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Author(s)	Oshio, Keiko
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## “The Magi” and Modernist Imagery

Keiko Oshio

In recent years, along with the rise of Postmodern critical consciousness, we have witnessed a resurgence of interest in the aesthetics of Modernist literature. Among numerous attempts at re-defining Modernism or at shedding new light on some of its aspects, Maud Ellmann's *The Poetics of Impersonality* seems the most successful in explicating the equivocal yet haunting existence its aesthetics confers on personality.<sup>1)</sup> Drawing heavily on Derridean interpretations of Freudian and Lacanian theories of psychoanalysis, Ellmann describes the state of the poet's personality in Modernist literature as a fading, though multiplying subjectivity inscribed in its writing. On the other hand, because Ellmann adopts a deconstructionist understanding of language which is essentially nontemporal and beyond historicity, her analysis of the Modernist aesthetics of figuration fails to recapture the temporality which inheres in the working of its imagery. In this essay, using W.B. Yeats's "The Magi" as a point of departure, I wish to call attention to one aspect of Modernist image-making that involves an interaction among language, temporality, and personality.

### I.

Now at all times I can see in the mind's eye,  
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones  
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky  
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,  
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,  
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,  
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,  
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.<sup>2)</sup>

“The Magi” belongs to W.B. Yeats’s transitionary period of composition from the earlier period of the Celtic Twilight Movement. We discern in the scene a similarity to earlier works like “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”; for, both poems describe the poet’s consciousness as looking at its alternative vision of the world that materializes itself as an image in the text. In “Innisfree,” the poet’s Wordsworthian consciousness turns away from the drab reality of everyday life or from dissatisfied feelings caused by its being locked in that life, and seeks solace in the image of the island of Innisfree evoked in his mind. In “Magi,” however; instead of giving any solace or comfort to the poet, its double vision—the silver constellation of the night invading like soldiers into the midday blue of the sky—has an unsettling affect on his consciousness.

“Magi” distinguishes itself from poems like “Innisfree” not so much in what the poet sees but as in how its image is presented to his “mind’s eye.” The image’s unsettling quality is achieved in its transitory appearance and uncertainty of meaning. The still figures the poet glimpses in the sky do not remain quietly, but “appear and disappear” as though they were merely an illusion. The future they anticipate is even more ambiguous than their appearance. The image of those “pale, unsatisfied” soldiers, in spite of the poet’s calling it “Magi,” forbodes the bloodshed of a second Calvary rather than another Nativity in Bethlehem. In “Innisfree,” the poem’s narrative movement coincides with the poet’s conscious yearning for the timeless peace of an imaginary landscape. There, the peace comes “dropping slow”(5) upon the Isle as time gradually comes to a complete stop. The “glimmer” of the midnight moon and stars, and the “purple glow” of the noonday sun become indistinguishable from each other and from the glowing dimness of evening: “. . . from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings; / There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow, / And evenings full of the linnet’s wings”(“Innisfree,” 6–8).

Whereas in "Magi," the vision of night upsets the poet, foreboding some "uncontrollable" disaster. There is a pervading sense of time in the imagery and in the language of the poem, which undercuts the visionary experience that would otherwise be interpreted as stasis. The stiff, unmoving image of the soldiers in the sky paradoxically evokes an assailing sense of time rather than its suspension. In the context of the poem, the adverb "Now," which indicates the shorter, more instantaneous passage of time, is put before the phrase "at all times," and emphasizes the transient nature of the poet's vision. Or the "ancient" faces of the imagined soldiers bring to the poem glimpses of the past together with their anticipation of disaster. The poet's visionary experience is thus reduced to a precarious equilibrium between pressures past and future.

"Magi" reveals a particular relationship between time, imagery and the poet's consciousness when Yeats works with Modernist imagery. Breaking away from earlier, moody poems like "Innisfree," the poet in "Magi" reexamines what an image can offer. The poem shows schematized elements of the poet's imagination that would recur in Yeats's later poetry: the poet's consciousness represented in the text as "the mind's eye," and the image of soldiers played against the poet's acute awareness of time's passage. The poem is important not only because it marks Yeats' break from his earlier poetry and hints at later, more complex poems of revelation like "The Second Coming," but also because, in contrast, it illustrates a Modernist use of imagery which is different from *fin-de-siècle* Aestheticism and Symbolism.

The difference has to do with the problem of passivity in Modernist literature. By "passivity," I mean that state of poetic consciousness which exists as a ready psychological snare for the Modernist imagination, as solipsism does for the Romantics or as aesthetic esotericism does for the Symbolists. It indicates a poet's state of almost helpless receptivity to the world, to the image he has produced, and to the passage of time that lessens

his consciousness and diminishes his act of creation. Richard Ellmann uses "passivity" in his *James Joyce* to describe a common character trait of Stephen and Bloom in *Ulysses*: "He[Joyce] does so chiefly in terms of one trait which the two men share, their essentially inactive roles . . . . Joyce, Stephen, and Bloom share the philosophy of passivity in act, energy in thought, and tenacity in conviction."<sup>3</sup>) Although Ellmann limits the application of this negative attribute only to the state of the characters' action, the actual Stephen and Bloom in *Ulysses* are also psychologically passive characters. While Bloom's passivity is often transformed into creative receptivity, pacifism, magnanimity, and Christ-like martyrdom through Joyce's art, or somewhat tempered at the end by his unexpected order of breakfast and by his wife's final, affirmative "yes," Stephen the artist remains ambiguously close to failure. He is obsessed with the nightmare of Irish history and suffers from the lack of some solid foothold in the present to withstand the challenge of time: "Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past."<sup>4</sup>)

In "Magi," the poet's consciousness is reduced to the sheer passivity of a sense organ, helpless and with control neither over the content of vision nor over the future predicted in the eyes of the heavenly soldiers. Likewise, in *Ulysses*, time overwhelms Stephen as it runs back-current from the future to the past; he is neither able to grasp nor participate in the moment when the future becomes the present. The figure of Stephen, helpless and paralyzed in the flow of time, represents the author's anxiety that accompanies his act of creation, his fear of the possible loss of artistic control over material he produces. The anxiety is not only Joyce's, since it is also a manifestation of passivity in Modernist consciousness which arises out of its singular aesthetics of imagery.

## II.

The writers of the Modernist era primarily define themselves as image-makers. Even outside of Ezra Pound's Imagism, the image as a rhetorical trope not only governs the writings of such diverse poets and novelists as Eliot, Yeats, Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, Moore, Crane, Stevens, and Faulkner, but is also the subject of their major aesthetic concern. On the other hand, as John T. Gage demonstrates in *In the Arresting Eye*, when the Modernists explicate image or image-making, they often draw on the theories and the vocabularies of Romanticism and other nineteenth-century literary movements against which they wish to establish their own.<sup>5)</sup> Consequently, as Gage suggests, those explications often blur the nature of their praxis, and end up obscuring the part of their aesthetics which engenders the above sense of temporality in their writing.

Pound, expounding Imagism, asserts that a poet must be an architect of language, and create with a combination of words a brilliant association of sound and meaning which must then have an immediate impact on the reader.<sup>6)</sup> Pound's ideas of imagery, which include the poet's conscious and concentrated craftsmanship, the autotelic nature of poetry, the importance of music in poetic language, and the emphasis on a condensed, metaphorical usage of words; are, nevertheless, basically identical with those of French Symbolism and its tributary, the British *fin-de-siecle* Aestheticism. Before Pound, the Symbolist poets were already aware of the evocative power of language in a condensed form of expression, and engaged themselves in a careful craftsmanship of shaping words into a poem for maximal metaphorical finesse. Pound's famous definition of an image—" . . . that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"—is, perhaps in itself not enough to differentiate the Modernist concept of image from that of Symbolism.<sup>7)</sup> It compares

with Mallarmé's "complex," the amalgam of sense and sensation he seeks through symbol: "I say: a flower! and out of the oblivion to which my voice consigns every contour, so far as anything save the known calyx, musically arises, idea, and exquisite, the other flower absent from all bouquets."<sup>8)</sup>

What truly differentiates Pound's Imagism from Symbolism is in fact discovered in the first of the three precepts he records in "A Retrospect"—"Direct treatment of the 'thing'— which requires the artist to shun abstraction and to stress concreteness of expression."<sup>9)</sup> The Symbolists' interest in imagery terminates in language *per se*. It concerns itself with the beauty of the word and its connotations. Pound's definition brings imagery back again to denotation, subsequently introducing the concepts of time and space in his idea of imagery. Pound goes on to further develop this idea in Vorticism; he adds the attributes of motion and "energy" to his previously static conception of the image.<sup>10)</sup> Yeats, however, was in closer association with the Symbolist Movement through his intercourse with Arthur Symons and other members of the Rhymers' Club. Yeats's biographer, Ellmann, explains that this association brought about a shift in Yeats's method of composition before the turn of the century. The change involved a painstaking effort of revision toward a more precise and musical usage of words.<sup>11)</sup>

Then, another shift in Yeats's method of composition took place around 1914, about the time Pound worked for him as secretary.<sup>12)</sup> As in the case of Pound and his Imagism, what differentiates Yeats's later method of composition from his earlier one is the treatment of time in image-making. In "Magi," the difference manifests itself in the form of the poet's visionary experience. We have already contrasted it to the one in "Innisfree." In "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1903), Yeats wrote on the effect of images:

Had my pen not fallen on the ground and so made me turn from the images that I was weaving into verse, I would never have known that meditation had become trance, for I would have been like one who does not know that he is passing through a wood because his eyes are on the pathway. So I think that in the making and in the undertaking of a work of art, and the more easily if it is full of pattern and symbols and music, we are lured to the threshold of sleep, and it may be far beyond it, without knowing that we have ever set our feet upon the steps of horn and of ivory.<sup>13)</sup>

The experience Yeats describes here is similar to the state of the poet's consciousness in "Innisfree." In the poem, time stands still on the Isle of Innisfree. The poet's consciousness gradually approaches the world of its images, a world that lies beyond ordinary life experience. Yeats calls these images "symbols." They are the unchangeable, innate forms of imagination independent from the poet's ordinary self or reality. Like in the above passage, the poet's consciousness reaches a "trance" in "Innisfree," but that is accomplished only when a sense of time is lost from his imagery.

In "Innisfree," Yeats creates a special world of his own, seemingly freed from everyday limits of time and space. The poem represents a typical relationship between time, imagery, and the poet's consciousness in Yeats's earlier style. On the other hand, in a note attached to a poem called "The Dolls," to which "Magi" is a sequel, Yeats writes about the moment of inspiration for the second poem:

I had noticed once again how all thought among us is frozen into 'something other than human life.' After I had made the[first] poem, I looked up one day into the blue sky, still figures in procession. I remembered that they were the habitual image suggested by the blue sky, and looking for a second fable called them "The Magi," complementary forms of those enraged dolls.<sup>14)</sup>

Here, as in the passage from "Symbolism," the poet is recounting the birth of the image in his mind and its succeeding relationship with his con-



sciousness; but the evoked image, "still figures in procession," no longer carries the poet to the land of sleep and other-worldly quietude, because it rejects the poet's sympathy by being "frozen into 'something other than human life.'"

Yeats's changed attitude is already clear in "Dolls," which functions, in its relation to "The Magi," as a transitional piece. Earlier, the poet declared in "Symbolism" that the plenitude of "subtle suggestion" in his symbols relieves a soul from the "sterility and noisy violence" of humdrum reality. He felt that it was the world of imagination and symbols, rather than the world of everyday existence, which was near to the genuine source of human life.<sup>15)</sup> In "Dolls," as well as in "Magi," the images beheld in the poet's mind's eye are not tranquil and life-giving as they are in "Innisfree." On the contrary, in "Dolls," art and life are mutually exclusive terms in the poet's image-making. The poet portrays himself as a troubled doll-maker torn between two kinds of production: old, man-made, voluble dolls with their durable lives granted by his careful craftsmanship, and the mortal baby born as "an accident" ("Dolls," 20) of nature, which threatens the dolls' existence with its very quality of human animation.

### III.

So far, we have been trying to locate a difference between the Modernist use of imagery and that of French Symbolism and the *fin-de-siècle* British Aestheticism by using Yeats for our illustration; for the two phases in his poetic career correspond to these opposing trends in image-making. The difference is manifest in the nature of the relationship a poem or a piece of writing creates among time, imagery and the poet's consciousness, but it is due to the Modernist shift in the conceptions of language and tradition that such a difference is established between them.

In Symbolism, the poet strives to arrive at a magical world of peace and eternity existing beyond his ordinary life circle, evoked by what he considers as mystical implications of language he would foreground through the manipulation of symbols. A Symbolist desires to represent in his poem a vision of an ideal universe, in which not only form and matter, but also language and what it designates, reach perfect unity and correspondence. Since he views symbols as his only means of access to this world of eternal purity and identity, these symbols must also be beyond transience and decay. It is impossible for him to conceive that they might some day be obsolete and dead. On the other hand, working with an image in a poem, a Modernist does not believe that a key to such a magical world of eternity can be embodied in his language. For him, language is no longer a source of mystery as it was for a Symbolist, since it has become a matter of tradition as well as a thing of time. It evokes, not a transcendental universe of symbols, but an accumulation of culture and civilization through history.

Moreover, while a Symbolist is more interested in the connotations of a word than its denotation, a Modernist thinks that his poem must be a reflection of the temporal, actual world of humanity, and that the value of an image must be measured in terms of its truthfulness in representing that reality. But then, when the poet's consciousness is taken back to work within the limits of time and space and against the standard of reality, and when his material of creation, language, comes to be understood as transmitting a vast body of human ideas from history, an obsessive fear is born in the poet's mind that his images, essentially timebound as they are, might at any time become obsolete, useless and unable to represent any portion of reality. As Yeats writes in his note to "Dolls," an image can at any moment be "frozen into 'something other than human life,' " and becomes inept as the dolls confronted by the living human child in the poem.

In "Dolls," Yeats enacts the poet's fear of obsolescence when he feels that his images, like the time-wizened, obdurate dolls in the doll-maker's house, become fossilized and useless. A similar fear overtakes Hart Crane in the composition of his poetry sequence, *The Bridge*, in whose central image of the Brooklyn Bridge he would mean to synthesize "the experience and perceptions of our common race, time and belief":

The symbols of reality necessary to articulate the span—may not exist where you expected them, however. . . . I may amuse and delight and flatter myself as much as please—but I am only evading a recognition and playing Don Quixote in an immorally conscious way.

The form of my poem rises out of a past so overwhelms the present with its worth and vision that I'm at a loss to explain my delusion that there exist any real links between that past and a future destiny worth of it.<sup>16)</sup>

Echoing T.S. Eliot in his argument on tradition, Crane, in "General Aims and Theories," defines his art of image-making as "a grafting process" of the resources of the past onto scenes representing present society. For Crane, the title of his poetry sequence, "the bridge," is also a metaphor for the image in Modernist poetry, which must be wrought to encompass the "many divergent realities of our seething, confused cosmos of today," and make a connection between the "so-called classic experience" of past tradition and future vision.<sup>17)</sup> Crane's positivistic time-scheme and objective for writing *The Bridge* start to collapse as soon as he begins the composition. Overwhelmed by the power in the voluminous quantity of semantic connotations brought up from the past, Crane, in the quoted passage, is another victim of the same anxiety that plagues the Modernists in their image-making.

As we have seen so far, a Modernist's interest in images and image-making is directed to the point where the complex system of language, with its synchronic structures and a vast body of traditional meanings,

meets a still different paradigm of the contemporary reality, which the poet always considers to exist independently outside of his consciousness and apart from the language he has inherited as tradition. An image is born out of this dramatic meeting of the two different paradigms of language and reality. The meeting, which takes place within the poet's consciousness, however, is inseparable from its accompanying anxiety. The anxiety is born owing to a Modernist's reification of history through ideas of tradition and language. That is, in the Modernist aesthetics of imagery, which demands this dynamic confrontation between the two entities of language and reality, an unmeasurable, but felt sense of living time is conferred only on the paradigm of reality, while history exists either as the thing of the past or as the compilation of its derelicts called tradition—which wholly belongs to the paradigm of language, and is beyond such temporality as the one accompanies the mutable reality.

In "Magi," Yeats dramatizes the Modernist act of image-making. Here, as the poet's note indicates, the image presented to his mind's eye is the "habitual," Biblical metaphor of the stars as heavenly soldiers, but the disturbed equilibrium in its appearance and meaning is caused by the two elements that arouse anxiety in his consciousness. First, the volume of tradition in language which oppresses the poet's imagination and endangers his creativity, appears as the figure of the stiffened, revengeful soldiers, who seek disaster in the future. Secondly, the everchanging, external universe which is the image-maker's subject and background now gives the poem its ambient temporality. It is a temporariness which might uproot at any moment those still, unmoving products of his work, and reveal them as complete illusion. Unlike Crane in the confession, or unlike Joyce and his heroes in *Ulysses*, Yeats in "Magi" comes out more successfully with his own particular vision of the future. The vision is brought out by the poet in the very form of the anxiety his consciousness feels in the act of image-making, though the contents of the image

itself, as the poet realizes, are merely "habitual," time-worn, and not original enough to vouchsafe his creativity as an image-maker.<sup>18)</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1) Maud Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1987).
- 2) W. B. Yeats, "The Magi," *The Poems: A New Edition*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (London: MacMillan, 1984): Quotations, titles and line numbers listed in parentheses within the text are from the same edition.
- 3) Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (NY: Oxford UP., 1965), 379.
- 4) James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Collected Text* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1986), 153.
- 5) John T. Gage, *In the Arresting Eye: The Rhetoric of Imagism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981): See especially Chapter 1 in which he compares Imagism with Romanticism, Victorian poetry, and Symbolism, though he falls short of discussing temporality.
- 6) On Pound's ideas about Imagism, see "A Retrospect," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), especially 3-12.
- 7) "Retrospect" 4.
- 8) Arthur Symons, "Stéphane Mallarmé," *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (NY: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 73.
- 9) "Retrospect" 3.
- 10) Pound, "Vortex," *Blast I*, ed. Wyndam Lewis (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1981; reprint of 1914), 153.
- 11) Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (NY: Norton, 1948), 144ff.
- 12) Yeats 215: Pound worked for Yeats during the winters of 1913-1916. According to A. Norman Jeffares in *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, "The Magi" was written on September 20, 1913; See *Commentary* (London: MacMillan, 1968), 148.
- 13) Yeats, "The Symbolism of Poetry," *Essays and Introductions* (NY: MacMillan, 1961), 160.
- 14) *The Poems* 594: According to Finneran, the note is from the 1933 edition of *The Collected Poems* and originally dated as 1914.
- 15) "Symbolism" 161.
- 16) Hart Crane, "A Letter to Waldo Frank," *The Complete Poems & Selected Letters & Prose*, ed. Brom Weber (London: Oxford UP, 1968), 231-32: The letter was dated as June 20, 1926.
- 17) Crane, "General Aims and Theories," *Complete Poems* 217.

- 18) The word "habitual" comes to have a further implication in the later theory of art and personality Yeats explicates in *A Vision*. He uses it to indicate the characteristics of an image or a personality belonging to the primary or objective phases of the moon, during which a person loses his original creativity by subduing himself to a code enforced from the outside; see Yeats, *A Vision* (London: MacMillan, 1937), 84.