# The Spatial Form of W. B. Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole"

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W. B. Yeats's position in the context of Modernism has always been uncertain. Some critics claim Yeats to be one of the Modernists,[1] others exclude Yeats from the group of Modernist poets focusing their attention on T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound.[2] There are several reasons for this: one of the reasons lies in the very fact that the nature of Modernism in literature cannot be precisely defined; but a more important reason is the lack of formal mannerism or experimentalism in Yeats's poetry, for these are typical elements of Modernism in the poetry of Eliot and Pound.[3] Moreover the fact that some other Modernist elements can be found in Yeats's poetry seems to have made his position more ambiguous.

In his famous essay published first in 1945 Joseph Frank discusses the issue of the relationship between temporality and spatiality in literature as an important feature of Modernism.[4] In the eighteenth century Gotthold Lessing argued that literature, which is composed of words revealing their meaning in the linear flow of time, is an art of temporality, while plastic arts, which are visible objects appreciated in a moment of time, are arts of spatiality, and that they differ in their fundamental forms. Lessing's view had been held as the traditional idea for a long time. But early in this century Modernist writers attempted to break the rule: in their work, though images appear consecutively, the meaning of images is independent of the temporal relationship. They intended images in a poem to be perceived simultaneously, and their work, like plastic arts, to be apprehended,

not in a temporal sequence, but spatially in an instant of time. Though Frank does not refer to Yeats in his essay, Yeats may be counted among the poets who tried to give spatiality to their poetry. But while he made the reader perceive some elements in his poems as space-oriented, he believed, unlike Eliot or Pound who abandoned syntactical sequence, in the fluid nature of time and did not completely disregard the temporality of language. There is an essential difference between Yeats and representative Modernists in the aim of spatialisation. The difference is a cause of unsettled estimation regarding the position of Yeats as a Modernist.

J. Hillis Miller examines in *The Linguistic Moment* "moments of suspension within the texts of poems...moments when they reflect or comment on their own medium"; he calls the suspension "the linguistic moment".[5] Miller's idea bears a similarity to Frank's statement: "modern poetry asks its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity".[6] In this essay applying Miller's idea of the linguistic moment, I will discuss the spatial form in "The Wild Swans at Coole", a poem written at the transitional period of Yeats, namely a poem showing both the end of early Yeats and the beginning of later Yeats. By discussing the poem I will also reconfirm the validity of calling Yeats a Modernist poet. Yeats was obsessed by time's cruel nature to transform all; it was impossible for him to neglect completely the temporal sequence in his poems as other Modernists did. Yeats's use of the Modernist technique is not the same as Eliot's or Pound's. Looking for the linguistic moment in Yeats's poetry will make us understand how the simultaneous juxtaposition of images is achieved, what the true aim of the spatialisation is, and why Yeats is sometimes called not a Modernist but a Romantic.

## I

"The Wild Swans at Coole" was composed in 1916 after Yeats had completed *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* ; it was also when he was writing *Autobiographies,* and just after his last proposal to Maud Gonne had been bluntly refused. The poem has been construed as showing that, having had a chance to recall his past, Yeats began to think about decrepitude as his own problem, and about the contrast between the joyful memory of love and the sorrow of lost love, between the past and the present. It has also been regarded as one of his last symbolic poems and the images of the poem have been attentively analysed. Donald Stauffer expounds its images relating them to the other poems of Yeats.[7] Norman Jeffares, pointing out that the swans are modelled on Shelley's swan in *Alastor,* explains that they symbolise immortality or love for Maud.[8] Frank Hughes Murphy relates it to *A Vision* and says that "great broken rings" in the poem is a kind of gyre that reconciles this world and the transcendent world.[9] In this essay I will examine how the words, instead of the images, are interconnected within the poem, focusing my attention on the problem of where we can find the centre of Yeats's consciousness.

In the first stanza, as is often the case with lyrics of later Yeats, a concrete natural setting is offered in the present tense.

> The trees are in their autumn beauty,
> The woodland paths are dry,
> Under the October twilight the water
> Mirrors a still sky;
> Upon the brimming water among the stones
> Are nine-and-fifty swans. (11. 1–6)[10]

This seems an ordinary circumstantial description. On an autumn day in the twilight, the poet comes to his favourite lake through the paths in the forest, the trees of which are at the peak

of their beauty. There are many swans on the lake the water of which is brimful. These statements are suggestive of a mood of calmness although they do not lead us to grasp the poet's feelings. The number "nine-and-fifty", however, is specific enough to attract the reader's attention. We cannot help suspecting that there is a special meaning in the number which could be replaced by "many" or "a lot of".

> The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
> Since I first made my count;
> I saw, before I had well finished,
> All suddenly mount
> And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
> Upon their clamorous wings. (11. 7–12)

The first two lines tell that the poet has made it a custom to count swans on the lake for nineteen years, and "nine-and-fifty" is not a symbol of any great significance but an amount of the actual count. When he first came to Coole and counted them, he saw "before [he] well finished, / All suddenly mount", — he could not accomplish the act nineteen years ago whereas he can do it now. And the calmness of the first stanza is contrasted with the noise of "clamorous wings".

> I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
> And now my heart is sore.
> All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
> The first time on this shore,
> The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
> Trod with a lighter tread. (11. 13–18)

In this stanza we are given a clear account of his feelings for the first time. The remark "All's changed" is meaningful. The poet of nineteen years ago has changed into the poet of the present; and at the same time, by the change of himself the past scene has also been changed. Nineteen years ago the sound of flying swans was "clamorous" and it signified that the act of

counting was interrupted, but now it is a "bell-beat" to him. Although Yeats is describing the past event, his point of view is consciously maintained in the present. This is endorsed by the fact that Yeats says "*And* now my heart is sore" (italics mine). Instead of "but" he uses the conjunction "and" that naturally continues the narration, while in fact he meditates on the change recollecting his life of these nineteen years through the act of looking at the swans.

> Unwearied still, lover by lover,
> They paddle in the cold
> Companionable streams or climb the air;
> Their hearts have not grown old;
> Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
> Attend upon them still. (11. 19–24)

This is again a circumstantial description stated in the present tense; what is described seems to be the same scene the poet is watching in the opening stanza. If it is the case, however, there are some unnatural descriptions. First, all the fifty-nine swans cannot swim "lover by lover" in pairs — one must be left alone.[11] And if Yeats talks about the actual swans before him, how can he know "Their hearts have not grown old", or "Passion or conquest, wander where they will, / Attend upon them still"? These problems are resolved when we interpret these swans not as actual creatures, but ideal and transcendental beings, imagined in the poet's mind, that do not undergo any changes: "Unwearied, still... / Their hearts have not grown old". This is well accounted for by the fact, as Brian Arkins says, that Yeats is putting a Latin derivative word "companionable" (an unsuitable word for describing nonhuman beings) among the monosyllable words deriving from Old English such as "cold", "stream" and "climb". The mixture of the rare and the commonplace makes us feel an unworldliness of the swans.[12] What is described is conceptual or mythological existence, which implic-

itly forms a contrast to the actual fifty-nine swans. Yeats is trying to represent the character of what is present (the swans on the lake in the October twilight) by invoking what is absent (the ideal or transcendental swans). This absence/presence antithesis, as Edward Engelberg says, is also found in the next stanza.[13]

> But now they drift on the still water,
> Mysterious, beautiful;
> Among what rushes will they build,
> By what lake's edge or pool
> Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
> To find they have flown away? (11. 25–30)

"*But* now they drift on the still water" (italics mine). The conjunction shows that the swans here are not the same as those of the fourth stanza — again he is watching the actual scene on the lake in Coole Park. He knows, though they are drifting on the lake now, they will fly away and the sight will change some day : by telling of the future changes, the present scene is implied.

By examining the poem carefully we may find its basic structure : the situation depicted at the beginning is given details and implications in the following stanzas. The present moment is characterized by the past from which he has reached to the present, the future to which the poet is going and the ideal situation with which the actual situation is contrasted. Stanzas from the second to the last are various versions colourfully enriching the meaning of the pictorial landscape of the first stanza — the fifty-nine swans floating on the lake under October twilight. The time in the poem does not proceed as the stanzas are added. Temporality is suspended at the opening scene. The word "still" in the first stanza, implying serenity or quiescence, also appears in the fourth and fifth stanza to play a part in leaving the mood suspended. Nineteen years ago the swans faded away and the mood was not suspended; the words "scatter",

"broken" and "clamorous" suggest an instability of that moment. The present moment is arrested, and if it is considered as flowing, it is just while the poet is counting the swans up to fifty-nine, or while he is contemplating his past and future. Miraculously a portion of time is detached from the actual flux of time; for the phrase "when I awake some day" shows that he is asleep and inanimate now[14].

Yeats portrays the present as transient in the first stanza. The images suggest the ephemeral quality of things: "the trees in their autumn beauty", the "twilight" that exists only for a short time at dawn or sunset, and the "nine-and-fifty swans" whose number may increase and decrease at any moment. In a miraculous minute when ephemeral conditions happily occur, the swans are called "Mysterious, beautiful". Whenever readers confront what is absent — "the days that are no more" or "the never-ending flight of future days", — they are forced to keep in the mind the unstable factors suggested in the beginning scene. The moments of reflection are "moments of suspension" in this poem. The meaning of the poem does not reveal itself as the poem proceeds from stanza to stanza. The linguistic moment in "The Wild Swans at Coole" comes with the picture of the landscape in the first stanza and the picture gives a spatial form to the poem.

## II

It has often been pointed out that the origin of Modernism can be traced back to Mallarmé who tried to evoke what words do not immediately denote by invoking a sense of absence.[15] He was so eager to achieve this rhetoric that the words in his poetry were detached from the context and fell into a state of uncommunicativeness, but Mallarmé's assertion that the reflective nature of language should play an important role in poetry is inherited by Modernist poets. Eliot's "The Love Song

of J. Alfred Prufrock" is an example showing this inheritance:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.[16]

There is no syntactical logic between these two sections. What is in common among all the sections of the entire poem is an implied framework that they display Prufrock's gloomy dilemma. The framework is not manifest at a glance; in order to grasp it readers must examine and reflect on the words, sincessantly reminding themselves of its existence. Paradoxically, however, it is not until they have finished reading the whole poem that they can clearly comprehend the framework. It appears that there is no logical sequence of the sections, nor a temporal sequence of language. Readers are motivated to "perceive the elements of the poem as *juxtaposed in space* rather than *unrolling in time*" (italics mine).[17] As is stated above, "The Wild Swans at Coole" is also a poem that induces such a way of reading; from this viewpoint one may claim that Yeats is a Modernist. But Yeats did not wholeheartedly agree with Pound's idea: "an 'image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time".[18] He does not disregard the logical progression of the stanzas nor the time-oriented nature of language. Even

if the sections in "Prufrock" are rearranged, its thematic purport will be almost the same. In "The Wild Swans at Coole", though its spatial form requires reading it like a picture, the arrangement of the stanzas is made intentionally.[19] The succession of time is from the past to the future and the temporal continuity of the words is certainly preserved. It is necessary, then, to consider what idea Yeats has regarding time.

## III

From the earlier stages in his career Yeats wrote poems with the theme of a change from the past to the present showing his longings for the by-gone days. "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner" in *The Rose* (1893) is an example of the early poems about time:

Although I shelter from the rain
Under a broken tree,
My chair was nearest to the fire
In every company
That talked of love or politics,
Ere Time transfigured me.

Though lads are making pikes again
For some conspiracy,
And crazy rascals rage their fill
At human tyranny,
My contemplations are of Time
That has transfigured me.

There's not a woman turns her face
Upon a broken tree,
And yet the beauties that I loved
Are in my memory;
I spit into the face of Time
That has transfigured me.

This poem is based on the traditional idea that time consists of three fragmented parts — present, past and future. "Time" with the capital T with "the face" indicates not an abstract conception or an invisible movement but a personified object that has a concrete shape. From the phrase "Ere Time transfigured me", it can be argued that there are divisions in the course of time and that the passage of time is limited from the past to the present. His "contemplations are of Time" in the past. It is to be noted that we can see here already the concept of time's cruelty underlying "The Wild Swans at Coole" that "transfigures" what used to be into what is. In this poem, however, Yeats has no interest in the breakup of narrative-time that Pound and Eliot tried to achieve in poety. (One reason for this might be that "The Lamentation" was written before Modernism reached its peak.) We cannot find any element to suspend the flux of time of the poem here.

The idea that time is a stream and not a sum of discrete units was advocated by Henri Bergson in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), which Yeats was reading around 1917.[20] Although Yeats did not agree with Bergson's opinion that it is impossible to make a spatial representation of time because time itself is a movement, he found the philosopher's idea of time's fluidity concordant with his own idea that time flowing changes everything. He thus fully realized the uncertainty of human life. In 1908 he asks himself why "life is a perpetual preparation for something that never happens", and his autobiographical reminiscences written in 1914 read "All life in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens". And he writes in a prose draft of *At the Hawk's Well* (1917), "Accursed the life of man — between passion and emptiness what he longs for never comes. All his days are a preparation for what never comes".[21] These statements convince us that Yeats was keenly interested in the irretrievable flux of time altering

everything. In "The Wild Swans at Coole", too, we can find the progression from the past to the future within the suspended moments of the present.

The recognition that every irreversible instance generates something unexpected has naturally led Yeats to the wish to keep a meaningful instant for ever. The linguistic moment is functioning as a means of suspending the moment in "The Wild Swans at Coole". As stated before, the whole mood of the poem is determined by the first circumstantial depiction, which can be construed as what the poet hopes to retain eternally : nineteen years after his first visit, he watches the swans standing in the autumn twilight by the lake possessed by his mental supporter Lady Gregory. The scenery has been cherished in his mind and the moment he is trying to suspend has a special meaning to him. That he tries to suspend that serene moment means that he attempts to escape from the invisible future in life — from the flow of time. Yeats's rhetoric is different from that of Eliot who locates the images spatially in his poems for the sake of the aesthetic effect. In "Prufrock" Eliot does not tell a story or explain anything ; instead he places the images to imply something. Yeats, on the other hand, by transforming a moment spatially, intends to make it eternal or supernatural. This is a Romantic conception. The difference between Eliot and Yeats in the purpose of spatialisation in their poems clearly shows their difference as poet : one is a typical Modernist, the other is difficult to classify.

Yeats in the later period wrote many poems beginning with circumstantial descriptions founded on his personal experience, for example, "Among School Children", "Coole Park, 1929", "Coole Park and Ballylee" and "The Municipal Gallery Revisited". In these poems the poet's consciousness is not unfolded along with the progression of the poem ; the opening scenes are suspended

until the end of the poem — a moment is spatialised. The moment of Yeats's personal experience can be shared with readers who are invited to experience the moment. Thus, a mythologizing of an experience is achieved. But in "The Wild Swans at Coole", though there is a connotation of a civilizational problem in the final stanza (for example, the image that swans build rushes implies the beginning of a society), what Yeats attempts to portray is just a picture of an instant important to him. The distinctive aspect of "The Wild Swans at Coole" is that what Yeats intends to do is not to mythologize his experience but to represent the desire to escape from the course of time in real life. This poem, which has a Modernist feature, is the last poem that displays such a Romantic dream, and could be regarded as written at the turning point from Symbolist to Modernist in Yeats's poetic career.

**NOTES**

1) Cairns Craig, *Yeats, Eliot and Pound and the Politics of Poetry* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1982); James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988).
2) C.K. Stead, *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement* (London: Macmillan, 1986); Sanford Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot and Early Twentieth-Century Thought* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986).
3) Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The Name and Nature of Modernism" in *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930*, (Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds.; 1976; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 19–55.
4) Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Poetry" in *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 3–62. Frank also published a book in which he is answering the questions raised by this essay about forty-five years after its first publication, and the issue seems to

be worth considering even now. See, *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1991).

5) J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985), p. *xiv*.

6) Frank, *The Widening Gyre*, p. 13.

7) Donald Stauffer, *The Golden Nightingale: Essays on Some Principles of Poetry in the Lyrics of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), pp. 64–79.

8) A. Norman Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 222–24.

9) Frank Hughes Murphy, *Yeats's Early Poetry: The Quest for Reconciliation* (Louisiana: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 145–49.

10) W.B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, (Peter Alt and Russell K. Alspach, eds.; New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 322. Subsequent citations are from this edition and page or line numbers will be incorporated in the text in parentheses.

11) Murphy, p. 147.

12) Brian Arkins, *Builders of My Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1990), p. 152.

13) Edward Engelberg, discussing that the absence/presence antithesis is a kind of Modernist rhetoric, recognises that it is applied in "The Wild Swans at Coole". See *The Vast Design: Patterns in W. B. Yeats's Aesthetic*, 2nd ed., expanded, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1988), pp. 223–41.

14) Although critics explain that "when I awake some day" means "when I die some day", there seems to be no reason for such an interpretation at least in "The Wild Swans at Coole". See John Unterecker, *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* (1959; rpt. Yugoslavia: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 132, and Murphy, p. 147.

15) See Maurice Blanchot, "Le Mythe de Mallarmé" in *La Part du Feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

16) T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (1969; rpt. London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 13.

17) Frank, p. 10.

18) Ezra Pound, *Make It New* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), p. 336.

19) When "The Wild Swans at Coole" was first published, the last part of the poem was put between line twelve and thirteen, and Yeats revised it afterward. See *Variorum Edition*, p. 322.

20) Herbert J. Levine, *Yeats's Daimonic Renewal* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1977), p. 56.

21) See Yeats, *Memoirs* (Dennis Donoghue ed., London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 230, Yeats, *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 132, and Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (1979; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 219. We also find a similar statement in a draft of "Among School Children" written in March 1926: "Bring in the old thought that life prepares for what never happens". See, Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 251.

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