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Watery modernism? Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* and W. B. Yeats's *John Sherman*

In what follows, I analyse two Irish novels that share a deep concern for the West of Ireland as imperiled cultural resource and watery environment. Published over a hundred years apart, on either side of the period of literary modernism, both Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016) and W.B. Yeats's *John Sherman* (1891) mobilize modernist forms and themes in partial and selective ways. In doing so, they imagine forms of rupture that are nonetheless conceived in terms of permeable points of connection: in both novels, bodies of water link people, places, species and materials and stimulate us to think about water as political, cultural and environmental threshold in the Anthropocene. The novels also turn to infrastructure (pipelines, bridges, quays and roads) as constitutive of a modernity made in watery places. In experimenting with their contemporary worlds, *Solar Bones* and *John Sherman* inscribe the contours of a broken world but also invoke the prospect of a salvaged modernity.

My consideration of Irish modernism with and through water is animated by the charged temporality of the Anthropocene: broadly understood as the period in which humans have had a decisive impact on the planet, polluting and acidifying the oceans, causing the extinction of plant and animal species and altering the atmosphere. 'A poetics of the Anthropocene' can, suggests David Farrier, work to connect up different points in time and 'point us toward a careful retying of the knots that bind us together, in deep time, with the fate of the Earth' (128). The two novels discussed here imagine forms of connection that animate a renewed modernity in ways that are closely related to but that also swerve away from modernist styles. Rather than practise forms of breakage or disruption, *Solar Bones* and *John Sherman* concern themselves with forms of aesthetic and cultural practice that take root

in time and space, pursuing self-conscious questions about representation but also finding resilience in ordinary activities such as driving, fishing and gardening.

In what follows I understand water as expressing and enabling a porous form of connection between places and worlds, shaped by histories at once environmental and political. The bodies of water that surround, permeate and shape our islands are the result of gradual geological or climactic change over time but also carry memories of violent colonial disruptions, played out on environmental thresholds, including riverbanks, coasts and shores. The fractures and pressures consequent upon that history are part of a wider Atlantic modernity that affects cities such as London as much as port towns like Sligo or Galway and both novels seek to test these pressures across different points while measuring their effects in space and time. To address their points of connection is to reimagine ‘the enduring potentiality of modernist forms, themes and practices’ in Irish culture while also moving towards a more multi-directional account of ‘the degrees of ideological, intellectual and artistic distance that separates divergent modernisms from their equally diverging legatees’ (James 178).

The action of *Solar Bones* is dated on All Souls Day, the 2 November, a threshold time in the Celtic calendar during which the souls of the faithfully departed find their way back to the homes of the living . With a first person narrator whose remarkable single sentence monologue is voiced from beyond the grave, *Solar Bones* has been hailed as testament to the vibrancy of modernism’s modes in contemporary Irish culture. Writing in the *New Statesman*, Stephanie Boland hailed the novel as the ‘latest addition to a growing canon of experimental Irish writing’, nothing less than a ‘resurrection for Irish modernism’. As befits a novel with a protagonist whose profession is engineering, *Solar Bones* is constructed via a set of intricate and gripping dilemmas. Marcus Conway is a public servant,

a husband and a father. He is also, we learn at the novel's end, dead, having suffered a heart attack in his car. As county engineer, Marcus discovers that lazy expediency has resulted in the use of poor quality materials in the foundations of a new school building; meanwhile repairs to a bridge are delayed due to political corruption. Via the filter of Marcus's consciousness, readers witness the unfolding a public health crisis caused by a tainted water supply: hundreds are hospitalised and his wife, Mairead, suffers a protracted and violent illness. Relations with his son in Australia and his artist daughter, Agnes, are frayed: late night Skype conversations fail to bridge the distance with the son while Marcus finds himself tested by viewing Agnes's art work in the nearby town of Galway. Agnes's installation is called 'The O Negative Diaries' and uses her own menstrual blood as its main medium, and Marcus finds himself 'standing in the middle of a municipal gallery with its walls covered in a couple of litres of her own blood' (44). Red words shine through the 'finely emulsified' light, meaning that 'even if the crowd broke up the continuity of the space there was no doubting that the light served to make everyone part of a unified whole that occupied the whole gallery, Agnes's blood was now our common element, the medium in which we stood and breathed' (44).

The novel connects experimental and political art with forms of knowledge rooted in an embodied locality, challenging a 'commonplace modernist hostility for the provincial' (MacDonald 91). Agnes's art is challenging to her father not only because it is made using the medium of her own menstrual blood but also because of the way in which the 'livid words and sentences' she displays on the walls of the gallery incorporate 'snippets of new stories' from local Mayo newspapers (44). In Agnes's own words, Marcus suspects his daughter of 'a cheap shot, that I'm standing on some urban stage and poking fun at culchies', 'Uncle Tomming here, gratifying urban audiences with the comedy capers of their country cousins' (55). But Agnes's powerful defence of the use of provincial newspapers is expressed

in terms of the value of forms of ‘local reckoning’, suggesting a shared immediacy between avant-garde art, menstrual blood and provincial print.

This novel’s central crisis involves a reference to real event in the West of Ireland, the widespread contamination of drinking water in 2007. In the novel, Marcus’s wife Mairead drinks poisoned water in the restaurant that they visit following Agnes’s gallery opening and suffers gut-wrenching cramps and vomiting as a result. Official civic explanations of the episode refer to ‘the convergence of adverse circumstances — decrepit technology and torrential rains, overdevelopment and agricultural slurry’ but fail to ‘point the finger at farmers or engineers or those planners and developers who had allowed the city to grow beyond its ability to keep itself supplied with potable water’ (196). It falls instead to the narrative to sketch out a map of a world made by and with water, ranging from Marcus’s painstaking account of a supply ‘severely contaminated with the coliform *Cryptosporidium*, a viral parasite which originates in human faecal matter’ (31) to Agnes’s more ‘lurid’ images of ‘civil collapse and destruction’ (109).

Such connections between private and public realms are integral to a narrative that moves along and between ‘mountains, rivers and lakes past, present and future’ (57). A hydrological landscape forms the permeable ground of the novel’s plot, serving to bring into view the centrality of infrastructure (in particular, roads, bridges and water pipes) to the lives of the main characters. The relationship between lived territory and the technical systems that underpin civic society shapes the question of connection as a sinuous, elusive presence in the novel – a fragmented prose style that is assembled to form a single capacious sentence stretching the entire length of the novel; a broken public realm seen through the eyes of a man with a fundamental belief in the human value and spiritual beauty of large technical solutions; a rich emotional life realised within the narrative of a dead man. While much of the

acclaim of *Solar Bones*'s modernism focuses on its experimental narrative, the novel also asks us to go beyond questions of style and to make connections between the specificities of matter (concrete, bodies, cars) and the abstract world of politics (County Council corruption, lax implementation of essential safety guidelines for public construction projects). To adopt Bruno Latour's terms, the non-human actors in the novel are never 'simply the hapless bearers of symbolic projection' (2005 10) but rather possess forms of agency that serve to remake the social world: most strikingly, when Marcus experiences the heart attack he suffers while driving home as an operatic coming apart 'in sheets and waves', with different parts of the car (steering wheel, passenger seat, windscreen, accelerator, engine) each sounding their distinctive notes as part of 'my post mortem aria my engineer's lament' (263). Though Marcus Conway cannot at the end reach out across 'that vast unbroken commonage of space and time' that makes up the unknowable world beyond mortal life, he considers the possibility of God as a 'fellow engineer'. In that suggestion, we see the promise of a remade modernity in which we 'regain the capacity to do our own sorting of the elements that belong to our time' (Latour 76), a reconnection of natural and social worlds.

In *Solar Bones*, that work of sorting and connecting is imagined a search for 'accuracy' in a world of awkward angles (221). Marcus Conway finds solace in the memory of his own father's efforts at 'fixing an accurate scale and placing of himself in the world' but is also haunted by a childhood story 'of how, when he was a child himself a massive ship came into Clew Bay'. The size and power of the mysterious impresses itself in awed memory: 'a huge ship which bow-to-stern was over a mile long and with four massive funnels on it coughing up big balls of black deatach and armed with cannon and other artillery along its sides when it anchored in the middle of the bay for a full day before it fired

two shells onto the mainland' (88).¹ The boat unloads its timber onto the quay in Westport, and the hardness of the raw wood is part of the texture of the memory: 'this timber was so dense and close-grained it destroyed every saw blade that was set to it, shearing teeth and buckling so many, one after another, that Kelly's timber yard had to send to Sheffield for specially tempered blades' (88). The strange story of the ship draws imperial history into the narrative: the quays at Westport quays were built in the early 1800s by the Brownes of Westport House to facilitate connections with the family slave plantations in Jamaica and to encourage Atlantic trade.² The link with empire becomes deadly as his father remembers how the Sheffield blade cut 'smoothly' through the tropical hardwood but released a poisonous substance: 'any man who ever worked on the cutting of that timber never had the full of his health afterwards because there was nothing but blue dust out of it, which lodged in their lungs and sent several of them to early graves, five or six men with young families left behind them, drifting away into oblivion the same way the ship itself left the bay, turning on its own central axis with its massive diesel engines churning and pushing it out into the Atlantic beyond whence it came and to where it returned' (88-89).

The modernism of *Solar Bones* lies not only in forms of syntactical innovation borrowed from Joyce but also in these contradictions of time and space. In an interview with the author, Treasa de Loughry describes McCormack's West of Ireland 'as hyper-modern and under-developed at the same time – the landscape is contradictory, so that we have the ruins of older energy regimes like peat bog lands and the older technologies we used to mine or to transform the land, but then that coexists with wind turbines and the hypermodernity of gas fields' (109). These contradictions in turn open into a diffuse relationship with an earlier West of Ireland novel: W.B. Yeats's *John Sherman*. Like *Solar Bones*, *John Sherman* routes

¹ 'Deatach' is a Hiberno-English word meaning smoke.

² Howe Peter Browne (1788-1845; second Marquess of Sligo) was governor general of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands during the period of the abolition of slavery. The community of Sligoville, Jamaica is named for him.

its social and political concerns via bodies of water. The lines that connect the two novels cross the century and move in multiple ways and in sketching a series of possible connections, I set questions of precedence and influence to one side and proceed in the spirit of the ‘offbeat temporality’ invoked by Paige Reynolds in her account of Irish modernist afterlives (4).

Yeats was twenty-two when he began work on *John Sherman* and its companion piece, *Dhoya*. He described the former as a fiction of ‘latter day Ireland’ intended to accompany the latter, ‘a short romance of ancient Ireland — somewhat over dreamy and florid but quite readable [*sic*] any way’ (Yeats Vol 12 ix). The legendary tale *Dhoya*, completed first, depicts an occult world in which a young mortal man grows to be a giant and falls in love with a fairy, a theme shared with ‘The Wanderings of Oisín’ on which Yeats was working at the same time (Yeats Vol 12 x xi). Encouraged by his father to write ‘a story with real people’, Yeats then began working on *John Sherman* in 1887 and by May 1888 told Katharine Tynan that ‘it goes on fairly well the style quite sane and the theme modern, more character than plot in it’ (Yeats Vol 12 xiii). He compared the novel to national tales by the Banim brothers and Gerald Griffin and to the poetry of William Allingham (Yeats Vol 12 xvii-xviii).

As R.F. Foster remarks, however, both *John Sherman* and *Dhoya* ‘lack artistic confidence’: ‘the author’s voice was still uncertain: ironic social and psychological observation alternates uneasily with romantic introspection’ (I, 68-69). Emer Nolan’s observation that Yeats’s imagined ‘fin-de-siècle Ireland as the site of a collision between ancient tradition and commercial civilisation’ (158) rings true for *John Sherman* but the novel draws only obliquely on currents of cultural decolonisation. Perhaps this is because Yeats’s desire to imagine the path towards a whole and renewed artistic life is always countered by

the inevitable experience of division between Ireland and Britain. The references are in part personal and Yeats reported to John O’Leary that ‘hatred of London’ was the book’s ‘motif’ (Yeats Vol 12 xxv).³ But the book’s treatment of the theme of an artistic life divided across the islands goes beyond autobiography and inscribes a set of conditions attendant upon Ireland’s colonial modernity. Forms of necessary but painful connection are expressed in the novel via the bodies of water that connect Sligo and London. As such, *John Sherman* prompts us to take further steps in the recalibration of the relationship between revivalism and modernism begun by Emer Nolan. With the Irish Revival now ‘regarded as a signal aspect, even one of the incubators, of modernism’ (MacDonald 56), we can see how *John Sherman* holds in balance a rural Irish landscape rendered via romantic aesthetics with the urban cityscapes of modernism, but also how it undoes this distinction via a closely focused and intensely realised account of the natural world and a particular focus on water. In contrast to a periodised account of Irish modernism that focuses on short-lived political and stylistic revolutions, the style, imagery and themes of *John Sherman* invite a consideration of issues such as longevity, resilience and sustainability.

The resonance of these issues for Yeats’s novel can be more fully grasped in relation to *Dhoya*, published alongside *John Sherman* by T. Fisher Unwin in a volume bearing the pseudonym ‘Ganconagh’. *Dhoya* immerses its readers in deep time: its fantastic plot is tied together via references to ancient Japanese art, the pyramids of Egypt and a legendary warrior from Germanic mythology. These disparate invocations of a deep past are knitted together to create what Yeats would later call a ‘phantasmagoria’: an obscure but powerful invocation of an ancient culture (Yeats, ‘Introduction’ V 204). Just as Dipesh Chakrabarty tells us that the Anthropocene ‘entails a constant conceptual traffic between Earth history and world history’,

³ For details of the novel’s autobiographical resonances, see Finneran ed xxv-xxvi.

so an immersion in deep time is recursively connected to Yeats's late nineteenth-century contemporary moment (6). The placing of the two fictions side by side — a fiction set in a slightly rendered present alongside a resonant mythic fable—expresses a version of 'ethical proximity between the most fleeting event in our present and planet-shaping effects that will play out over millenia' (Farrier 2). The setting of *Dhoya* is the Bay of Ballah, on the western shores of a mythological but recognisable Ireland. Just as the town of Ballah serves as a version of Sligo in *John Sherman*, the Bay of Ballah is a lightly disguised Sligo Bay.

John Sherman is an unusual experiment in fiction by a writer whose global reputation rests on his poetry. In classic *bildungsroman* style, the narrative closely tracks the intense experiences of its protagonist, a young man in search of artistic identity and personal fulfillment. The novel's opening establishes co-ordinates in time and space ('On the evening of the 9th of December, in the coffee-room of the Imperial Hotel, there was nobody but this guest') and the novel tracks its protagonist's journey in a realist fashion, moving from Ballah to London and back again.⁴ The narrative shapes itself to the emerging psychology of the protagonist but is not characterised by the kind of linguistic innovations we encounter in the best known Irish modernist *Künstlerroman*, *A Portrait of An Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Sherman's agonised sincerity stands in contrast to the delicate ironies of *Portrait*. Neither is *John Sherman* a naturalist fiction in classic late nineteenth-century style: the novel does offer a Zola-esque depiction of a wretched, doomed environment but ends with marriage and the cautious promise of a renewed society.⁵

⁴ Finneran describes a copy of *John Sherman* and *Dhoya* with an inscription from Yeats that reads 'all Sligo and Hammersmith'. (xxvi-xxvii).

⁵ The narrative arguably shows the influence of Émile Zola, whose essay on 'The Experimental Novel' was published in 1890 and whose observations on the value of authenticity over accuracy in prose style are quoted by Yeats in his 1902 essay on 'The Irish Dramatic Movement' (Yeats Vol 8 18, 239n).

Unlike *Solar Bones*, then, the modernism of *John Sherman* does not clearly reside in an identifiable stylistic signature. Rather, the novel experiments with forms of social life, sending its protagonist on a recognisable journey in search of professional and emotional fulfilment that is punctuated by periods of doubt and uncertainty. Just as Mike McCormack describes ‘the real experiment at the heart of *Solar Bones*’ as the challenge to tell a story ‘about a white middle-aged man who has no material want, who loves his wife, son, and daughter, and he lacks nothing’ (De Loughry 109) so *John Sherman* absorbs itself in the ordinary world of an idle young man who needs to find a profession. With *Solar Bones*, however, an intense focus on ordinary life and the ‘natural rhythms of light and weather and time’ (De Loughry 109) yielded a style and a syntax characterised as modernist. Similarly in *John Sherman*, the uncertainty of the protagonist in Yeats’s plot shapes a ‘narrative unfolding’ of conflict, overlaps and connections (Levine 20).⁶

John Sherman is possessed of a strange unsettled consciousness that slips away from everyday reality into the territory of dreams. The pictures that he sees have a vividness that disrupt the onward movement of the plot, practising what a ‘narrative unfolding’ of conflict, overlaps and connections (Levine 19). Sherman’s dreams are illuminated by a dazzling light that ‘flowed from the vague and refracting regions of hope and memory’, nearly but not quite extinguished by ‘the too glaring lustre of life itself’ (X). This attention to ‘life itself’ makes for a slow-paced narrative, gapped by pauses and *longeurs* that enact the drift of the plot. The two novels share a sceptical attitude to what Latour calls ‘the calendar or the flow that the moderns had constructed for us’ (75). With this resistance to modernity as progress comes an interest in forms of networks and connection that cut across the linear movement of the plot,

⁶ Making a case for a renewed attention to plot in the context of formal readings of social relationship, Caroline Levine discusses Bruno Latour’s observation that ‘fiction writers often do better than sociologists at capturing social relations because they are free to experiment ... Like Latour, I treat fictional narratives as productive thought experiments that allow us to imagine the subtle unfolding of multiple social forms’ (19).

often routed in both plots via water. Latour's imagery of modernity as tide is helpful here: 'There is no tide, long in rising, that would be flowing again today. There has never been such a tide. We can go on to other things – that is, return to the multiple entities that have always passed in a different way' (76). In *John Sherman*, the 'other things' of which Latour writes can be seen to flow through and past watery places, as the narrative feels its way towards a fuller domain of the social (taking in, for example, animal as well as human life). Neither fully realist, naturalist, or modernist, *John Sherman* stands apart from both old and new: a novel not of breaks but of strange continuities and flowing water.

Foster describes *John Sherman* as a 'novel [that] evokes a sense of place, and a passion for a homeland, which at certain key points conveys homesickness and alienation both powerfully and precisely' (Foster I 69). But *John Sherman* is not simply a book that contrasts Sligo and London. Rather it brings into view 'the salt-water networks of the nineteenth-century Anglophone world' (Mentz and Rojas X), part of a wider effort made by late nineteenth and early twentieth century 'grappled with the challenges of representing the geography of an island undergoing rapid and shocking change' (Parsons 2). John Sherman leaves his home town of Ballah to work as a clerk in his uncle's shipbuilding firm in London; he finally returns, breaking his London engagement in order to marry his childhood sweetheart, Mary Carton.

The Sligo shipbuilding context is informed by biography and family history but also links the novel to wider efforts within Irish modernism to register the effects of Atlantic modernity. Yeats's mother's family, the Pollexfens, were ship owners in Sligo while his father's family were associated with art and bohemia. Foster refers to the autobiographical 'Yeats / Pollexfen dichotomy' that informs the novel (Foster I, 111) and we see this when Sherman drifts from indecisive thoughts about art and life to an office job in London. There,

John Sherman works for his uncle Michael at the firm of Sherman and Saunders. A man who has regard only for 'his family and his ships', Michael Sherman is depicted as holding humans and boats in a strange, loveless form of affinity with one another:

His family were represented by his nephew and his nephew's mother. He did not feel much affection for them. He believed in his family — that was all. To remind him of the other goal of his thoughts hung round his private office pictures with such inscriptions as 'S.S. *Indus* at the Cape of Good Hope,' 'The barque *Mary* in the Mozambique Channel,' 'The barque *Livingstone* at Port Said,' and many more. Every rope was drawn accurately with a ruler, and here and there were added distant vessels sailing proudly by with all that indifference to perspective peculiar to the drawings of sailors. On every ship was the flag of the firm spread out to show the letters (23-24).

The pictures on Michael Sherman's wall represent shipping networks that span the globe, tracing the sinews of Britain's maritime empire, while the reference to the typical artistic style of sailors suggests marine art pursued in a utilitarian mode: drawings that glorify ships as possessions and advance the geographical imagination of empire. Where the plot might appear to divide John Sherman's undefined artistic vocation from his office work in London, then, the scene presented holds commerce, art and empire in close relationship.

These questions of artistic representation, scale and perspective are echoed throughout the novel. *John Sherman* opens with a highly self-conscious debate about artistic and individual identity, staged as an argument between two serious young men with differing outlooks. They meet 'in the west of Ireland, on the 9th December, in the town of Ballah, in the Imperial Hotel.' While the eponymous John Sherman hails from the town, a Protestant curate named William Howard finds himself 'in Ballah among the barbarians' and enjoys a pleasant sense of superiority over the inhabitants of 'this half-deserted town': 'Here

everybody lives in the eighteenth century—the squalid century! Well I am going tomorrow you know. Thank Heavens I am done with your grey streets and grey minds!’ (8). Yeats’s protagonist, John Sherman, has a friendly loathing for the resident curate, a cosmopolitan who has ‘read much, seen operas and plays, known religious experiences and written verse to a waterfall in Switzerland’ (7). This shallow admiration for Swiss scenery is expressed in contrast to Sherman’s deep knowledge of his own west of Ireland place. Howard in turn regards Sherman as a ‘mercenary’: a young man who, living only in a small town dominated by ‘facts’ fails to take nature for his ‘compass’ (9).

These debates about the natural world and its meanings are worked out in close proximity to water. The two men stand on a bridge that crosses the town’s river, debating their different approaches to the world. The two men cannot agree on their future plans but the river meanwhile makes its own meanings: ‘It bade him who loved stay still and dream, and gave flying feet to him who imagined’ (10).⁷ In conversation with Bruno Latour, Michel Serres suggests that we resist the familiar connection between the flow of river water and the movement of time in linear modernity, turning to the Seine as an example:

“*Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine ...*’ [Beneath the Mirabeau Bridge flows the Seine ...] — thus flows classical linear time. But Apollinaire, who had never navigated, at least on fresh water, hadn’t studied the Seine enough. He hadn’t noticed the counter-currents of the turbulences. Yes, time flows like the Seine, if one observes

⁷ T.R. Henn remembers Jack Yeats’s discussion of the way in which Sligo’s Garavogue river makes its brief journey from Lough Gill through Sligo town before discharging into the Atlantic:

It was Jack Yeats, the painter, who told me of an ancient piece of myth: that where a great mass of water meets the sea by way of a short river, a kind of magic is generated and spread upon the whole neighbourhood. (Henn 77)

it well. All the water that passes beneath the Mirabeau Bridge will not necessarily flow out into the English Channel; many little trickles turn back toward Charenton or upstream (Serres and Latour 58).

Following Serres and Latour, we can say that Yeats observes the river well: in *John Sherman*, ‘time flows in a turbulent and chaotic manner; it percolates’ (Serres and Latour 59).

Similarly, Mike McCormack has written of the narrative of *Solar Bones* as fluvial in highly particular ways, closely connected to the actual, observed movement of water: ‘it’s riverine in the later meandering stages of a river, when its meanders loop round on each other, but it is always heading to the sea. And there was going to be no full stop because I was interested in chasing a rhythm and seeing where the exercise would go. There are small little oases of clarity and then it loops off and it repeats’ (De Loughry 112).

Seen from boats, bridges and quays, Ballah is a place pervaded by water, flowing in many different directions. When the curate first leaves his hotel in *John Sherman* and walks to the bridge, past the fish market, the entire town seems water-logged, soggy with rain that promises well for John Sherman’s eel trapping: ‘The town was dripping, but the rain was almost over. It was the hour of ducks. Three or four had squeezed themselves under a gate, and were now splashing about in the gutter of the main street’ (6).

The conversation quoted above ends with Sherman turning from abstract talk of nature to the simple act of baiting his hooks, meaning that the narrative understanding of the creative process remains close to the natural world on which it relies for material. A near contemporary poem by Yeats, ‘The Song of Wandering Aengus’ (written in the summer of 1897) imagines fishing as a singular act animated by fire, mystery and light:

I went out to the hazel wood,

Because a fire was in my head,
 And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
 And hooked a berry to a thread;
 And when white moths were on the wing,
 And moth-like stars were flickering out,
 I dropped the berry in a stream
 And caught a little silver trout. (Yeats Vol 1 55 lines 1-8)

In *John Sherman*, however, the casting of lines affords a less dazzling experience and tends rather towards silence, doubt and abstraction. Yet fishing in the novel possesses something of the intimacy promised in ‘The Song of Wandering Aengus’:

‘You need some occupation peculiar to the place,’ said the other, baiting his hooks with worms out of the little porringer. ‘I catch eels. You should set some night-lines too. You bait them with worms in this way, and put them along the weeds at the edge of the river. In the morning you find an eel or two, if you have good fortune, turning round and round and making the weeds sway. I shall catch a great deal after this rain.’
 (8)

The association of fishing with a slow-paced, immersive and authentic relationship to place is also familiar from Yeats’s later great poem, ‘The Fisherman,’ published alongside ‘September 1913’ in the 1914 collection *Responsibilities*.⁸ Yet in *John Sherman*, the focus remains on the water itself rather than the qualities that it represents. While the curate stares

⁸ That poem was echoed in its turn by “Casualty”, Seamus Heaney’s elegy for his eel-fishing friend, Louis O’Neill, setting in motion a resonant metaphorical chain of connection.

intently at the water, spinning a web of connections from the water to himself — ‘Some meaning must it have’ he thinks — John Sherman is content to simply set his lines and wait for the eel to take the bait.

In *John Sherman*, the flow of the river expresses neither rupture or connection but rather realises a wider natural environment with its own agency, not yet exhausted by its deployment as metaphor. John Sherman’s absorption in the unpredictable movements of water under the bridge calls to mind Yeats’s famous image of a stone that troubles the ‘living stream’ of time in ‘Easter 1916’, itself an image that offers a striking instance of ‘the reciprocal relationship between life and nonlife’ (Farrier 17):

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream. (Yeats ‘Easter 1916’ lines 41-44)

Critics often read the obdurate stone in relation to the troubled water, with the latter representing the unrest of time and history. Those lines from ‘Easter 1916’ however allow the stone its own magical agency in its encounter with water. Rather than expressing an ‘ephemeral understanding of the ‘flux and reflux to nature's changes: forward or backward’ (Vendler 21), it is possible to see Yeats’s ‘living stream’ as a material manifestation of multiple movements across time: ‘a reprise, repetition or revisiting of a past that has never truly disappeared’ (Latour 1993 74). These overlapping and criss-crossing temporal vectors are embodied in *John Sherman* by the restless movements of its protagonist, a man described by his mother as ‘a rolling stone’ (21).

Layered among these times is Yeats's powerful vision of a mythic past, already at work in this early experiment in prose fiction. Eve Patten compares the opening scenes of *John Sherman* to the opening of *A Vision*, with Sherman and Howard prefiguring the dialogue between Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes, or Will and Mask (Patten 102). On first glance, the simple plot of *John Sherman* may seem far from the complex mathematical system, historical fantasies and occult imagery of *A Vision*. Yet if *A Vision* is a poem in which 'the bewildering present is recast as a necessary phase of transition' (Allen 210, 211), then *John Sherman* too works to transform present uncertainties into the stuff of epochal change.

In Patten's account of the connections between the two texts, 'If we regard Sherman as primary man, then it follows that his movement against himself will be destructive, and the stupor into which he falls in London is made intelligible by *A Vision*' (102). Primary man in *A Vision* is associated with the dominance of 'individuality and Creative mind' and *John Sherman* as a whole prefigures the 'system of contraries' mapped out in *A Vision* (Patten 103). In Patten's reading, 'there are enough similarities between the ideas in each to allow one to provide a gloss upon the other' (103) the novel 'contains the essences of division and quarrel, and of the contemplative spirit that can master them' (103), suggesting that an sternly modernist concern with abstract symbol lies beneath the texture of Yeats's effort at realism. The complexity of the relationship between plot and symbol can be glimpsed by further reference to *A Vision*, in particular the section entitled 'Gates of Pluto', where Yeats turns to childhood memories of fishing in Sligo in order to speculate on the relationship between lived experience and abstraction:

Much of this book is abstract, because it has not yet been lived, for no man can dip into life more than a moiety of any system. When a child, I went out with herring

fishers one dark night, and the dropping of their nets into the luminous sea and the drawing of them up has remained with me as a dominant image. Have I found a good net for a herring fisher? (Yeats, Vol 13 206)

Though Ballah can seem at times like ‘a formless dreamscape’ (Patten 104), it is nonetheless associated with highly particular and placed activities. Both fishing and gardening in the novel express a form of placed relationship to time: a ‘deep and complex intimacy’ expressed as ‘an uncanny coincidence of ancient resources, rapid change, and long consequence’ (Farrier 16). Howard accuses Sherman of rotting in Ballah and ‘vegetating’ there, using a word that ties Yeats’s protagonist to the activity of gardening (in *Solar Bones*, Marcus ‘potters’) (4). As Patten argues, ‘Sherman’s irrepressible instincts to “garden” his land, both in Ballah and in London, connect him with this primary and organic sensibility, elaborated by Herbert Spencer, and William Howard’s accusation that he is “vegetating” becomes a compliment’ (Patten 99). John Yeats had drawn on Spencer’s *Education* (1861) when considering his son’s future and its influence is felt in the novel, which Patten suggests should be read as a defence of an ‘authentic imaginative evolution’ founded in idle dreaming (Patten 104).

In Ballah, we encounter John Sherman checking his tulip shoots, forcing sea-kale, and sorting seeds; later, in London, he tackles dock leaves, dandelions and ‘patches of untimely grass’ (34). Sherman’s garden, together with his book and a letter from Mary Carton, represent ‘the three symbols of his life, summing up as they did his love of out-of-door doings, his meditations, his anxieties’ (13):

Every morning he worked in that garden among the sights and sounds of nature. Month by month he planted and hoed and dug there. In the middle he had set a hedge that divided the garden in two. Above the hedge were flowers; below it, vegetables. At the furthest end from the house, lapping broken masonry full of wallflowers, the river said, month after month to all upon its banks, 'Hush!' (13)

The agency attributed to the plashing, speaking river shapes Sherman's sense of Ballah as a place apart. Accused by the curate of rotting in this provincial west of Ireland town, Sherman replies:

No, I am seeing the world. In your big towns a man finds his minority and knows nothing outside its border. He knows only the people like himself. But here one chats with the whole world in a day's walk, for every man one meets is a class. The knowledge I am picking up may be useful to me when I enter the great cities and their ignorance. (9)

Sherman's sense that 'every man one meets is a class' in the West of Ireland might be compared to a naturalist's interest in the specimen as representative of the wider ecosystem of which individuals form a part. The natural and social worlds are interconnected as the novel seems to reject a modernity that depends on an artificial separation of 'the human multitudes and the nonhuman environment' (Latour 1993 76) These observations of humans as class and type further resonate with John Millington Synge's West of Ireland observations. Synge notes 'the absence of any division of labour' on the Aran Islands and 'the correspondingly wide development of each individual, whose varied knowledge and skill necessitates a considerably activity of mind' (156-157). In Yeats's novel, just such a wide

and varied knowledge is brought to bear on a world made in miniature, bordered by the river which flows under the bridge on which the two men have their conversation.

The younger Yeats was an avid reader of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace. He recalls in *Autobiographies* that his ‘favourite book’ as a boy was ‘a small green-covered book given to my father by a Dublin man of science; it gave an account of the strange sea creatures the man of science had discovered among the rocks at Howth or dredged out of Dublin Bay’ (Yeats, *Collected Works* III 59). Methods drawn from natural history can be seen to inform the narrative of *John Sherman*, which often seems to hold Sherman’s strange creaturely consciousness up for readerly inspection. Sherman is himself associated with inductive methods inseparable from close observation of nature. When he first visits Mary Carton’s schoolhouse in Ballah (following the mysterious guidance offered by a beetle in his garden), the two young people sit watching a mouse carrying away a crumb. Sherman’s time as a shipping clerk in London is largely spent absorbed in the activity of inspecting the movement of fourteen flies on the ceiling of his office. Reflecting on his own passage at a crucial point in his London time Sherman decides that ‘I am not going forward; I am at present trying to go sideways like the crabs’ (61). *Solar Bones* too, draws on metaphors from marine life in order to imagine the uncanny location of its narrative voice: the dead Marcus describes a compulsion ‘to keep moving, drifting from room to room like one of those sea creatures who cannot stay still for fear they may sink and drown’ (264). In both examples, metaphors drawn from marine life support and sustain unconventional forms of human identity.

The maritime aspect of the book is most notable in its depiction of John Sherman’s travels on the Irish Sea. Mother and son cross to Liverpool on a ‘cattle boat’ in order to save money and share a rough passage over the ‘many miles of uneasy water’ that separate London from Ballah (69). Sherman’s mother suffers below while he is ‘pretty happy on

deck', listening to squealing pigs and sitting in close proximity to an old woman and the geese that she brings to market in Liverpool every month. Sherman's own state of suffering is realised in close relation to the human and nonhuman environment that surround him. He writes a letter describing his 'desolation' as he watches puffins sleeping on the waves: 'each one of them had its head tucked in a slightly different way. "That is because their characters are different", he thought.' (22) Puffins are different from humans but their difference from one another prompts an awareness of their connection to the human world. Yeats's strangely compelling account of the puffins can be read in terms of Patricia Yaeger's account of ocean as 'assemblage': 'it is now our task to see it as an assemblage, to denaturalise entities we have come to call "Earth" and "Sea", human and animal' (Yaeger 181). If, as Yaeger suggests, 'the quasi-ocean is the speaking ocean, and our task is to look for the turbulence that occurs when humans and nonhumans try to interact or speak,' then the puffins, along with the corks that Sherman sees floating by in the water, express forms of potential interconnection (Yaeger 182).

Yeats's novel helps us to develop an approach that grasps the shaping power of the sea in ways that cross and connect human and non-human alongside environmental and cultural histories. In London, Sherman courts but finally resigns the affection of a young woman, Margaret Leland, who eventually marries the self-absorbed curate, Howard. Midway through the novel, John Sherman makes his first journey home, arriving in Ballah by rail, having connected from Euston via Holyhead and Dublin. On this occasion he tells his childhood friend Mary Carton that he is to be married and returns to London once more by rail, travelling from Holyhead to London and experiencing en route 'one of those dangerous moments when the sense of personal identity is shaken, when one's past and present seem about to dissolve partnership' (47). Despite the threatened severance of the self across time, however, water once more is the medium of a cloudy form of connection: 'The rain beat on

the window of the carriage. He began to listen; thought and memory became a blank; his mind was full of the sound of rain-drops' (47).

Remaining dissatisfied in London, Sherman returns to Ballah once more. This time he proposes to Mary and is first rejected, then accepted. On this second and final return to his homeplace, Sherman travels again on the S.S. Lavinia; this time on a boat with 'no cattle, but many passengers' (67). On board ship, Sherman engages in close observation of his fellow passengers: restive cattle dealers who 'lean over the taffrail, smoking', a consumptive clerk from Liverpool, a nervous governess with her luggage heaped around her (67). He watches gannets striking the water and porpoises that gleam in the sun. Sherman subjects these human and nonhuman creatures to his scrutiny, just as when on the first journey east he had contemplated the characters of puffins sleeping on the waves. Meanwhile the narrative describes the boat's return journey via the north-western islands of Tory and Rathlin with some care, noting how the Donegal cliffs come into view.⁹ Sherman looks from the sea to the ship, and the vessel itself acquires an uncanny life: 'this thing, crawling slowly along the sea' (68).

Just as the question of where and how to live are closely connected with Sherman's journeys on the Irish sea, so the journey towards personal and artistic fulfillment in the novel is often realised in terms of uncertain boundaries between water and land. The exchange between river and sea is replicated and echoed in the novel's London scenes. In the city, Sherman follows pathways along the edge of the Thames and thinks of Sligo, like London a settlement shaped by an estuarine relationship between river and sea. In one remarkable prose sequence, *John Sherman* revisits and rewrites Yeats's poem of 1888, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree':

⁹ *The Speckled Bird*, an unpublished autobiographical prose fiction by Yeats that exists in outlines and variant versions written by Yeats between 1896 to 1902, began when the publisher A.H. Bullen gave the writer advance royalties of £2 a week and some travel expenses for him to write a novel about Tory Island.

Delayed by a crush in the Strand, he heard a faint trickling of water near by; it came from a shop window where a little water-jet balanced a wooden ball upon its point. The sound suggested a cataract with a long Gaelic name, that leaped crying into the Gate of the Winds at Ballah. Wandering among these memories a footstep went to and fro continually and the figure of Mary Carton moved among them like a phantom. He was set dreaming a whole day by walking down one Sunday morning to the border of the Thames — a few hundred yards from his house — and looking at the osier-covered Chiswick eyot. It made him remember an old day-dream of his. The source of the river that passed his garden at home was a certain wood-bordered and islanded lake, whither in childhood he had often gone blackberry-gathering. At the further end was a little islet called Inniscrewin. Its rocky centre, covered with many bushes, rose some forty feet above the lake. Often when life and its difficulties seemed to him like the lessons of some elder boy given to a younger by mistake, it had seemed good to dream of going away to that islet and building a wooden hut there and burning a few years out, rowing to and fro, fishing, or lying on the island slopes by day, and listening at night to the ripple of the water and the quivering of the bushes — full always of unknown creatures — and going out at morning to see the island's edge marked by the feet of birds (56-57).

The Chiswick eyot (the latter an Old English term for an islet) is a small, narrow, uninhabited island in the River Thames. Its covering of osier, a type of willow used to weave baskets, suggests the wattles of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', while the wooden hut in which the hero might live yet more clearly echoes Yeats's famous poem. Rather than an imagined journey from 'the pavements grey' (Yeats Vol 1 35 line 11) of London to a lonely island in

Lough Gill, however, the transition undertaken by *John Sherman* is from one abandoned waterway to another. With London ‘a reef’ (41) upon which John Sherman is ‘cast away’, the oceanic identity of Britain’s imperial capital comes into view. When Mary finally accepts him it is as fellow castaway: she says ‘We have been shipwrecked. Our goods have been cast into the sea’ (78).

Both the evocation of homeland beside a Sligo river and of homesickness at the edge of the Atlantic involve an ethical relationship to place in its fullest sense: an environment that has emerged over time, and where ‘the whole world’ includes nonhuman as well as human others. To phrase these issues in more contemporary terms would be to consider with Kate Rigby ‘the kinds of stories that we tell about ourselves and our relations with one another, as well as our nonhuman others and our volatile environment’ (X).

Lonely in London, John Sherman finds himself considering his own artistic past, in particular the childhood artworks preserved by his fond mother. As he ponders practical questions of artistic education, John Sherman’s mind turns to home and to the memory of the cruelty of a peasant child towards a dog. Revisiting the earlier description of the problems of perspective affecting the pictures of ships in Michael Sherman’s office, the prose sequence is beautifully arranged, tracking a delicate set of connections between the protagonist’s childhood, his remembered absorption in the practicalities of drawing and the memories of animal abuse. Natural and social worlds are brought into a kind of charged, painful connection:

Round the walls were one or two drawings, done by him at school. His mother had got them framed. His eyes were fixed on a drawing of a stream and some astonishing cows.

A few days ago he had found an old sketch book for children among some forgotten papers, which taught how to draw a horse by making three ovals for the basis of his body, one lying down in the middle, two standing up at each end for flank and chest, and how to draw a cow by basing its body on a square. He kept trying to fit squares into the cows. He was half inclined to take them out of their frames and retouch on this new principle. Then he began somehow to remember the child with the swollen face who threw a stone at the dog the day he decided to leave home (49).

Harriet Ritvo's account of depictions of animal cruelty and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century books aimed at children helps us to see this 'old sketch book' as part of a wider culture of sentimental improvement. Such books were able not only to open up wider questions of animal cruelty but also to express a 'complex relationship between sympathetic concern for animals and manipulation of people', addressing issues such as class and empire (Ritvo 131). For John Sherman, the problem of how to represent animals is connected to the issue of how to treat them: together, these connected forms of benevolent thought help to bolster the ethically informed relationship to place that culminates in a return to Ballah and marriage to Mary Carton.

The questions raised in *John Sherman* — issues of epistemological, ontological and artistic identity — are connected to forms of ethical living as imagined in terms borrowed from the natural world and suggestive of a responsibility for its future grounded in locality. Like *Solar Bones*, the novel might be read as practising the kind of 'anthropocene poetics' that can, in David Farrier's terms, 'help frame the ground we stand on as we consider which way to turn' (128). The novel's conclusion stays resolutely close to the terrain on which the narrative opens and closes, retaining its steadfast commitment to the material conditions of modern life on streets, quays, squares, boats and trains. When Mary Carton finally accepts

Sherman it is following an anxious walk along the ‘gritty and barren roads’ of home. These concluding scenes are at once emotionally intense and unstable in tone — Foster refers to ‘[t]he book’s hasty but striking finale’ (I 68) —with the narrative itself mirroring Sherman’s impassioned but uncertain ascent of Knocknarea.

I have been arguing that *John Sherman* imagines a connected world permeated by water, as if in defiance of a critical orthodoxy that juxtaposes a romanticised Irish natural landscape with urban modernity. Its invocation of a watery, provincial modernity echoes with and resonates in other writing by Yeats, most notably ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’, a poem that as Edna Longley argues ‘laid down an influential template for intra-archipelagic poetic travel; that is, for poems shaped by migration, by nostalgia for home, by the problematics of that word: their trajectory mainly (not always) from city to country or east to west’ (150). In her discussion of how poetry before the later twentieth century was shaped by ‘the archipelagic heyday of boat and train’, Longley connects ‘The Lake Isle’ with ‘Under Saturn’, a poem that calls up Yeats’s astrological interests and provides a further point of connection to *John Sherman*. In 1907, introducing a new edition of *John Sherman*, Yeats described himself as a ‘young man ... born when the Water-Carrier was on the horizon, at pains to overcome Saturn in Saturn’s hour’. The reference is to Aquarius, Yeats’s rising sign. ‘Saturn’s hour’ refers to the planet’s association with the god Chronos, ‘the timekeeper who makes us work hard and face up to our responsibilities’ and also to the transit of Saturn in 1888 (Yeats Vol 12 95n).¹⁰ Travel between and across the islands and journeys taken via boat and train thus connect with forms of mythic transport made under the sign of water.

¹⁰ In 1907 Yeats wrote of *John Sherman and Dhoya*; ‘I have read them for the first time in many years. They have come to interest me very deeply; for I am something of an astrologer, and can see in them a young man — was I twenty three? and we Irish ripen slowly — born when the Water-Carrier was on the horizon, at pains to overcome Saturn in Saturn’s hour, just as I can see in much that follows his struggle with the still all-too-unconquered Moon, and at last, I think, the summons of the prouder Sun.’ (Yeats Vol 12 95n)

Written in November 1919, the final lines of ‘Under Saturn’ recalls a journey Yeats took from London to Sligo in September 1918, with his pregnant wife, George Hyde-Lees:

“You heard that labouring man who had served my people.

He said

Upon the open road, near to the Sligo quay -

No, no, not said, but cried it out – ‘You have come again,

And surely after twenty years it was time to come.’

I am thinking of a child's vow sworn in vain

Never to leave that valley his fathers called their home. (Yeats Vol 1 182 lines 11-17)

In Longley’s reading, ‘Under Saturn’ is an archipelagic poem that ‘rewrites’ the sense of loss expressed in ‘Lake Isle’ as a phenomenon at once more diffuse and more placed than in the earlier poem. Equally, it can be said to reimagine the archipelagic travels of *John Sherman*, a novel ends in a homecoming that is also imagined as a shipwreck.

The ‘open road, near to the Sligo quay’ marks not only a memory of place and family but also Yeats’s own travels: ‘For years he had physically shuttled between the actual islands, between London lodgings, Dublin and Coole Park’ (Longley 150). When *John Sherman* reaches for forms of mythic unity that can shore up the protagonists’ disintegrating sense of self, the search is not presented as a private one, but rather as a dilemma shared with children, insects and animals; experienced on boats, trains, quays, squares and roads. As with *Solar Bones*, geography mutates through and against infrastructure, as journeys unfold along shipping routes, roads and railways. *John Sherman* asks readers pay attention to the kinds of public systems that tend to escape attention, to ‘drop off the radar because they seem to constitute a minimum threshold, an earth-bound zone in which the large irresolutions of

politics can for once be ignored and decisions safely left to the technocrats' (Robbins 31). An interest in the 'large irresolutions of politics' as expressed by infrastructure reconnects Yeats's novel to *Solar Bones*, which not only finds 'ways to denaturalise and revalue our taken-for-granted conveniences' but also suggests 'love and care as a possibility, a prospect' for public utilities (Robbins 31, 28). McCormack's narrative locates us 'on the edge of this known world with Sheeffry and Mweelrea to the south and the open expanse of Clew Bay to the north' (8). It is a place made of 'mountains, rivers and lakes' that have been here since 'the beginning of time' but also hewed from water pipes, engineering schemes and local building projects. The river itself tells the story of these connections: the Bunowen 'flows north to the sea, carving out that floodplain to which all roads, primary and secondary, following the contours of the landscape, make their way and in the middle of which stands the village of Louisburgh' (9); 'our little village here on the Western Seaboard' (27).

In the *New York Times* review of *Solar Bones*, Martin Riker writes: 'Where modernism took a world that appeared to be whole and showed it to be broken, "Solar Bones" takes a world that can't stop talking about how broken it is, and suggests it might possibly be whole'. In *John Sherman* too, the arc that connect different aspects of human and non-human life is traced in minute, agonising detail. Michael Wood has described Yeats's poetics as practising a kind of deceptive modernism, which, rather than offering 'a faithful reflection of an altered or broken world' via fragmented forms, develops instead a mode that, 'to be difficult in its own way, often hides the breakage in simplicity or song' (176) In *John Sherman*, a pained reach for wholeness and completion is stretched over the skin of a fragmented world. Faithful to the flow of water between and across places that are normally understood as separated by time, culture and politics, the novel channels watery networks, passages and energies to make its own difficult connections.

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