

Yeats and Secularization in the Manuscripts of *The Tower*

Jerry Chia-Je Weng

Abstract: Defining the position of literary modernism within the larger narrative of western secularization is a difficult task. Some critics argue that modernism constitutes a radical break from inherited cultural paradigms and has thereby accelerated the decline of religion, or at the very least carried on the process of secularization; on the other hand, vestiges of spirituality and transcendence are found to be accentuated, rather than excised, in the works of writers such as Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Woolf. How does one place Yeats within the context of the secular? There has always been a fascination with the occult, the hermetic, and the otherworldly since Yeats's earliest work, yet the majority of readers would not describe Yeats's most celebrated poems in exclusive terms of transcendence or spirituality. This paper attempts to contextualize Yeats within the process of secularization, assessing the strange mix of supernatural interest and immanent reality that coexist antithetically in his greatest poems. I will examine poems from *The Tower* (1928) as a summation of Yeats's concerns in the 1920s. The period occupies a transitional phase within Yeats's oeuvre in which the transcendent gradually gives way to the immanent. The manuscript materials of *The Tower* capture Yeats's revisionary processes in reimagining the spiritual.

Key words: William Butler Yeats, Charles Taylor, secularization, *The Tower*, manuscripts

Author: Jerry Chia-Je Weng is Assistant Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University.

E-mail: jerryweng@ntu.edu.tw

제목: 『탑』의 원고에 나타난 예이츠의 세속화

우리말 요약: 보다 큰 서구의 세속화 문학담론에서의 모더니즘의 정의는 어려운 작업이다. 어떤 비평가는 모더니즘은 이어받은 문화적 패러다임과의 과격한 단절을 나타내며 이로써 종교의 몰락을 가속화하거나 적어도 세속화의 과정을 진행시키고 있다고 주장한다. 반면, 엘리엇, 파운드, 조이스 및 울프 같은 작가들의 작품에서, 초월주의와 영성의 흔적들이, 삭제되기 보다는, 강조되고 있는 것이 보인다. 예이츠는 이 세속화

과정 어디에 위치하는가? 에이츠의 초기작 이후 밀교적이고, 연금술적이고, 내세적인 것의 현혹이 있지만 대부분의 독자들은 에이츠의 가장 잘 알려진 시들을 초월성이나 영성으로만 묘사하지 않는다. 본 논문은 그의 가장 대표적인 시들에 대조적으로 공존하는 초자연적 관심과 내재적 실상의 절묘한 혼재를 가늠하여, 세속화 과정 속에서 에이츠에게 맥락을 부여하는 것이다. 1920년대의 에이츠의 주된 관심이 정리된 『탑』(1928년)의 시들을 읽을 것이다. 이 시기는 초월적인 것이 점차적으로 내재적인 것으로 이행하는 그의 작품 속에서의 변환기이다. 『탑』의 원고들은 에이츠가 영적인 것을 상상할 때 그가 보이는 수정적 과정을 포착하고 있다.

주제어: 윌리엄 버틀러 에이츠, 찰스 테일러, 세속화, 탑, 원고

저자: 제리 키아-제 웡은 국립타이완대학교 외국어문학학과의 조교수이다.

In the past decade or so, there has been a cross-disciplinary renewal of interest in questions of religion and secularism concerning our contemporary moment. The resurgence of global religious belief, as well as of religious orthodoxies and fundamentalisms, has led western liberal democracies to reevaluate the premise of living in a secular age, which is often taken for granted as a key feature of modernity. At the horizon of increasing secularization which has taken place in the West for at least two centuries, Jürgen Habermas has instead proposed the term “post-secular,” in which the tenets of modern liberalism require substantial adjustments to respond to the tenacity of religion (17). In any case, it is clear that secularization was never a unitary historical process, but has involved conflicts, negotiations, and reassessments at every turn. There is heightened interest in reexamining how the modern secular condition came to be, and to what extent the established narratives of secularization are adequate to describe the trajectory of the past. Literary scholars and critics are likewise exploring how secularization has intersected with the genealogies and practices of literature in new and often counterintuitive ways. This paper attempts to place Yeats’s poetry of the 1920s tentatively within the trajectory of secularization, and to articulate some

of the ambivalences that are revealed through the manuscript materials and composition process.

For nearly half a century, the dominant paradigm for secularization in British literature had been represented by M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), which argues that post-Enlightenment literature charts a course of "the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking" (12). Abrams argues that secularization "has not been the deletion and replacement of religious ideas but rather the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a world view founded on secular premises" (13). As the dominant worldview shifts from a religious to a secular one, literature undergoes an adaptive process that modifies and reshapes itself accordingly. Religious and theological modes of thinking continue to exert influence in an increasingly secular era as they are transmuted or transfigured into new literary forms and themes. Although Abrams's model demonstrated great explanatory power in the twentieth century, it has begun to seem dated when confronted with other national literatures, the diversity of religious traditions, or the constellation of mystical and hermetic beliefs and practices that are only tangentially connected to Christianity.

One recent account of the secular that has gained widespread recognition and discussion is that proposed by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor breaks with previous thinkers in *not* defining secularization merely as the decline of religion and its replacement by science, reason, or emerging ways of life in secular society. Instead, Taylor's focus is on what he terms "new conditions of belief," which he defines as "a new shape to the experience which prompts to and is defined by belief; in a new context in which all search and questioning about the moral and spiritual must proceed" (20). The crucial question is: How did western culture shift from a condition in which belief in God was the default position, structuring all aspects of

social life, to a modern condition in which belief is merely one option among many others, and which often needs to be explained or defended? Taylor argues that must have been a “massive change in the whole background of belief or unbelief” (14). The shifts in background or context that made possible this radical difference are reflected in lived experience, and Taylor’s project is concerned with documenting these historical shifts: the legacy of reform movements, the disenchantment of magic, the rise of exclusive humanism, and the diversification of belief systems.

The role of modernity in the secularizing process is contested by Taylor, especially the commonly held notion that secularity has occurred as an inevitable consequence of modernity. Taylor calls these types of teleological narratives “subtraction stories,” in which factors linked to modernity (be it reason or atheism or evolution) “subtract” from religious belief to reveal the unadulterated features of humanity that had always existed and ought to be celebrated under the aegis of modernity and secularity. “The rise of modernity isn’t just a story of loss, of subtraction” (26), Taylor argues; rather, “western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can’t be explained in terms of perennial features of human life” (22). Secularization is thus a dynamic process evolving out of the systems of belief that it has tended to displace. The historical evolution has added, rather than subtracted, new features that constitute modern secularity.

Two features of secularity identified by Taylor may be relevant here. The first is the question of what constitutes a sense of “fullness” in human experience. Taylor defines the experience of fullness as “a richness in that place (activity or condition), [where] life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more than what it should be” (5). One’s orientation toward this place of fullness may be seen as a defining factor in the secular condition. For believers, a state of fullness necessitates reference to a higher

being or deity, whereas for unbelievers this state may be derived naturalistically, or emerge from the purely human. For Taylor, “a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable” (19). Once it becomes possible to believe and experience fullness in exclusively human terms, without reference to the transcendent, one may begin to speak of a secular condition. George Levine illustrates this point when he defends secularism as “an affirmation of the world we’re living in now… such a world is capable of bringing us to the condition of ‘fullness’ that religion has always promised” (1). Exclusive humanism constitutes one broad element of a secular age, in which there is no higher good beyond human flourishing, fulfillment, and happiness.

Another prevailing feather of secularization is what Max Weber called “the disenchantment of the world.” Weber’s term is *Entzauberung*, which contains the word *Zauber* (magic), and literally signifies the removal or taking away of magic. In this view, we once lived in a time when magic, spirits, and supernatural agencies were real and palpable, each providing essential schemas for understanding the world. With the rise of reason and rationalized society, however, magic was exiled and we feel a lack, a sense of loss and nostalgia. Taylor points out one of the major dilemmas in making sense of the world when confronted with this loss:

When we have left the “enchanted” world of spirits, and no longer believe in the Great Chain, what sense can we make of the notion that nature or the universe which surrounds us is the locus of human meanings which are “objective,” in the sense that they are not just arbitrarily projected through choice or contingent desire? (“Disenchantment – Reenchantment” 64)

The loss not only of meaning in the universe but the very ground of meaning can be disquieting. For many artists and writers, this lack can only be restored through a re-enchantment of the world – in the reintegration of

mythic folklore and the exploration of new spiritual movements (Yeats's Celtic and occult forays), via a retreat to religious orthodoxy (Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism), or through the idealization of art as a final value in itself (Arnold, Pater, and Wilde, though with radically differing sensibilities).

Although narratives of secularization are used to describe large-scale social phenomena and cultural change, it is also possible to consider the microcosm of an individual writer within this broader context. Yeats writes in *The Trembling of the Veil* that when rationalistic society had stripped him of his childhood faith, he aimed to create a "new religion... of stories and of personages, and of emotions" (*Autobiographies* 115). Yeats's pursuit of a new religion to re-enchant the modern world is evident early on from the Irish myths included in *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), his founding of the Dublin Hermetic Society in 1885, and the fascination with Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society in 1887; he would join the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1888 and begin to experiment with automatic writing in 1912. Yeats worked strenuously on both the first and the revised edition of *A Vision*, published in 1925 and 1937, concluding an interest in the occult that spanned decades.

How might we position Yeats — as impossible as he is to categorize — within the narrative of secularization? Yeats endeavored in various ways to bring about a re-enchantment of the world in a modern secular era, and yet his spiritual quest for the mythical, the occult, and the transcendent led him toward beliefs and practices that were outside the religious mainstream. Complicating this outlook is Yeats's poetry, which often employs occult symbolism but more frequently bears an oblique, ambiguous connection to his beliefs. The poems written in the 1920s and collected in the volume *The Tower*, at the same time Yeats was completing the first version of *A Vision* (1925), reveal the full extent of the contradictions between the desire for the transcendent and the tendency to remain in the immanent.

“Sailing to Byzantium” is often read as a definitive statement about Yeats’s aesthetic desire, through which the poet achieves a kind of immortality with the symbol of his own creative mind. Byzantium’s cultural significance to Yeats has been well recognized: T. R. Henn notes that the city represents the “interpenetration of religion and art, the Hebraic and Hellenic held in perpetual synthesis” and “the unity of all aspects of life, for perhaps the last time in history” (222-23). Yeats thereby attempts a re-enchantment of both the poet’s spiritual existence and the implicit referent of Ireland via a synthesis of poetry and religion. If “Sailing to Byzantium” ultimately proceeds to an imagined transcendence (the desire to be “out of nature”), it also represents spirit or soul in its sublimated form as artifice and material object, thereby reversing the traditional hierarchy of materiality and immateriality. The tension between the drive toward transcendence and the persistence of materiality is epitomized in the phrase “artifice of eternity.”

The manuscript materials are revealing of Yeats’s ambivalences here, for prior to depicting “the young / in one another’s arms” in the final published version, Yeats conceived of an Edenic state distinctly involving the presence of the divine. At an early stage of composition, Yeats seems to be attempting repeatedly to insert God into this scene:

Here all is young and all grows young day by day
~~*Even my god*~~
~~*Ev*~~
~~*& God himself — comes down [?for her] blessed smiles*~~
~~*God lies upon his mother*~~
~~*Even god lies upon his mother tap knees*~~
~~*& Holds out childish hands in play*~~
~~*And [?&]*~~
~~*And even called the gods & we*~~
~~*And those my fathers called the gods*~~
~~*And even those I know*~~

~~& there are some — & I know who they be
They Called the gods, that~~

([NLI 13,589(3) a, 3^r], p. 7, lines 5-16)¹⁾

The manuscript reveals that “no country for old men” was originally invoked as a scene comprising a youthful god and a divine family. There is some ambiguity as to whether the divine entity is singular or plural, Christian or pagan. In any case, Yeats was envisioning a Blakean state of Innocence, where the youth, the mother, the father, and God himself coalesce into a holy community, stretching back into the poet’s ancestral past. The next page more poignantly depicts God as an infant dependent on his mother:

~~All here — my god upon his mother’s knee
Holding out his infant hands in play
The old gods still at their
The gods
 other
Those older gods~~

~~All here — my god
Everything
 my maker at his
All in this land — even my god at play
Or else asleep upon his mother’s knees~~

([NLI 13,589(3) a, 4^r], p. 9, lines 1-9)

In the finished poem, the opening stanza reads:

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another’s arms, birds in the trees
— Those dying generations — at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long

Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.²⁾

God has been all but banished in the first stanza. This is now the world of “fish flesh or fowl,” the world of “dying generations” who are “Caught in that sensual music.” It is the immanent – one might even say biological – realm of copulation, birth, and death. The metamorphosis from Eden to the world of Generation is a radical reversal of the poem’s initial premise in manuscript. In stanza III, God is no longer a child but becomes the agent of holy purgation by fire, Yeats’s version of the Blakean smithies who will gather up the soul into eternity. Eden is transmuted into Purgatory; an anticipated fall *from* the divine becomes a sublimation *into* the divine. But the mode of transcendence offered in the final stanza, as many commentators have remarked, is a Keatsian paradox, embodying a negative capability that straddles two contradictory realms: nature and artifice, the material and the eternal, the immanent and the transcendent. The paradox in itself may be called a secular moment in the sense of opening up multiple possibilities of belief or unbelief that deviate from visions of the purely transcendent. As Helen Vendler notes, critics “have missed the equally fierce antithesis repudiating sacred song in favor of secular music” (38).

A comparable moment can be found in the final section of “The Tower.” In the poem, Yeats reviews his past in order to seek consolation for the poet’s “decrepit age.” Yeats attempts to find meaning through the memory of his creations, especially the reckless, frenzied Hanrahan – and eventually sets down his own poetic inheritance to future Irish writers. In addition to making his will to future generations, Yeats also proclaims his poetic faith:

And I declare my faith:
I mock Plotinus’ thought

And cry in Plato's teeth,
 Death and life were not
 Till man made up the whole,
 Made lock, stock and barrel
 Out of his bitter soul,
 Aye, sun moon and star, all,
 And further add to that
 That being dead, we rise,
 Dream and so create
 Translunar paradise.

Yeats asserts his independence from Plato and Plotinus's systems of philosophy, audaciously declaring that man alone creates life and death — that life and death have no meaning beyond the human mind's imaginings. In fact, humans “make up” or confer exclusive meaning upon the material world “lock stock and barrel,” which encompasses the known universe. Furthermore — knowing that he is stretching the boundaries of the imagination's sovereignty — Yeats appropriates the Resurrection as a vehicle for human imagination to create a secular paradise: “That being dead, we rise, / Dream and so create / Translunar paradise.” The tone is restrained compared to one of the draft manuscripts, where Yeats had written:

Lock and stock & barrel
 Out of his bitter soul
 Aye sun and moon & stars all
 & all beings under the sun;
 And all who are under the moon
 And then I mock at the Jew
 Because he did so say
 That the Eternal Man
 Rested the seventh Day
 And add to what I have said
 I therein mock at the Jew

And add to what I have said
 That day by day we renew
 The living & dead—
 The living & the dead.
 dream
 The blessed life of the dead
 because their life is a dream
 For mans a dreams at the last.

([NLI 30,373 a, 6'], p. 69, lines 6-27)

The negation of Christian belief takes on a strident tone, which is partly why Yeats might have chosen to remove it. First the poet mocks the Israelite faith in the Sabbath, then adds that the holy day is irrelevant since humans regenerate and revitalize themselves daily through dream and imagination. By implication the Resurrection is cast aside as well, since both “the living & the dead” are eternally resurrected daily in the human imagination. Finally, through the “poet’s imaginings,” it will be possible that “Man makes a superhuman / mirror-resembling dream” — the quintessential quest for unbounded human potential.

One might describe this progress of the poem as a narrative of disenchantment and re-enchantment under the aegis of an exclusive humanism. The human subject is placed at the center of the universe, and all systems, including religion, have been recast as fictions of the human imagination. The manuscripts show Yeats experimenting with various choices before he hit on the word “translunar” — perhaps a gesture to “The Phases of the Moon” in *A Vision*, thus promoting his own syncretic system over established religious traditions.

The final stanza of “The Tower,” however, characterizes the endpoint of the soul’s bitter study of old age. The experiences “Seem but the clouds of the sky / When the horizon fades / Or a bird’s sleepy cry / Among the deepening shades.” The note of pessimism does not bode well for the strong

affirmations of the human in the previous stanza. For Harold Bloom, the ending echoes Stevens' "Sunday Morning" as the poet descends downward to darkness: "the imaginative gesture remains an extended one, and the act of dying suggests only another fictive covering woven by the poet himself" (352). But the fade out to the natural landscape may also suggest a surrendering of the human will and imagination. We are left in a secular world in which Yeats has further decentered the human experience, where only natural sound and planetary motion remain. Yeats seems to hint at the prospect of a further stage of secularization, in which "the bitter furies of complexity" of the human is dissolved into the nonhuman.

Notes

- 1) Manuscript materials are cited from the editor's transcriptions in *The Tower (1928): Manuscript Materials*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (2007). The typography here attempts to replicate as closely as possible the transcriptions in this edition. References are given to page and line numbers, as well as to the manuscript identification number used in this edition.
- 2) Final published versions of Yeats's poems are cited from *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, 2nd ed. (1989).

Works cited

- Abrams, M. H. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: Norton, 1971.
- Blake, William. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. Rev. ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1982.
- Bloom, Harold. *Yeats*. New York: Oxford UP, 1972.
- Foster, R. F. *W. B. Yeats: A Life. II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.
- Habermas, Jürgen. "Notes on Post-Secular Society." *New Perspectives Quarterly*

25 (2008): 17-29.

Henn, T. R. *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats*. London: Methuen, 1950.

Levine, George, ed. *The Joy of Secularism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007.

_____. "Disenchantment—Reenchantment." *The Joy of Secularism* 57-73.

Vendler, Helen. *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.

Yeats, William Butler. *Autobiographies*. Ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas Archibald. New York: Scribner, 1999.

_____. *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. 2nd ed. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. London: Macmillan, 1989.

_____. *The Tower (1928): A Facsimile Edition*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. New York, Scribner, 2004.

_____. *The Tower (1928): Manuscript Materials*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007.

Manuscript peer-review process:

receipt acknowledged: Oct. 10, 2016.

peer-reviewed: 2+1.

revision received: Nov. 14, 2016.

publication approved: Dec. 14, 2016.

edited by Beau La Rhee