

## **'Death-in-life and life-in-death': Yeats's Romanticism**

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### **Introduction**

Parallels with and allusions to the English Romantics are abundant throughout Yeats's work, but I would like to argue that it is perhaps his inherent affinity with the model of Romanticism developed in Germany at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century that positions him most compellingly in the Romantic tradition. In this regard I suggest that it is with his middle period poetry and, in particular, with what one might call a certain restorative, visionary experience of the 'death' of the self which he works into his poetry, that Yeats's Romanticism is most fully evolved. My task, therefore, is twofold: firstly I must uncover what I have called Yeats's Romanticism and then, secondly, I must show how it aligns him with the European Romantic tradition.

### **Yeats's Vision Poetry**

I would like to focus straight away on a type of visionary poetry which finds its most mature expression in the book of poetry called *The Tower*. *Prima facie*, passages such as section VII of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' ('I see phantoms of hatred and of the heart's fullness and of the coming emptiness') and section VI of 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' are baffling – they seem to come out of nowhere: they aren't in keeping with the form of the poetry in

which they are embedded and they seem to resist interpretation almost wilfully. The typical basic structure of such poems is that for the most part they are well-ordered, obeying strict metrical rules, and are clearly and calmly expressed, but for an irruptive passage of visionary poetry in which these things – calm, order and clarity – are overturned. Crucially important is the fact that Yeats does not simply present such ‘vision poetry’ in its own right, that is, as complete poems. Rather, such poetry makes its chaotic appearance in the midst of poetry that is, in contrast, ordered, calm and rationally meditative. It is possible to detect embryonic examples of such vision poetry as early as *The Wind Among the Reeds* in poems such as ‘The Unappeasable Host’ and ‘The Valley of the Black Pig’, and later, with ‘The Cold Heaven’ and, of course, ‘The Second Coming’, but such poetry reaches a peak in *The Tower*.

‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’<sup>1</sup> is one of Yeats’s most desolate and nihilistic poems. The first section, written in perfectly ordered *ottava rima*, begins by bemoaning the passing of great art and tradition, the change of what had appeared changeless:

Many ingenious lovely things are gone  
That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,  
Protected from the circle of the moon  
That pitches common things about.

Violence had been little more than a quasi-ornamental threat, ‘a great army but a showy thing’, but no longer:

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare  
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery

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<sup>1</sup> *Yeats's Poems*, pp. 314-18.

Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,  
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;  
The night can sweat with terror as before  
We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,  
And planned to bring the world under a rule,  
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

This relapse into a state of barbarism in light of the failure of philosophy and politics leaves but 'one comfort left': the knowledge that man has security and a retreat in 'solitude'. But even this is doubtful and leads Yeats to ask: 'But is there any comfort to be found?' The exquisitely melancholy answer suggests not:

Man is in love and loves what vanishes,  
What more is there to say?

This last hope eliminated, the poet, in the second section of the poem, anticipates a catastrophic transvaluation of values:

So the Platonic Year  
Whirls out new right and wrong,  
Whirls in the old instead;

In Part 3 'winds...clamour of approaching night' and all human effort and struggle now appear to have been self-deluding vanity:

O but we dreamed to mend  
Whatever mischief seemed  
To afflict mankind, but now  
That winds of winter blow  
Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed.

Similar sentiments are expressed in the fourth section which is followed by the profoundly nihilistic fifth section in which a world of destruction and hopelessness is presented. The poet ridicules in turn 'the great', 'the wise' and 'the good', echoing a line from Blake's 'Mock on, Mock on Voltaire,

Rousseau', 'Mock on Mock on tis all in vain',<sup>2</sup> before finally turning on 'mockers' like himself: 'Mock mockers after that'. All activity seems pointless in the face of 'the levelling wind', 'that foul storm' which brings annihilation: 'Wind shrieked – and where are they?'

After so final a rejection of life, the stage is set for a 'vision'. Yeats has traced the disintegration of the ordered, prosaic world of traditions and established values to the point where it is utterly exhausted. As the empty nihilism of the fifth section prepares the way for the sheer fullness and immediacy of the vision of the sixth section, Yeats's careful rhythmic plotting also sets the scene for a stunning stylistic contrast in which the poet appears to almost lose control of the poem. Whilst preaching destruction and disintegration, the stanza form of the fifth section (*cinquain*) is actually a model of sober regularity and conformity. In fact, in terms of form, the fifth section is very close to the ninth song in Sidney's 'Astrophil and Stella'. From the beginning of the sixth section this order is overturned. The rhythm is urgent and unpredictable, intensifying the chaos of the imagery:

Violence upon the roads: violence of horses;  
Some few have handsome riders, are garlanded  
On delicate sensitive ear or tossing mane,  
But wearies running round and round in their courses  
All break and vanish, and evil gathers head:  
Herodias' daughters have returned again,  
A sudden blast of dusty wind and after  
Thunder of feet, tumult of images,  
Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind;  
And should some crazy hand dare touch a daughter  
All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries,  
According to the wind, for all are blind.

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<sup>2</sup> William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 418.

The clamour then dies down ('But now wind drops, dust settles...') leaving us with a final daemonic image of an 'insolent fiend'. The visionary fragment ending as abruptly as it began.

What is important to take away from this reading is the fact that the complexly suggestive visionary passage is written as though it bursts forth uncontrollably in the middle of the poem, disrupting the rest of the poem and saying or revealing something that cannot be brought forth or grasped in the ordered, tempered language of the poem. It is almost as though midway through the poem the poet loses authorial control and becomes a direct conduit to something beyond, something wholly other than himself and alien to the ordered, ultimately rational and reflective perspective of the poet. In a sense – and we will return to this later – one might say that Yeats's vision poetry captures, poetically, the death of the author.

That other great sequence poem of *The Tower*, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' possesses a very similar structure. After six sections of lucid, limpid poetry dealing prosaically with the themes of war, declining tradition and disintegration, the visionary seventh section bursts forth with disruptive violence. The scene is chaotic, there are 'arms and fingers spreading wide / For the embrace of nothing' and Yeats carries over this feeling of 'senseless tumult' into frantic poetic rhythms. The use of repetition is strikingly effective.

Words bite back at words in aggressive echo:

In cloud-pale rags, or in lace,  
The rage-driven, rage-tormented, and rage-hungry troop,  
Trooper belabouring trooper, biting at arm or at face,  
Plunges towards nothing

Yeats, a consummate master of rhythmic plotting, ends the vision by descending into calm iambic peace:

I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair...

### The Significance of 'Vision' Poetry for Yeats

What does Yeats intend by setting up these passages in which the poem – its style, form and subject matter – is so radically transformed? What, for Yeats, do these poetic visions signify?

Yeats's ideal was what he referred to as 'unity of being' and he believed that in order to try to achieve this one must evoke what he called one's anti-self, one must, in other words, strive for one's antithetical mask. The self, then, is, *qua* self, incomplete and a sense of the whole can only be attained by drawing forth the anti-self, conjuring a world completely other than that which the poet appears to inhabit. And yet this pure otherness has value only in relation to the self – that is, the anti-self *is such* only insofar as it is *anti* the self. So Yeats must attempt to negate the self whilst, at the same time, seemingly paradoxically, somehow maintaining and sustaining the self. In the moment of vision the self, in a sense, dies but, more than that, it experiences, or passes through, its own death. The self must, to appropriate Hegel's phrase, 'endure death and maintain itself in it'. It is in this complete dissolution that the self 'wins its truth' and 'finds itself' in a way that without this experience of life-in-death it cannot do.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hegel, *Preface of Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 19.

Yeats seems to be seeking something that is beyond the self and as such something that the self can only but fail to grasp and understand. Yet, it is only *through* the self and *in relation to* the self that the anti-self can be evoked. Thus the visions that Yeats incorporates into some of his most significant middle period poetry only emerge at the point at which traditional poetic discourse – the discourse of the self – breaks down. In fact, for the reader these visions appear precisely as a breakdown of meaning and order – but this, I maintain, should not be understood as obscuring what these passages are, that *is* what they are, their inscrutability is their un-co-optable, inassimilable difference. They *point* to something beyond rather than naively attempting (but inevitably always ultimately failing) to *present* it in a way that could be grasped and the way they achieve this is by overturning the rules, conventions, order and sense of the poems in which they are contained. In this sense what Yeats has developed is an aesthetics of failure. Traditional, everyday language and reflective consciousness cannot achieve unity of being, cannot have access to what one might call the absolute. To attempt this it must reach to its opposite and yet the implication is that any attempt to do this in traditional poetic discourse will merely obscure what it is that the poet wishes to bring forth. Yeats's vision poetry operates according to an aesthetics of failure insofar as it is motivated by the belief that one can only gesture to the beyond by performing, poetically, the catastrophic failure of sense and thus of authorial control.

#### The Early German Romantic Parallel

Insofar as this is the case, Yeats is unwittingly positioning himself squarely in a particular European Romantic tradition, a tradition which believed that a certain 'unity of being' or 'absolute' is lost to us or beyond our conceptual grasp and that the only way of getting a sense of it is to artistically perform the failure of that conceptual grasp and of conceptualising language. Influenced by Fichte, and in particular the perceived failure of Fichte's attempt to adequately account for the first principle of his philosophy, namely the self-positing ego, the Jena Romantics turned to art in the belief that it could reveal more than could the reflective discourse of philosophy. The basic problem was that the language of reflection (at the base of which lies the self-certainty of the subject) divided the world into subject and object and the inability of any particular articulation to escape the subjectivism of its perspective meant that one could never hope to overcome one's finitude and cognitively 'reach' the absolute. Thus, for Friedrich Schlegel, 'philosophy...always begins *in medias res*',<sup>4</sup> it can never begin at a first principle and can never reach some sort of non-perspectival position. However, although the early German Romantics were committed to the idea of the finitude of ordinary language and the inherently divided nature of subject/object consciousness, they continued to believe that there was a larger unified whole or absolute of which they were a part but which could not be reached given because of that finitude. Given this they developed the idea that the only way to escape one's finite, subjective position, however briefly, was to rupture that subjectivism by performing in art the failure of reflective consciousness and language in the belief that doing so would create a space in which that which exceeds ordinary consciousness,

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<sup>4</sup> Schlegel, fragment 84 of *Athenaeum Fragments*, in *Philosophical Fragments* (Minnesota, 1991), p. 28.

the absolute or unity of being, may appear. Of course, this rupture provides no substantive alternative to the rational, reflective and everyday, and it risks being immediately co-opted by one's subjective, conceptualising grasp. Thus the most that can be achieved for Schlegel (and, so some degree, Novalis and perhaps even Hölderlin), is an alternating proof, a wavering between the world we know and a pure world beyond, a wavering between our subjectivism and a pure objectivity, between determinacy and indeterminacy, between the I and the not-I (or the self and the anti-self) or, to put it more metaphorically, between the day and a night that is completely other, between life and a visionary, Orpheus-like death. Unable to get beyond one's subject/object perspective in order to grasp the world as it is in itself, this sense of something beyond, something utterly different, is as close as one can get to the absolute.

For Schlegel the moment of indeterminate otherness constitutes the 'real' in contrast to the idealism of one's subjective perspective. It is the task of poetry – since poetry is capable of this, unlike philosophy – to hover, alternating between the real and the ideal. In the *Athenaeum* fragments he calls this 'transcendental poetry'.<sup>5</sup> To achieve this, Schlegel believes that an absolute indeterminacy must be built into an otherwise determinate artwork so that the work alternates undecidedly between the two. This is the moment of the work's self-critique: the dynamic between determinacy and dissolution is the critical *unworking* that is the *work* of the Romantic work. In this critical moment the work ruptures its (that is to say, our) subjective, conceptualising

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<sup>5</sup> Schlegel, fragment 238 of *Athenaeum Fragments*, in *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 50.

grip on the world. Ironically, therefore, it is precisely this rupture, this dissolution in indeterminacy of the seemingly objective, which constitutes an objective moment in the Romantic artwork. As such, in the apparent breakdown of the artwork we are momentarily carried (by the work) beyond ourselves and our perspectival finitude. In that brief moment the self-critical work opens us to what we are not by performing its own failure which is also our own failure. In this sense the work should be both complete and incomplete – indeed, incompletable – where it is ‘everywhere sharply delimited, but within those limits limitless and inexhaustible’.<sup>6</sup> The fragmentary ideal of the romantic work is to be endlessly becoming in self-critical dissolution. This is what Schlegel means when he argues that Romantic irony should be employed to bring the artwork to ‘the point of continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction’.<sup>7</sup> As Blanchot makes clear, the point of the self-critical Romantic fragment is not to realise the whole but to signal it by suspending it. ‘Only what is incomplete can take us further’<sup>8</sup> as Novalis says, and it is in this sense that he develops the idea of works of literature being ‘seeds’ which are a site of growth and becoming beyond what they are.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Schlegel, fragment 297 of *Athenaeum Fragments*, in *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> Schlegel, fragment 51 of *Athenaeum Fragments*, in *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 24. Similarly, in *Athenaeum* fragment 121, Schlegel writes: ‘An idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts’ (p. 33).

<sup>8</sup> Novalis, *Logological Fragments*, in *Novalis: Philosophical Writings* (Cornell, 1988), p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> Novalis, *Miscellaneous Observations*, in *Novalis: Philosophical Writings*, p. 42. This is, of course, a recurrent metaphor – and organic growth a recurrent theme – in Novalis’s writings. ‘Novalis’ itself, the pen name of Hardenberg, is derived from an old family name meaning ‘from the cleared land’ and *Miscellaneous Observations*, which he described as ‘fragments of my continuing dialogue with myself – shoots’, were originally published with the title ‘*Pollen*’. O’Brien, *Novalis: Signs of Revolution*, p. 2 and Mahony Stoljar, *Novalis: Philosophical Writings*, p. 168.

According to this early German Romantic aesthetics of failure, then, the artwork should be engineered to teeter on catastrophic failure, hovering between determinacy and indeterminacy for the sake of an insight into something beyond, some larger unity or absolute which our reflective subject/object finitude prevents us from ever fully knowing. It is to this tradition that I think Yeats's vision poems are best understood as belonging. For Yeats, the momentary negation of the subjective perspective is a sort of passing over, a moment of death. But for this ecstatic death to be at all valuable to the Romantic artist, he must, to quote Hegel again, endure death and maintain himself in it. This experience of death, this moment of death in life and life in death is the moment of visionary inspiration for which Yeats thought the artist must strive.

#### Death-in-Life for Life-in-Death

Drawing on the Neo-Platonic tradition Yeats presents this striving as something solitary, nocturnal and withdrawn from the world – a sort of death-in-life which is a condition to achieving the vision. In 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' Yeats presents the 'old wind-beaten tower' in which, at night, 'A lamp burns on beside the open book'. The obvious reference point here is Milton's 'Il Penseroso' ('Or let my lamp at midnight hour / Be seen in some high lonely tower, / Where I may oft outwatch the Bear'<sup>10</sup>) and, of course, Samuel Palmer's famous 'Tower' illustrations. In 'The Phases of the Moon' the imaginary figure Michael Robartes speaks of 'the candle-light / From the far tower where Milton's Platonist / Sat late [...] / The lonely light that Samuel

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<sup>10</sup> Milton, *Milton: Minor Poems and Sonnets* (London: James Brodie), p. 25.

Palmer engraved, / An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil';<sup>11</sup> and, again in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', there is a description of 'An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower', which contains,

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,  
A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,  
A candle and a written page.  
*Il Penseroso's* Platonist toiled on  
In some like chamber, shadowing forth  
How the daemonic rage imagined everything.

Evidently, this image of the light in the tower represents for Yeats the unending, solitary and decidedly nocturnal task of writing. It is of further significance given the internal dynamism of Yeats's vision poems that I have argued is reminiscent of the early German Romantic ideal artwork which hovers between the two poles of determinacy and indeterminacy, that 'Il Penseroso', together with its twin poem, 'L'Allegro', form a *synkriseis*, or debating situation between two antitheses. 'L'Allegro' concerns itself with championing light, sound and society ('vain deluding Joys' according to 'Il Penseroso'), and condemns 'Il Penseroso's' obsession with darkness, silence and solitude.

So, the interminable, daemonic insomnia of the writer that the image of the lonely tower represents is, for Yeats, a form of death-in-life.<sup>12</sup> It is as far removed as possible from the day-to-day life of action, and as such it holds the promise for Yeats of life-in-death, or, what Blanchot calls, the experience

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<sup>11</sup> *Yeats's Poems*, p. 268.

<sup>12</sup> One should recall the lines from Coleridge's *Epitaph* (1833): 'O, lift one thought in prayer for S.T.C.; / That he who many a year with toil of breath / Found death in life, may here find life in death!' (*The Complete Poems*, p. 416).

of the 'other night'.<sup>13</sup> It is the impossible task of the writer to bring that other night to the light of day. To this end, writes Blanchot, the poet has no choice but to submit himself to the interminable and incessant solitude which 'the work visits on the writer'.

Blanchot calls this 'the pure passivity of being' and suggests that the writer becomes fascinated by its timeless interminability. He explains how the writer's gaze (the gaze which in Milton's 'Il Penseroso' 'may outwatch the Bear') is 'seized':

[T]he gaze gets taken in, absorbed by an immobile movement and a depthless deep. What is given us by this contact at a distance is the image, and fascination is passion for the image.<sup>14</sup>

This 'gaze of the incessant and interminable' is what Blanchot calls 'the essence of solitude'. This, incidentally, recalls Hegel's belief that 'Spirit' in enduring and maintaining itself in death, looks the negative in the face and carries with it.<sup>15</sup> This unseeing gaze which is able to apprehend images unavailable to normal sight, clearly approximates the Yeatsian vision.

Blanchot goes on describing the gaze:

In it blindness is vision still, vision which is no longer the possibility of seeing, but the impossibility of not seeing, the impossibility which becomes visible and perseveres – always and always – in a vision that never comes to an end: a dead gaze, a gaze become the ghost of an eternal vision.<sup>16</sup>

A similar fascination seems to hold sway over the artist in the tower in Yeats's work. In 'The Phases of the Moon', the character Michael Robartes intones:

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<sup>13</sup> See, in particular, 'The Outside, the Night', pp. 163-70 and 'Orpheus's Gaze' (in *The Space of Literature*) pp. 171-176.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 19

<sup>16</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 32.

[T]hat shadow is the tower,  
And the light proves that he is reading still.  
He has found, after the manner of his kind,  
Mere images...

Even more striking evidence to support this idea can be found in 'Ego Dominus Tuus' which begins with 'Hic' (the one) addressing 'Ille' (the other):<sup>17</sup>

On the grey sand beside the shallow stream  
Under your old wind-beaten tower, where still  
A lamp burns on beside the open book  
That Michael Robartes left, you walk in the moon,  
And, though you have passed the best of life, still trace,  
Enthralled by the unconquerable delusion,  
Magical shapes.

Ille responds:

By the help of an image  
I call to my own opposite, summon all  
That I have handled least, least looked upon.<sup>18</sup>

The image, Blanchot suggests, 'robs us of our power to give sense' and draws us out of the world, out of life:

It abandons the world, draws back from the world, and draws us along.  
It no longer reveals itself to us, and yet it affirms itself in a presence  
foreign to the temporal present and to presence in space.<sup>19</sup>

A passage from Yeats's 'Byzantium' perfectly illustrates this drawing out of the world (from man, to shade, to image), this death-in-life/life-in-death which fascination with images effects:<sup>20</sup>

Before me floats an image, man or shade,  
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;

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<sup>17</sup> *Yeats's Poems*, pp. 264-6.

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Hic, Ille's rational, prosaic interlocutor, answers: 'And I would find myself and not an image'. This recalls the first aphorism of Novalis's *Miscellaneous Remarks*: 'We look everywhere for the Unconditional Absolute, and all we find are the conditions' (*Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, p. 203).

<sup>19</sup> Blanchot, 'The Essential Solitude', p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> *Yeats's Poems*, pp. 363-4.

For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth  
May unwind the winding path...

### The Orphic Archetype

The mention of Hades – whose name means ‘the unseen’ – reminds us that although the artist is able to apprehend the image, and is transfixed by his fascination with it, he is unable to peer directly into the night beyond, the other night which ‘is always other’.<sup>21</sup> The most well-known classical illustration of this situation is the story of Orpheus, a character who is the epitome of the Romantic artist insofar as he is able, by means of his art, to breach the border of day and night, life and death, but is unable to gaze at that which is concealed in the darkness of the other night.<sup>22</sup>

In his essay, ‘Orpheus’s Gaze’, Blanchot reminds us that in Orpheus’s descent into the realm of Hades – the realm of the dead – ‘art is the power by which night opens’.<sup>23</sup> Eurydice, his beloved whom he wishes to recover, marks ‘the furthest that art can reach’:

Under a name that hides her and a veil that covers her, she is the profoundly obscure point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend. She is the instant when the essence of night approaches as the *other* night.<sup>24</sup>

However, as Blanchot points out, Orpheus’s work is not to descend the depths to this point: ‘His *work* is to bring it back to the light of day and to give it form, shape, and reality in the day’. Orpheus is able to descend to

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<sup>21</sup> Blanchot, ‘The Outside, the Night’, p. 168.

<sup>22</sup> It is perhaps significant that Orpheus gets an approving mention in *both Il Penseroso* and *L’Allegro*.

<sup>23</sup> Blanchot, ‘Orpheus’s Gaze’, in *The Space of Literature*, p. 171.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 171.

Eurydice, the only restriction being that he must be turned away from her as he approaches her. But, of course, Orpheus fails in his task and ‘forgets the work he is to achieve’. However, although his work is to bring Eurydice, the furthest point art can reach, out of the darkness and back to the daylight of the surface (that is, to render *in the artwork* the profoundly obscure point to which art tends), the ‘ultimate demand’, writes Blanchot, ‘is not that there be a work, but that someone face this point, grasp its essence, grasp it where it appears, where it is essential and essentially appearance: at the heart of the night’.<sup>25</sup> This sets up an interesting problem: to turn to face ‘Eurydice’ would ruin the artwork, it would mark the failure of the artwork. Yet, the achievement of the artwork would signal a failure to meet the ultimate demand of the artwork. What the artwork ultimately calls for – its exorbitant demand – is that that which resists, that which threatens the artwork, be brought into the artwork:

Thus he [Orpheus] betrays the work, and Eurydice, and the night. But not to turn toward Eurydice would be no less untrue. Not to look would be infidelity to the measureless, imprudent force of his movement, which does not want Eurydice in her daytime truth and her everyday appeal, but wants her in her nocturnal obscurity, in her distance, with her closed body and sealed face – wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the foreignness of what excludes all intimacy, and wants, not to make her live, but to have living in her the plenitude of her death.<sup>26</sup>

This, and not the work, is in fact what Orpheus descends to the underworld for: ‘to look in the night at what night hides, the *other* night’.<sup>27</sup> This is the reason the artwork fails – and fails necessarily. The artwork – in the case of Orpheus, the song – comes about in a movement of reaching beyond what

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 171.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p. 172.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p. 172.

the artwork is capable of. In the case of Orpheus, Eurydice is always already lost:

He loses Eurydice because he desires her beyond the measured limits of the song, and he loses himself, but this desire, and Eurydice lost, and Orpheus dispersed are necessary to the song, just as the ordeal of eternal inertia is necessary to the work.<sup>28</sup>

The artwork demands its own failure.<sup>29</sup> Failure is both its possibility and its impossibility: in failing, the artwork reaches beyond itself towards that which enables it to be but in relation to which the artwork is, in itself, wholly inadequate. Hence Blanchot calls the exorbitant turn towards Eurydice, the turn in the instant of which the artwork is both made possible and ruined (made possible in being ruined and ruined in being made possible), '*inspiration*'.<sup>30</sup> This moment of inspiration is the centre point of the Romantic aesthetics of failure. 'From inspiration we sense only failure', Blanchot writes. '[I]nspiration pronounces Orpheus's failure' but it also 'turns Orpheus and it propels him toward that failure and insignificance irresistibly, as if to renounce failure were much graver than to renounce success...'.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, in the 'inspired and forbidden gaze', Orpheus loses everything. In the instant of the gaze, the work reaches 'its point of extreme uncertainty'. However, it is at this point – the point of the work's collapse – that something other than the work 'announces and affirms itself': 'Thus it is only in that look that the work can surpass itself, be united with its origin and consecrated in impossibility'. In this *regard*, therefore, the failure of the work is the 'ultimate

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 173.

<sup>29</sup> Blanchot refers to this as 'the deep demand of the work' (*ibid.* p. 173).

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 173.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* pp. 173-4.

gift to the work'.<sup>32</sup> Failure is, in a sense, its own compensation – in the certainty of failure Orpheus achieves the work's uncertainty, the work's failure. In failing, the work encloses within itself that which surpasses it and 'death-in-life, life-in-death' is achieved. Blanchot calls this 'the extreme moment of liberty, the moment when he [Orpheus] frees himself from himself and, still more importantly, frees the work from his concern, frees the sacred contained in the work, *gives* the sacred to itself, to the freedom of its essence, to its essence which is freedom';<sup>33</sup> Yeats calls it 'vision'.

The Orphic goal of Romanticism, then, is the artistic mediation of day and night, life and death, the finite and the infinite. By performing the failure of the finite a space is created in which the infinite announces itself, however reticently. Yeats's vision poems represent his version of this aesthetics of failure. They are constituted, as we have seen, by calm, well-ordered, at times almost detached, poetry – the prosaic poetry of the day – which is violently interrupted by chaotic, strange poetical fragments – the vision poetry of the night. It is these experiences of death which give life to the artwork and in so doing give birth to the artist. It is in this respect that Yeats is a Romantic poet and that he is thus restored from, by, through and in death.

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p. 174.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p. 175.