 (March 30, 1889) 216, as in Jeffares (1977) 69.

¹²⁸ Wilde (July 12, 1889), as in Jeffares (1977) 73. Other reviews complained of the poem's failure to provide a "bardic treatment." An unsigned review (by George Coffey [1857–1916]) for the *Evening Telegraph* (February 6, 1889) noted how the "principal poem, 'The Wanderings of Oisín,' runs to some fifty pages" but was, "perhaps, the least satisfactory; we had looked for a more bardic treatment." *The Manchester Guardian* likewise deemed Yeats "a rough and sometimes a rather inharmonious bard." "Books of the Week," *The Manchester Guardian* (January 28, 1899) 6.

¹²⁹ Lionel Johnson, Rev. of *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*, by W. B. Yeats. *The Academy* 1065 (October 1, 1892), as in Jeffares (1977) 79.

Greeks or Romans,” Johnson wrote, Yeats “treats his subject according to its nature. Simple as that sounds, it is a praise not often to be bestowed.”¹³⁰ Yeats had taken on “a Celtic theme, some vast and epic legend,” but he did not display what Johnson called “the mere confused vastness” of Ireland’s folk culture.¹³¹ Instead, he had formed a poem “full of reason” from the ancient past, “a masterpiece of severe art” that set the “monstrous, barbaric frenzy” of primitive Ireland “in verse of the strictest beauty.”¹³² Though the poem had nothing of the “*gravitas*, that *auctoritas*, which belongs to the poetry of Rome and of England,” *Oisín* possessed a reputedly ‘classical’ manner in its “beautiful childishness and freshness,” its “quickness and adroitness in seizing the spiritual relations of things.”¹³³ That quickness reflected, Johnson argued, the “gift of simple spirituality,” one born of what the French historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874) had called the profound sympathy of “le genie celtique ... avec le genie grec.”¹³⁴ The *Clonmel Chronicle* reached a similar conclusion about *Oisín*, calling the poem “a genuine product of what is called the Classical School of English Literature.”¹³⁵ Remarkably, the reviewer wrote, Yeats managed to avoid the “flat, stale, and unprofitable idea of imitation” even while working with

a classical subject ... [he] has submitted that subject to a purely classical design and treatment. In his imitation of the Celtic Homer’s lays, Mr. Yeats is, no doubt, following the true bent of his genius: he exhibits many of the intrinsic attributes of true art, a refined sense of beauty, an imagination of vast range and considerable power, and a diction of exquisite felicity and elegance.¹³⁶

Unlike those classically minded writers who possessed an “unconquerable disrelish to admit of sensible progress, and in many instances even a morbid belief in the retardation of poetic genius,” Yeats tried, if not to overcome the “ill-timed unsympathetic ways” of the classical school, then to only admit them while “making his story interesting by picturesque descriptions and some pretty lays.”¹³⁷

¹³⁰ Johnson (October 1, 1892), as in Jeffares (1977) 79–80.

¹³¹ Johnson (October 1, 1892), as in Jeffares (1977) 80.

¹³² Johnson (October 1, 1892), as in Jeffares (1977) 80.

¹³³ Johnson (October 1, 1892), as in Jeffares (1977) 82.

¹³⁴ Johnson (October 1, 1892), as in Jeffares (1977) 82. See also Michelet (1835) 1:121.

¹³⁵ Acoe (1889). Yeats admired this review. For many years, he kept a newspaper clipping of it among the papers later bequeathed to the National Library in Dublin. See Yeats Papers, MS 31087, National Library of Ireland, Dublin (NLI).

¹³⁶ Acoe (1889).

¹³⁷ Acoe (1889).

Praise aside, the classical manner that Lionel Johnson and others detected in *Oisín* had little to do with its “vast range,” “severe art” or Yeats’ treatment of a “subject according to its nature” and more to do with stylistic techniques that English poets had sometimes used to convey the pressure of ancient Greek. Over the course of the nineteenth century, two divergent ‘Hellenic’ styles emerged in English poetry, and both exerted influence on Yeats’ efforts to dislocate his Anglo-Irish from conventional English.¹³⁸ The first ‘Greek’ style has been described as a “new and stricter neo-classicism largely derived from Winckelmann and his idealization of the ‘noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur’ of the Greeks; in literature, this corresponded to a style which emphasized swiftness and clarity, simplicity, crystalline transparency.”¹³⁹ By mid-century, Matthew Arnold had become the foremost advocate of this style in English letters, writing in the preface to *Poems* (1853) that the “clearness of arrangement, rigour of development, simplicity of style” once achieved by ancient Greek poetry was needed in English, for at present the “multitude of voices counselling different things bewildering” was too great.¹⁴⁰ To clarify the “confusion of the present times,” English required the “eternal objects of poetry, among all nations, and at all times,” objects that the “Greeks understood far more clearly than we do.”¹⁴¹ Because Greek poets had not subordinated “great action treated as a whole” to more impermanent aspects of literary expression, Greek literature remained rooted in what the “cultivated Athenian required,” namely that the “permanent elements of his nature should be moved.”¹⁴² Such movement had been expressed most eloquently and most lucidly, Arnold argued, in Sophocles and in Homer whose work reflected “intense significance,” “noble simplicity” and “calm pathos”: both were therefore “excellent models” to shape new commensurate forms of writing in an otherwise rudderless modernity.¹⁴³

Arnold himself tried to recast this ‘Greek’ form of permanence in his own idiom, fashioning in the narrative poem *Sohrab and Rustum* (1853) what Coventry Patmore (1823–96) called “a vivid reproduction of Homer’s manner and spirit.”¹⁴⁴ Drawing a story from Persian myth, he

¹³⁸ On these poetic stylizations of Greek, see Haynes (2003) 104–37.

¹³⁹ Haynes (2003) 115.

¹⁴⁰ Matthew Arnold, “Preface to *Poems*” (1853) in Arnold (1960) 12, 8.

¹⁴¹ Arnold (1960) 8, 3, 5.

¹⁴² Arnold (1960) 12, 6.

¹⁴³ Arnold (1960) 12, 8–9.

¹⁴⁴ Patmore (1854) 495. On the poem as evidence of the “direct influence of Greek upon English,” see Clark (1923) 3–7, and Holloway (1967) 34–37.

set out to anglicize the “perfect plainness and directness” of Homeric Greek through parataxis and often literal translations of Greek similes, two conventions that Arnold believed could help anglicize “noble simplicity” and a “baldness of expression.”¹⁴⁵ Yet, while influential, the classical ideals articulated by Arnold did not resemble Yeats’ view of ancient civilization in Ireland, a primitive folk world that possessed, he thought, little clarity and less restraint – ancient Ireland was a fractured civilization, best represented by what Yeats called its “wild anarchy of legends.”¹⁴⁶ Where Arnold found a grand style, a nobility, an order in Homeric epic, nothing of a *genus sublime dicendi* had yet to emerge in Irish; there remained instead a scattered collection of folk tales still in need of aesthetic stability.¹⁴⁷ “There behind the Ireland of to-day,” Yeats explained, “lost in the ages, this chaos murmurs like a dark and stormy sea full of the sounds of lamentation. And through all these throbs one impulse – the persistence of Celtic passion.”¹⁴⁸ Accordingly, in *Oisín* Yeats hoped to bring that passion and chaos into stricter form. Though he saw in Irish antiquity nothing of the order Arnold ascribed to Homer – and though Yeats also commonly ridiculed the English critic’s influence in contemporary debates about modern poetry – he found the paratactic style of Arnold’s Homeric imitation compelling;¹⁴⁹ and just as Arnold had done and as William Morris had attempted with his own 1887 ballad-style version of the *Odyssey*, Yeats too employed parataxis to pace *Oisín*, to give Anglo-Irish something of an epic, grand treatment.¹⁵⁰ Throughout *Sohrab and Rustum*, Arnold used the convention to mimic the “eminently rapid” quality, the plainness and directness he found in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.¹⁵¹ In a similar way, Yeats sought to keep *Oisín* free from embedded clauses and unfettered by subordinate

¹⁴⁵ Arnold (1960) 116, 12, 6.

¹⁴⁶ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 112.

¹⁴⁷ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 11.1.3. See also Saint-Girons (2014) 1091–96.

¹⁴⁸ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 112.

¹⁴⁹ Yeats often derided Arnold’s belief that poetry was a “criticism of life.” “Great poetry does not teach us anything,” he wrote in 1886, “it changes us ... Heroic poetry is a phantom finger swept over all the strings, arousing from man’s whole nature a song of answering harmony. It is the poetry of action, for such alone can arouse the whole nature of man. It touches all the strings – those of wonder and pity, of fear and joy. It ignores morals, for its business is not in any way to make us rules for life, but to make character. It is not, as a great English writer has said, ‘a criticism of life’, but rather a fire in the spirit, burning away what is mean and deepening what is shallow.” Yeats *CW9* (2004) 6. On Yeats’ regard for Arnold, see Kelleher (1950) 197–221, Watson (2006) 36–58, Grene (2008) 197–204, and Schuchard (2008) 191–97.

¹⁵⁰ On William Morris and the reception of classical epic, see Tucker (2008) 511–12.

¹⁵¹ Arnold (1960) 102.

complexities, preferring instead simple phrases linked with coordinating conjunctions – a hallmark of parataxis – as in this passage excerpted from the poem's first book.¹⁵²

And then I mounted and she bound me
 With her triumphing arms around me,
 And whispering to herself enwound me;
 But when the horse had felt my weight,
 He shook himself and neighed three times:
 Caoilte, Conan, and Finn came near,
 And wept, and raised their lamenting hands,
 And bid me stay, with many a tear;
 But we rode out from the human lands.

(1.106–14)¹⁵³

Resolved to marry Niamh, “daughter of the King of the Young,” Oisín rides to the strange, earthly paradise of *Tír na nÓg*, the homeland of his fairy bride and a safe haven for everlasting youth. On route, the poem's syntactic similarities to *Sohrab and Rustum* and other Victorian versions of Homer become apparent: sequenced with simple independent clauses and linked by coordinating conjunctions, Yeats forges a heroic measure, one parallel to the reputedly Greek rapidity Arnold attributed to Homer. Yet, however evocative its syntax may seem, the action of *Oisín* is slowed by a further complication, the syntax mired in what Oscar Wilde derided as the “out-glittering” effect of Yeats' diction.¹⁵⁴ One after another, Yeats elaborates the polysyndetonic images of *Tír na nÓg* in a florid, pictorial fashion, stressing the painted strangeness in the Celtic Otherworld – as in the passage that follows, where Niamh entices Oisín, invoking all the pleasures that will soon consume him, bit by bit, on the Island of Youth.

“O Oisín, mount by me and ride
 To shores by the wash of the tremulous tide,
 Where men have heaped no burial-mounds,
 And the days pass by like a wayward tune,
 Where broken faith has never been known,
 And the blushes of first love never have flown;
 And there I will give you a hundred hounds;
 No mightier creatures bay at the moon;
 And a hundred robes of murmuring silk,
 And a hundred calves and a hundred sheep

¹⁵² On the “breaking of hypotaxis,” see Adamson (1998) 630–46.

¹⁵³ Yeats *VE* (1987) 9–10.

¹⁵⁴ Wilde (July 12, 1889), as in Jeffares (1977) 73.

Whose long wool whiter than sea-froth flows;
 And a hundred spears and a hundred bows,
 And oil and wine and honey and milk,
 And always never-anxious sleep;
 While a hundred youths, mighty of limb,
 By knowing nor tumult nor hate nor strife,
 And a hundred ladies, merry as birds,
 Who when they dance to a fitful measure
 Have a speed like the speed of the salmon herds,
 Shall follow your horn and obey your whim,
 And you shall know the Danaan leisure;
 And Niamh be with you for a wife.”

(I.80–102)¹⁵⁵

Niamh's enumeration of pleasures in this excerpt typifies the *enargeia*, the “extravagant picturesqueness” of *Oisín* whose “grotesque machinery” so irritated the poet William Watson (1858–1935) that he dismissed Yeats' Celtic “fantasies” as “stage-properties of the most unillusive kind.”¹⁵⁶ Their visual intensity overburdened the poem and robbed it not only of excitement but also of the plainness that Arnold thought fitting for authentic Homeric poetry. Though they left the reader with elaborate impressions of “luxuriant fancy,” *Oisín*'s “beautiful fantasies” had nonetheless made the heroic struggle in *Tír na nÓg* seem dull and without drama.¹⁵⁷

Though Arnold's principles for anglicizing Homer may have provided some model for Yeats to structure *Oisín*, he did not think plainness of diction, a diction marked with “baldness of expression,” would best reflect or translate ancient Irish myth into the ‘hybrid’ vernacular he desired.¹⁵⁸ For Yeats, Ireland's folk stories had emerged in an altogether primitive world far from modernity, a foreign world “full of restless energies ... as might be said of Greece.”¹⁵⁹ That civilization possessed little of the “calm pathos” Arnold attributed to Homeric poetry, and so Yeats instead aimed to articulate in his Anglo-Irish idiom the so-called restlessness at work in the untamed Gael, whose “persistence of Celtic passion” had given birth to ancient Ireland's “wild anarchy of legends.”¹⁶⁰ Accordingly, a competing form of Greek reception in English poetry

¹⁵⁵ Yeats *VE* (1987) 8–9.

¹⁵⁶ William Watson, A Review of “The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics,” *Illustrated London News* (September 10, 1892), as in Jeffares (1977) 77.

¹⁵⁷ Francis Thompson, “A review of ‘The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems’,” *Weekly Register* (September 27, 1890), as in Jeffares (1977) 74.

¹⁵⁸ Arnold (1960) 6.

¹⁵⁹ Yeats *CW9* (2004) III.

¹⁶⁰ Arnold (1960) 12; Yeats *CW9* (2004) 112.

made an indelible impact on the diction of *Oisín*.¹⁶¹ An altogether different fashioning of Greek influence – a “rough high style, modelled especially on Aeschylus,” a style that stressed disorder in English through “agglutination, and abruptness rather than lucidity, translucence, and clarity” – features prominently in the poem, having been mediated to Yeats by the English Romantic he admired most in his youth, Shelley.¹⁶² Shelley, Yeats believed, had portrayed in his *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) a strange archaic world, a world overrun with untrammelled energy, chaos and divine strife. The *Prometheus* showed a “grotesque, un-hellenic, unglorified” Greece, a dark Greece whose reception in the Anglophone world did not receive critical explanation until Walter Pater’s essays on “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone” emerged in 1876.¹⁶³ Tracing the development of Demeter across the religious imagination of the Greeks, Pater suggested that a radical transformation was at work. At one time the veneration of the goddess

belonged to that older religion, nearer to the earth, which some have thought they could discern behind the more definitely national mythology of Homer. She is the goddess of dark caves, and is not wholly free from monstrous form ... She is the goddess then of the fertility of the earth, in its wildness; and so far her attributes are to some degree confused with Thessalian Gaia and the Phrygian Cybele.¹⁶⁴

Slowly, however, he observed, her monstrous, chthonic form had given way to the marmoreal image of the new classical world, the representation of the goddess becoming “replaced by a more beautiful image in the new style, with face and hands of ivory ... in tone and texture, some subtler likeness to women’s flesh ... the closely enveloping drapery being constructed in daintily beaten plates of gold.”¹⁶⁵

Eager to portray Irish antiquity as full of “monstrous form,” Yeats perhaps found the darker, anarchic vision expressed in *Prometheus* commensurate with the “vast pell-mell” of Gaelic folklore.¹⁶⁶ In *Oisín*, therefore, Shelley’s stylization of the Greek is discernible in his diction in two specific ways. First, in imitation of Shelley, Yeats saturated the poem with privatives. In *Prometheus*, Shelley had used these generously, hoping to translate the common, alpha-privative construction found in ancient

¹⁶¹ Haynes (2003) 104–37.

¹⁶² Haynes (2003) 153.

¹⁶³ Pater (1876b) 269.

¹⁶⁴ Pater (1876a) 92.

¹⁶⁵ Pater (1876b) 270.

¹⁶⁶ Pater (1876a) 92; Yeats *CW9* (2004) 112.

Greek. Compared with other Indo-European languages, classical Greek has been said to possess what one study has called “a richer variety of forms of the negative prefix in compounds,” and so Shelley exploited these, inventing neologisms, negative adjectives in English with the prefix ‘un-’ and the suffix ‘-less’.¹⁶⁷ He did so not simply to register the foreign presence of Greek in his work but to generate also an “obscuring effect” in his imagery, an effect that enacted within each privative a withdrawal, a Platonic stripping away of the “sensuous character of experience.”¹⁶⁸

For Shelley the veil was the interposition of the material world between finite mind and Platonic idea; it was also the obscuring effect of concrete imagery, with its appeal to our senses, which his negative epithets were intended to remove. They withdraw the veil of sense-perception.¹⁶⁹

The force of Shelley’s negative adjectives helped drive the *Prometheus* from the familiar, “sensuous character” of native English, pushing the poem instead to a foreign ideal, to an anglicized Greekness whose strange, alien sound in English stressed “the intellectual, ideal world of Platonic forms” more than the ‘native Doric’.¹⁷⁰

At the time of writing *Oisín*, Yeats had little interest in the Platonic resonance of the *Prometheus*, but nevertheless Shelley’s manner of manipulating Greek in English offered a suggestive model of composition, perhaps even an escape from his ignorance of Irish. “It is markedly in the Shelleian vein, or rather in one Shelleian vein,” declared one contemporary critic of *Oisín*, “He is a fay hopped out of a corner of Shelley’s brain.”¹⁷¹ Hoping to dislocate, to foreignize his own idiom, Yeats mimicked Shelley’s practice to mask his English with apparent interference from Irish. In this way, the Celtic Otherworld Yeats sketched out in *Oisín* was also a conscious attempt at a *lingua dissimilitudinis*, a language of unlikeness pressed to evoke the ancient and Gaelic. To this end, as in this excerpt, Yeats’ use of the privative did significant work:

“Flee from him,” pearl-pale Niamh weeping cried,
 “For all men flee the demons”; but moved not
 My angry king-remembering soul one jot.
 There was no mightier soul of Heber’s line;
 Now it is old and mouse-like. For a sign

¹⁶⁷ Moorhouse (1959) 47.

¹⁶⁸ Buxton (1978) 159.

¹⁶⁹ Buxton (1978) 159, as quoted in Haynes (2003) 129.

¹⁷⁰ Buxton (1978) 159. On Shelley’s use of negatives, see Webb (1983) 37–62.

¹⁷¹ Thompson (September 27, 1890), as in Jeffares (1977) 74.

I burst the chain: still earless, nerveless, blind,
 Wrapped in the things of the unhuman mind,
 In some dim memory or ancient mood,
 Still earless, nerveless, blind, the eagles stood.

(2.92–100)¹⁷²

Here, the negatives obscure the psychic reverie of Oisín's adversaries, the "two old eagles, full of ancient pride," servants of the sea-god, Manannán mac Lir.¹⁷³ Transfixed by the Celtic past and wrecked by unseen "ancient things," their "unhuman" minds are now kept from both sight and sound in the present.¹⁷⁴ Denying the "presence of the attribute, which the positive describes," Yeats' privatives rupture the past and the present, stressing separation, not simply the passing of time but the passing from language to language as well. The negatives strip from the description the material "sensuous experience" of English, pushing Yeats' diction to denial: haunted by the absence of Irish Gaelic, his idiom possessed with its radical unlikeness to 'native' English expresses itself, paradoxically, through negative invention.¹⁷⁵

The influence of Shelley's 'grecified' English is discernible also in Yeats' manipulation of numerous compound epithets throughout *Oisín*. A prominent feature of Shelley's *Prometheus*, compounds were widely regarded, from as early as the late sixteenth century, as evidence of ancient Greek interference in English. In his *Defence of Poesy* (1595), Philip Sidney (1554–86) praised English for being "particularly happy in compositions of two or three words together, near the Greek, far beyond the Latin: which is one of the greatest beauties can be in a language."¹⁷⁶ Likewise, George Puttenham's 1589 handbook on rhetoric, verse and prosody, *The Arte of English Poesy*, noted how "happy" the Greeks were with the "freedom and liberty of their language," a language that, Puttenham argued, had allowed them "to invent any new name that they listed and to piece many words together to make of them one entire, much more significative than the single word."¹⁷⁷ With the rise of Romanticism in Britain, growth in the poetic use of the compound followed, and its prominence in the work of Keats and of Shelley was greeted "with a whole-hearted enthusiasm not known before."¹⁷⁸ Shelley,

¹⁷² Yeats *VE* (1987) 35–36.

¹⁷³ Yeats *VE* (1987) 34.

¹⁷⁴ Yeats *VE* (1987) 34, 36.

¹⁷⁵ Buxton (1978) 159. On the influence of *Prometheus* in Yeats' early work, see Bornstein (1970).

¹⁷⁶ Sidney (1983) 155.

¹⁷⁷ Puttenham (2007) bk 3, chap. 9, 241.

¹⁷⁸ Groom (1937) 309–10.

in particular, was drawn to the convention in his attempts to anglicize the agglutinated “heavy compounds” of Aeschylean Greek.¹⁷⁹ Once satirized by Aristophanes in the *Frogs*, Aeschylus was known for his boldness in employing a “multitude of long words.”¹⁸⁰ As one scholar has put it, the Greek poet “constantly builds an iambic trimeter out of four words and not rarely out of three; and of those long words heavy compounds form a large part ... Aeschylus in fact grows bolder in the formation of new compounds, not, like Sophocles, more cautious.”¹⁸¹ Shelley, though he confessed to taking “licence” with the received myth of Prometheus – one which “supposed reconciliation of Jupiter with his victim” – set out to replicate the verbal saturation that Aeschylus had mastered.¹⁸² The results, however, troubled contemporary critics of his work, who felt that the macaronic idiom of the *Prometheus* was “intolerable,” ruined, as one writer put it, by “the very exaggeration, copiousness of verbiage, and incoherence of ideas.”¹⁸³

If the poet is one who whirls round his reader’s brain, till it becomes dizzy and confused; if it is his office to envelop he knows not what in huge folds of a clumsy drapery of splendid words and showy metaphors, then, without doubt, may Mr. Shelley place the Delphic laurel on his head. But take away from him the unintelligible, the confused, the incoherent, the bombastic, the affected, the extravagant, the hideously gorgeous, and *Prometheus*, and the poems which accompany it, will sink at once into nothing.¹⁸⁴

According to James Russell Lowell (1819–91), *Prometheus* embodied “Shelley at his worst period,” the poem possessing what he called an “unwieldy abundance of incoherent words and images, that were merely words and images without any meaning of real experience to give them solidity.”¹⁸⁵ No matter the reception, Shelley’s aim had been an “elaborate and grandiose diction” of verbal and visual depth whose roots were not set in the familiar conventions of English poetry but outcrossed rather with what Aristophanes had once satirized in *Frogs* as an “ungated mouth, uncircumlocutory, a big bombastolocator” – the ἀπύλωτον

¹⁷⁹ Earp (1948) 6.

¹⁸⁰ Earp (1948) 6.

¹⁸¹ Earp (1948) 6, 9.

¹⁸² Shelley, “Author’s Preface” to *Prometheus Unbound* in Shelley (2002) 206.

¹⁸³ W. S. Walker, *The Quarterly Review* 26 (October 1821–January 1822) 177, as in Barcus (1975) 263.

¹⁸⁴ Walker (October 1821–January 1822) 177, as in Barcus (1975) 264.

¹⁸⁵ James Russell Lowell, Review of *The Life and Letters of James Gates Percival*. *North American Review* 104 (January 1867) 281, as in Barcus (1975) 269.

στόμα, ἀπεριλάλητον κομποφακελορρήμονα (*Fr.* 838–39) – of Aeschylean Greek.¹⁸⁶

Though the reception of the *Prometheus* was tepid on publication, Yeats still thought it his “sacred book”;¹⁸⁷ and, when in 1894 the London firm, T. Fisher Unwin offered to print a “new and corrected edition” of all of his previous poetry, Yeats used the opportunity to significantly revise *The Wanderings of Oisín*. Under Shelley’s influence, he continued to use the *Prometheus* as a model for defamiliarizing, ‘de-anglicizing’ his idiom. Infusing the 1895 revision of *Oisín* with elaborate compound epithets, Yeats complicated the paratactic syntax inherited from Arnold’s *Sohrab and Rustum*. In so doing, he hoped to strengthen the poem’s visual character, to keep it from the bland literalism of previous versions. The journey to the Celtic Otherworld was to be saturated in fantastical poeticisms, as in this passage where Oisín and Niamh ride on to *Tír na nÓg*.

And passing the Firlbolgs’ burial-mounds,
 Came to the cairn-heaped grassy hill
 Where passionate Maeve is stony-still;
 And found on the dove-grey edge of the sea
 A pearl-pale, high-born lady, who rode
 On a horse with bridle of findrinny;
 And like a sunset were her lips,
 A stormy sunset on doomed ships;
 A citron colour gloomed in her hair,
 But down to her feet white vesture flowed,
 And with the glimmering crimson glowed
 Of many a figured embroidery;
 And it was bound with a pearl-pale shell
 That wavered like the summer streams,
 As her soft bosom rose and fell.¹⁸⁸

(1.16–30)

Yet, though Yeats believed his compounds would stress the foreign character and strangeness of the Celtic world, the 1895 revision appears more derivative than its predecessor of 1889. Yeats’ exaggerated word choice never reached the radical heights of Shelley’s *Prometheus*: his “stony-still,” “dove-grey,” “high-born” and “pearl-pale” expose not a maturity of vision

¹⁸⁶ Earp (1948) 10. The translation is that of Jeffrey Henderson from the Loeb Classical Library edition, *Aristophanes: Frogs, Assemblywomen, Wealth* (Henderson 2002, 139).

¹⁸⁷ Yeats *CW*₃ (1999) 95.

¹⁸⁸ Yeats *VE* (1987) 3–4.

but rather an imitative foreign-ness, a fanciful epic that absorbed – largely naively – recent stylistic innovations of nineteenth-century England. Perhaps Yeats was aware of this, perhaps not; but in either case he would admit a certain discouragement with the poem in the preface to an 1895 revision of his poems. Though he had

revised, and to a large extent re-written, *The Wanderings of Usheen* and the lyrics and ballads from the same volume ... He has, however, been compelled to leave unchanged many lines he would have gladly re-written, because his present skill is not great enough to separate them from thoughts and expressions which seem to him worth preserving.¹⁸⁹

Oisín, it seemed, had failed, and Yeats' dissatisfaction with the poem only increased as the years passed. His rising discontent became a standard feature in his discussions of further stylistic reinvention later in his work. In the memoir of 1922, *The Trembling of the Veil*, Yeats again faulted *Oisín* as “too elaborate, too ornamental,” marred by a “vagueness of intention, and the inexactness of its speech.”¹⁹⁰ Nonetheless, it was that vagueness – what he called the “sentimental sadness” and “womanish introspection” of his early verse – that would drive him, he often alleged, to a poetry of “prose directness” and “hard light.”¹⁹¹ “[W]hen I had finished *The Wanderings of Oisín*,” he explained,

dissatisfied with its yellow and its dull green, with all that overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement, I deliberately reshaped my style, deliberately sought out an impression as of cold light and tumbling clouds. I cast off traditional metaphors and loosened my rhythm, and recognizing that all the criticism of life known to me was alien and English, became as emotional as possible but with an emotion which I described to myself as cold.¹⁹²

The narrative of a leaner poetic idiom, a revised ‘modernist self-fashioning’ that Yeats advanced across his autobiographical writing, is compelling, and it did profoundly impact the negative reception that *Oisín* long endured. A work of “tortured symbolism, Pre-Raphaelite diction, and Romantic sensibility,” it is said to have fallen “[f]ar from aspiring to an authentic Irish identification,” a recent critic notes, “the exotic Celtic names and settings are mere decoration for the real

¹⁸⁹ Yeats (1895) v. On the 1895 revision, see Parkinson (1971) 1–50.

¹⁹⁰ Yeats *CW3* (1999) 279, 127.

¹⁹¹ Yeats, “Letter to George Russell (Æ) [April 1904],” in Yeats *CL3* (1994) 577. Pound (1914) 66, 67. See Chapter 3, pp. 135–38.

¹⁹² Yeats *CW3* (1999) 86.

substance of the poem: the allure of the imagination and the insatiable pursuit of desire.”¹⁹³ However, taken without qualification, this can still obscure the intense “neo-romantic” impulse of Yeats’ earliest revisions to his *oeuvre*: *Oisín*’s elaborate, seemingly Pre-Raphaelite fusion of Hellenisms was made all the more ornamental in the first attempted rewriting of the epic. Dissatisfied with the poem, however, Yeats had become demoralized by what he called “this endless war with Irish stupidity” in matters both political and literary, and as such he grew increasingly skeptical of his own epic ambitions for Ireland (that distrust would later be powerfully mediated through his reception of Sophoclean tragedy).¹⁹⁴ From as early as 1894, though, Yeats was already questioning whether any Irish writer could compose a poem that would “awaken or quicken or preserve” a coherent sense of nationality.¹⁹⁵ “My experience of Ireland, during the last three years,” he explained,

has changed my views very greatly, & now I feel that the work of an Irish man of letters must be not so much to awaken or quicken or preserve the national idea among the mass of the people but to convert the educated classes to it on the one hand to the best of his ability, & on the other – & this is the more important – to fight for moderation, dignity, & the rights of the intellect among his fellow nationalists. Ireland is terribly demoralized in all things – in her scholourship [*sic*], in her criticism, in her politics, in her social life.¹⁹⁶

As Yeats saw it, what Ireland needed was not excess – neither in literary style nor in politics where new forms of anti-intellectual extremism threatened to restrict the country’s poets and artists. What was required, he believed, was a creditable literary tradition, a national literature written with “laborious care” and “studied moderation of style.”¹⁹⁷ *Oisín* had been tepidly received, and having failed to “convert the educated classes,” the poem did little to rouse the kind of “national idea” Yeats hoped to mobilize across Irish society – to distinguish Ireland with a new epic and with the invention of a hybrid vernacular.¹⁹⁸ As such, Yeats began to purge his work of what he perceived as the note of ‘false’ Celticism; and yet, nevertheless, *Oisín*, even with its “overcharged colour,” brought to bear on his early verse the ghostly pressures of

¹⁹³ Gomes (2014) 376.

¹⁹⁴ Yeats, “To Katharine Tynan Hinkson, 7 April [1895],” in Yeats *CLT* (1986) 458.

¹⁹⁵ Yeats, “To Alice Milligan, 23 September [1894],” in Yeats *CLT* (1986) 399.

¹⁹⁶ Yeats *CLT* (1986) 399.

¹⁹⁷ Yeats *CLT* (1986) 399.

¹⁹⁸ Yeats *CLT* (1986) 399.

languages lost, both those of the classical world and those of the Celtic.¹⁹⁹ Though Yeats had had no Irish, no Greek and very little Latin, the imaginative weight of these absences would later flourish across the British Isles in other responses to revival – not only in the work of Joyce's *Ulysses* but in the epic ambition of both Hugh MacDiarmid and David Jones as well. Their polyglot forms gained greater prominence as attempts to untether Anglophone expression from English 'ascendancy' led to new modes of modernist linguistic hybridity. These forms of experimental writing, however, sometimes stood in clear opposition to the nationalization of a Celtic 'classics', and as such questioned and satirized the very ground on which Yeats and others had forced a marriage between the Hellenic past and the desire for a de-anglicized future.

¹⁹⁹ Yeats *CW3* (1999) 86.