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## Counting on the Past: Yeats and Irish Romanticism

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In Edward St Aubyn's 2011 novel, *At Last*, the narrator Nicholas hears W.B. Yeats's poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" read aloud at his mother's funeral service:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
 And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;  
 Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,  
 And live alone in the bee-loud glade. (qtd. 132)

Read in church "in a loud, lilting whisper" (132) and shorn of the lines about "the pavements grey" (Yeats, "Lake Isle" 11) of an implied London, the poem loses much of its location in time and place and behaves rather as a loosely evocative depiction of a romantic otherworld. The framing of the lines within St Aubyn's novel is a good example of the tendency for Yeats's evocative sounds to triumph over the meanings generated via reference to particular places. As the poem loses its hold on a specific world, so its romantic resonances grow: "Within the poem, the name Innisfree, which is Irish for Heather Island, is transformed into a pun rather than a place, a pun that smacks of freedom (Innis—free), including the freedom of metre that Yeats permits himself for the first time in this poem" (Ellmann 569).

It is not only Nicholas in the novel who thinks that "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is a romantic poem: critical responses often turn to the term and it is commonplace to remark upon the influence of William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley on Yeats's early writing. But what does "romantic" mean in relation to Ireland and how can the literature we now understand in terms of a specifically Irish romanticism be linked to Yeats's

writing? Patrick Crotty argues that that for Yeats, Ireland was “the site of a species of optimism that had been unavailable to poets on the neighbouring island since the high tide of Romanticism almost a century earlier” (55). Rather than reading Yeats in terms of the renewal of English romanticism, however, or as a poet who joined “Irish patriotism” to “Shelleyan revolt” (Crotty 54), I approach him as writer in rich imaginative dialogue with a specifically Irish romanticism. Admittedly, the landscape of Irish romanticism is not yet fully charted and, ironically, Yeats’s own career makes it difficult to achieve perspective on that terrain: “One result of Yeats’s spectacular imposition upon events and people around him and after him is that what came before tends to take second place, or to be taken for granted” (Foster xiii). Yeats’s early poetry is often described in terms of a late romanticism, while its status at the outset of such an exceptional arc of creative attainment has helped to obscure the achievements of the Irish writers who preceded him. If however we approach “Yeats as an inheritor of a nineteenth-century tradition—or rather a complex of traditions—rather than simply as a creator of literary modernism in the twentieth century” (Foster xv), then his roots in a literary culture that is both romantic and Irish become more apparent.

Even as “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” casts off its anchors in time and space within St Aubyn’s novel, it is reattached to an Irish context. Nicholas associates the poem with his dead mother’s fondness for an exploitative new-age guru named Seamus, who, with his friends at the Dublin Women’s Drum Healing Circle, have persuaded Nicholas’s mother to leave a considerable fortune and a house in Provence to a Foundation that peddles cod Celtic mysticism. The disinherited Nicholas, following a bitter and skeptical

line of thought, conducts a kind of rudimentary act of internal literary criticism on the poem, focusing especially on Yeats's use of the number nine:

Whereas it was sophisticated enough to order nine oysters, thought Nicholas, there was something utterly absurd about nine bean rows. Oysters naturally came in dozens and half-dozens—for all he knew they grew on the sea-bed in dozens and half-dozens—and so there was something understandably elegant in ordering nine of them. Beans, on the other hand, came in vague fields and profuse heaps, making the prissy precision of nine ridiculous. At the very least it conjured up a dissonant vision of an urban allotment. (132-33)

The word “nine” is probably more important in terms of sound rather than syntactical sense: re-echoed within “hive,” “nine” serves to carry forward the sense of restless movement so central to Yeats's poem. Yet Nicholas's narrative, expressive of an idiosyncratic and aristocratic grasp of nature, is a compelling one. The number nine is artificial, but in the wrong way: it speaks of dull obedience to mundane acts of enumeration, where the poem might instead have expressed a haughty disdain of conventional numbering systems.

The fact that the number question arises here in the specific context of the Irish shaman Seamus and a version of Celtic spirituality that has been recycled for the needs of modern commerce is significant. “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” not only belongs to Yeats's Celtic revivalist period, but has come to stand in for Romanticism itself. Nicholas's internal monologue stages a sequence whereby the poem, disconnected from its context, becomes available for a loosely romantic idea of place outside time; as such, however, it

becomes newly connected with a brand of Celticism associated with modern Ireland. Nicholas uses numbers to resist the atmosphere of romantic Celtic mysticism. His observations express important oppositional forces within Yeats's writing, ideas that the later poetry would hammer into unity. In particular, Nicholas notices the role and function of numbers in relation to the complexity of lived experience and the passage of time. At the same time, the poem returns us to a more particular sense of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature and its relationship to questions of enumeration. Nicholas's observations seem to express characteristically romantic opposition between dry facts of enumeration (nine bean rows) and a more vital and organic vision of nature as "vague" and "profuse": the very antithesis of numbered order, as in William Wordsworth's famous vision in "I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud" of "a crowd, /A host, of golden daffodils" (2: 216-17, ll. 3-4).

What, after all, is the appropriate unit for enumerating bean rows; should plants be counted at all? These are questions that are central to the cultural history of British and Irish romanticism, which stages a central conflict between organic and mechanistic ways of thinking. In this essay, I explore these ideas in relation to Yeats and suggest that counting numbers is associated with a kind of vitality; a vitality whose particular promise resides in the possibility of a living connection with the past.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I consider in detail "the discursive cable" that connects romance, romanticism and revivalism in Yeats's work (Howes and Valente 2).<sup>2</sup> Rather than argue that "Irish romanticism needs to be disentangled from Yeats and relocated in the earlier nineteenth century" (Vance 38), I consider the ties that bind Yeats to an Irish romanticism that he himself helped to shape. Because "W. B. Yeats summoned the term 'romantic' in his poetry for two of his most

famous proclamations,” I focus on the pair of poems in which Yeats declares a relationship to romanticism: “September 1913” and “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” (Bornstein 19). Both of these poetic proclamations involve numbers; both also have dates that invite calendrical calculation but fail to deliver grand historical resonance. These dates cross and repeat one other with a difference—1913 / 1931—and allow us to think about the ways in which Yeats measured and enumerated his own literary inheritance.

### **“the whole world in a day’s walk”: Place and time in Irish Romanticism**

Yeats’s sense of time and place affects his relationship to the literary culture that precedes him. Often understood as someone who overlooked recent history in order to imagine a pre-modern Ireland that could support and sustain his vision of a brilliant future, Yeats has also been read as a “reviser of Romanticism,” a poet who reimagined romanticism for Ireland and whose books “fastened it to a national landscape” (Bornstein 27). But this is still to ignore the specific context of Irish romanticism and its particular meanings for Yeats. In directing our attention to what Yeats made of the past, I pay particular attention to the “fertile seedbed of nineteenth-century Irish writing” (Foster xiv). It has been often observed that the young Yeats looked for precursors as he sought to “create a literary pedigree for himself” (Foster 132). This move to the past was “grounded in Romanticism,” a romanticism that is most often associated with the exemplars of P.B. Shelley and Blake (Campbell 202). More than a “project to de-anglicize English Romanticism” (Bornstein 28), however, Yeats’s writing “maintained a consistent look backwards to precursors closer to home” (Campbell 203). Yeats himself

expressed this desire to locate a specifically Irish romanticism via his excitement at first reading “the Irish poets who had written in English.” There was a fascination as much to do with place as with poetry, as Yeats records in his comments on Jeremiah Joseph Callanan’s early nineteenth-century poem, “The Recluse of Inchydoney,” set on the rugged Cork coastline: “and yet I who had never wanted to see the houses where Keats or Shelley lived would ask what sort of place Inchydoney was, because Callanan had named after it a bad poem in the manner of Childe Harold” (Yeats, *Reveries* 104). Disappointed in Callanan’s style, Yeats still finds inspiration in the idea of a poet “who went to West Cork to try to realize his life-image” (Welch 18).

W. B. Yeats’s only published novel, *John Sherman* (1891), concerns just such a search for identity, initially expressed via a very deliberate debate about the romance of a West of Ireland locality. The novel opens “in the west of Ireland, on the 9th December, in the town of Ballah, in the Imperial Hotel.” A visiting 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). Howard’s views are challenged by Yeats’s protagonist, the young John Sherman, who, accused by the curate of “vegetating” in this provincial west of Ireland town, 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)

Howard is a self-identified cosmopolitan, an Anglican curate who has “read much, seen operas and plays, known religious experiences and written verse to a waterfall in Switzerland” (7). He regards Sherman as a “mercenary” young man who, living only in a small town dominated by “facts,” fails to take nature for his “compass” (9). The novel teases out a distinction between the Englishman Howard’s shallow admiration for Swiss waterfalls versus Sherman’s deep knowledge of his own West of Ireland place: their conversation ends with Sherman turning from talk of nature to the act of baiting his hooks. When John Sherman introduces the act of fishing, it is in relationship to his home town:

“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 familiar from Yeats’s later great poem, “The Fisherman,” published alongside “September 1913” in the 1914 collection *Responsibilities*. A century earlier, Thomas Moore’s poem “Let Erin Remember the Days of Old” also invokes the figure of the fisherman in relationship to place and past:

On Lough Neagh’s bank, as the fisherman strays,



When the clear, cold eve's declining,  
 He sees the round towers of other days  
 In the wave beneath him, shining.

George Bernard Shaw disliked Moore's lines for their problematically romantic politics and wrote a memorable parody: "Let the fisherman who strays on Lough Neagh's bank when the clear cold eve's declining be thrown into it. And then Ireland will have a chance at last" (8).

John Sherman's description of meeting "the whole world in a day's walk," and the conversation from which it emerges, resonate deeply within the literature of Irish romanticism. Whether explicitly stated or not, Irish writing of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century serves as a retort to the linking of Ireland to barbarity and savagery, an association common since the early modern period. Furthermore, the careful and precise depiction of small, even squalid places, is a hallmark of Irish novels before the Famine: Yeats himself said of *John Sherman* that it "was as much an Irish novel as anything by Banim or Griffen," suggesting a line of affiliation with earlier romantic prose (Yeats, *John Sherman* xviii). Meanwhile Irish romantic poetry is full of effects such as the ones Yeats casually conjures up here. When his protagonist, fishing, looks into the water, the language might once more be that of Thomas Moore: "Sherman paused for a moment as he repassed the bridge and looked at the water, on which now a new-risen and crescent moon was shining dimly" (10). The same river can be heard in the narrative, telling Howard, the Protestant curate, to go and Sherman to stay, as if catching the echoes of a debate that has sounded throughout Irish writing since Jonathan Swift.<sup>3</sup>

Yeats's relationship to romanticism is rich in acts of spatial as well as temporal displacement. Ballah in the novel is a disguised Sligo, with a recognizable topography. The river in which Sherman fishes runs arises in a lough with an island called Inniscrewin, the name of which Yeats changed in his *Collected Works* to Innisfree (Yeats, *John Sherman* xxviii). As George Bornstein puts it, "[i]n probing Yeats's relation to Romanticism, we should always ask when we mean; the multiple and shifting nature of those relationships demands a diachronic rather than a synchronic mapping" (21). But we should also ask where: Yeats's conscious interrogation of the Irish literary and cultural tradition that preceded him involved "a time of deliberate self-education in the neglected literary texts of the early years of the Union," a period during which Yeats could be found in the British Museum and later the National Library of Ireland "prospecting through back numbers of the Irish periodicals of the early nineteenth century, and persuading friends to make transcriptions out of, for instance, the DUM [*Dublin University Magazine*]" (Foster 133). Her wrote *John Sherman* as part of a "grounding in nineteenth-century Romantic history and fiction, folklore collections, fairylore, Young Ireland rhetoric (supplied from [John] O'Leary's library), Swedenborgian mysticism, the inheritance of a haunted history, and translated legends and sagas" (Foster 133).

Yeats's activities in measuring, anthologizing and enumerating the literary tradition that had preceded him took place in the context of late nineteenth-century Dublin and London and organisations such as the Contemporary Club, the Irish Literary Society and Young Ireland reading societies. These collective efforts to revitalize the idea of a national literature were not always peaceful or unified, as in the early 1890s debate over the contents of a new Library of Ireland where Yeats debated fiercely with the (now

old) Young Irelander Charles Gavan Duffy. Yeats's efforts in "the construction of canons and taxonomies and the creation of anthologies and lists" took inspiration from such earlier efforts as James Clarence Mangan's *Poets and Poetry of Munster* (Foster 155).

The result was a remarkable outpouring of London-published books, listed here:

1888 *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*

1888 *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*

1889 *Stories from Carleton*

1891 *Representative Irish Tales*

1893 *The Celtic Twilight*

1893 (with Edwin Ellis) *Blake's Writing, Poetic, Symbolical and Critical*

1895 *A Book of Irish Verse*

In 1895 Yeats deliberately started a controversy about which were the "Best Irish Books" when he published his own list of 30 best Irish books in the *Daily Express*, 27 February 1895. The list included "books of imagination or books that seem to me necessary to the understanding of the imagination of Ireland, that may please myself and the general reader. By this means I may have got nearer to what the next century will care for than had I enumerated substantial volumes 'that no gentleman's library should be without.'" Despite this reservation, Yeats continued to enumerate volumes and later updated the list to include additional titles in an article for the *Bookman* in October of the same year.

Here we might recall St Aubyn's Nicholas and his reservations about the counting of the nine bean rows. Is there something un-Romantic in this arrangement and systemizing of the literary past? A critical consideration of the cultural form of the list helps to contextualize Yeats's ordering and arrangement of the literary past. Lists might

be thought of as a romantic genre: “infinitely extendable, without boundaries and without any definite criteria for selection beyond an epochal intuition,” as John Frow puts it (28). Rather than expressing “a rigorous practice of exemplification,” lists and anthologies are “characterised by arbitrariness and eclecticism” (Frow 27). Yeats not only anthologized and enumerated his predecessors, then, but also via his “epochal intuition” created a kind of textual matrix within which the past might come to life. These are contradictions that belong to romanticism itself, as I will now go on to discuss.

### **“How many may you be?”: Romantic Counting**

We find a compelling instance of the Romantic argument over numbers in William Wordsworth’s poem “We Are Seven,” in which counting is imagined as the antithesis of the lived attachment to place and tradition. Wordsworth’s poem is staged as a dialogue between a “little cottage girl” and an older man travelling in North Wales, who asks her a seemingly innocent question about the number of people in her family: “Sisters and brothers, little maid, / “How many may you be?” The girl’s answer unnerves the man:

“Sisters and brothers, little Maid,”

How many may you be?”

“How many? seven in all,” she said,

And wondering looked at me.

“And where are they? I pray you tell.”

She answered, “Seven are we;

And two of us at Conway dwell,

And two are gone to sea.” (1: 236-37, ll. 13-20)

The man queries the girl’s assertion that she is one of seven children—for him the fact that two are dead and buried in the church yard in Conway means that she belongs to a family of five. The remainder of the poem stages a dialogue of incommensurable belief systems, as the man insists that the girl is one of a family of five and she keeps up the insistent refrain “We are seven.”

The questioner can be read as a representative of early nineteenth-century political economy and the views associated with Thomas Malthus. Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population* was published in 1798 and in revised form in 1803. The forms of quantification associated with Malthus and others represents a wrong done to these lived realities, as the strong lines of traditional culture are bent and twisted to fit artificial shapes of the census, table and graph. Recent critics have however begun to dismantle distinctions between poetry and political economy and to suggest instead that the romantic poets and the political economists share a suspicion of the idealized rationality of eighteenth-century forms of thought. The arguments seem fierce only because the poets and the political economists are “fighting over common ground” (Gallagher 7-9). “Romanticism and political economy should be thought of as competing forms of ‘organicism,’” sharing a “joint preoccupation with organic life” (Gallagher 7, 8). In the case of “We Are Seven,” where the very question and answer form of the poem might be seen both to mimic and to contest a bureaucratic obsession with quantification.

This same Romantic tension between bloodless enumeration and passionate forms of life is famously expressed within Yeats’s poem, “September 1913,” where an obsession with counting coin in the present is contrasted with the rich and committed life

of the past. The form of the poem “implies that the most venerable literary genre of ‘Romantic Ireland’ is the ballad, resuscitated by the poet as the native song in which to insert a roll call of vanished heroes” (Vendler 115). As with Wordsworth, the use of the ballad form itself expresses a relationship to the past and adds to the poem’s “lethal” appeal to past values (Brown 202).

The first five lines of the opening eight-line stanza of “September 1913” are posed as a question: an impatiently posed query, one that barely needs to be asked and which seems already to answer itself:

What need you, being come to sense,  
 But fumble in a greasy till  
 And add the halfpence to the pence  
 And prayer to shivering prayer, until  
 You have dried the marrow from the bone;  
 For men were born to pray and save:  
 Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,  
 It’s with O’Leary in the grave. (1-8)

The very certainty of the poem’s association of Catholicism with counting might be contextualized in terms of the key role of numbers in pre-famine Ireland: long regarded as an “outlier” in studies of demography, the rapid growth of population in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland astonished contemporary commentators (Ó Gráda, Daltry and Dickson 628).<sup>4</sup> When the Irish census was taken in 1821, the population was measured at 7 million (compared to 8.6 million in England and 1.6 million in Scotland in 1801). Not only the actual numbers but also the proportion of

Catholics to Protestants had been used to advance Catholic claims by commentators from Oliver Plunkett to Daniel O’Connell. In the early nineteenth century, liberal Protestants such as Henry Parnell and Daniel Augustus Beaufort concerned themselves with detailed acts of enumeration. Such numbers played a key role in nationalist oratory in the run up to Catholic Emancipation: O’Connell and others regularly quoted numerical evidence to show that Catholics, the majority part of the population, formed only a tiny minority in terms of access to public office; a statistic that, as Toby Barnard points out, “was at once the foundation and the nemesis of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy” (330). “September 1913” might be read in indirect relationship to this centuries-old debate over numbers: a highly singular response that nonetheless captures the impress of nineteenth-century debates about the Irish overpopulation and the sheer numerical predominance of Irish Catholics.

If the poem’s vision of a population that only concerns itself with counting is read in ironic relation to a nationalist politics of numbers, then its nineteenth-century roots become clearer. Most readers catch the sharp distinction that Yeats draws between the material preoccupations of an emerging Irish middle class and the impassioned politics of an earlier generation. It is less often noticed, however, that these impulses emerged from the same political and social world, that of post-famine Ireland. The Fenianism of Yeats’s great mentor John O’Leary and the conservative famililism that came to dominate late nineteenth-century Irish society both emerged from this matrix. Denis Donoghue has noticed the poem’s “continuity with Moore’s *Melodies*,” with both Yeats and Moore invoking “Romantic Ireland so memorably that it is impossible to distinguish between the songs and their burden of reference” (20). That “burden of reference” becomes clearer if

we link “September 1913” to a specific romantic ancestor, Thomas Davis’s street-ballad, “The Green above the Red” (Vendler 391n). In Davis’s ballad, the suggestion is that the green may appear to have vanished but it is in fact lying in wait, ready to be victorious once more:

The jealous English tyrant now has banned the Irish Green,  
 And forced us to conceal it like a something foul and mean;  
 But yet, by Heavens! he'll sooner raise his victims from the dead  
 Than force our hearts to leave the Green, and cotton to the Red.

That idea of concealment speaks to Yeats’s poem, especially to its suggestion of a turning of the years. The idea of a painful present that conceals its meanings for a more forgiving future echoes strongly in Yeats’s comments about Blake, a poet engaged in a complex relationship with time: “There have been men who loved the future like a mistress, and the future mixed her breath into their breath and shook her hair about them, and hid them from the understanding of their times” (Yeats, “William Blake” 84). The question with which the penultimate stanza opens—“Was it for this . . .” (17)—has proven especially resonant in Irish culture, capable of addressing itself to such unknown futures as the banking crisis of 2007.

There is then common ground—rhetorical, literary, historical—between the counting of coins and Yeats’s vision of a Romantic Ireland. Even as the poem criticizes the adding of “halfpence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer” it draws on enumeration as a form of poetic protocol. Despite Yeats’s later assertion that the Young Irishmen “were not separated individual men” but rather “a people,” this poem sees him rely on the act of separation via naming (Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* 510). The



heroes of Romantic Ireland, “Edward Fitzgerald . . . And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone” (20-21) are counted out by Yeats, just as he had already incanted a list of his poetic forbears in “To Ireland in the Coming Times”: “Nor may I less be counted one / With Mangan, Davis, Ferguson” (17-18). Yeats’s most famous act of poetic listing comes later, when he enumerates the rebel heroes in “Easter, 1916”: “I write it out in verse, McDonagh and McBride / And Pearse and Connolly . . .” (74-76).

Stylistically, “September 1913” calls up the romantic art of memory. Despite the powerful rhetorical questions of the third stanza, and the certainty of the ringing refrain, the poem ends on hazy speculation:

Was it for this the wild geese spread  
 The grey wing upon every tide;  
 For this that all that blood was shed,  
 For this Edward Fitzgerald died,  
 And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,  
 All that delirium of the brave?  
 Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,  
 It’s with O’Leary in the grave.

Yet could we turn the years again,  
 And call those exiles as they were  
 In all their loneliness and pain,  
 You’d cry, “Some woman’s yellow hair  
 Has maddened every mother’s son”:

They weighed so lightly what they gave.  
 But let them be, they're dead and gone,  
 They're with O'Leary in the grave. (17-32)

The counting of the first stanza is associated with “sense” and the domain of economic rationality, while the naming of names in the penultimate stanza has an almost hypnotic effect in the poem. The effect is that of a romantic memory at once cultural and personal, where “the impact of one’s actions on other people causes one to reevaluate what one’s actions were” (Ferguson 523). Yeats here calls up a romantic art of memory in which retrieval of events in the past gives way to a national rather than a personal act of self-reflection. The echoes between political and individual forms of memory become clearer if we remember that Wordsworth’s 1799 *Prelude* begins with and repeats a question that resonated deeply and powerfully for Yeats:

Was it for this

That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved  
 To blend his murmurs with my Nurse’s song,  
 And from his alder shades, and rocky falls,  
 And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice  
 That flowed along my dreams? For this didst thou  
 O Derwent, traveling over the green plains  
 Near my “sweet birth-place,” didst thou beauteous Stream  
 Make ceaseless music through the night and day,  
 Which with its steady cadence tempering  
 Our human waywardness, composed my thoughts

To more than infant softness, giving me,  
 Among the fretful dwellings of mankind,  
 A knowledge, a dim earnest of the calm  
 Which Nature breathes among the fields and groves?  
 Beloved Derwent! Fairest of all Streams!  
 Was it for this that I, a four year's child,  
 A naked Boy, among thy silent pools  
 Made one long bathing of a summer's day? (1-19)

As with Wordsworth's vision of himself as a "four year's child" in the Derwent valley, Romantic Ireland is recalled by specific acts of naming that vividly realise even as they lament a lost political landscape. Though Yeats was critical of Wordsworth's later poetry, the two authors share what Seamus Heaney calls a quality of "bardic representativeness."

"Was it for this" as used by Yeats might constitute what Fiona Stafford calls a "starting line," a poetic phrase recollected, quoted and transformed as it moves across the Irish Sea (8). In contrast to the counting of books discussed above, such poetic beginnings are not always clearly cited or marked, and can be difficult to track and analyse. One such uncertain imprint relates to the role of Sydney Owenson in Yeats's imagination. He never seems to have mentioned Owenson (later Lady Morgan) in print, though her work has been discussed by Foster in terms of "the traditions of literature that lie behind" Yeats (Foster xvii-xviii, 7-10). In *Patriotic Sketches*, however, we find Owenson evoking memories of meeting Irish peasants walking the roads of Sligo via a strikingly Yeatsian turn of phrase. To turn to Owenson's Sligo is of course not only to evoke the landscape of Irish romanticism in general but also invoke a topography more

intimately known to Yeats than Wordsworth's Lake District. *Patriotic Sketches* features many place names that resonate with Yeats's poetry: Knocknarea, Glencar and Ben Bulbin.

Writing in *Patriotic Sketches* about meeting "helpless and wretched groups straggling along the high-roads, or reposing their wearied limbs beneath the shelter of a ditch" (96), Owenson recollects her feelings of outraged sympathy at their plight in an account that repeatedly draws attention to her own position as observer and recorder of native misery. Her indictment of the treatment of the Irish peasantry begins to take on some of the quality of verse:

I have seen the feet of the heavily-laden mother totter through winter  
snows beneath her tender burthen. . . . I have met them wandering over  
those heaths, which afforded no shelter to their aching brows, amidst the  
meridian arbours of a summer's day; when violent heat and unsupportable  
fatigue, rendered the stream they stooped to drink, a luxury the most  
exquisite. I have met them at the door of magisterial power, and seen them  
spurned from its threshold by him who should have redressed their  
grievances or relieved their wants. I have seen them cheerfully received  
into the cabin of an equally humble, but more fortunate compatriot, where  
there wants were a recommendation to benevolence, and their number no  
check to its exertion. (96, 97-98)

Owenson's repetition of and variation on the phrase "I have met them" conveys the intensity of her encounters with the densely populated landscape of the West of Ireland in the pre-Famine period. When Yeats uses this same phrase to open "Easter, 1916"—"I

have met them at the close of day”—it is once more to describe an oppressed people, the ordinary office workers of Dublin whose lives are transformed in the moment of rebellion. In “Easter, 1916,” these ordinary people are engaged in the mundane economic acts so despised in “September 1913”:

I have met them at close of day  
 Coming with vivid faces  
 From counter or desk among grey  
 Eighteenth-century houses. (1-4)

Where Owenson’s “countless hordes of wretches” (99) realize a specific history of Irish colonial biopolitics, Yeats’s Dubliners are countless in the more modern sense of belonging to an undifferentiated mass of people, subject to the rules of industrial time. Despite these differences, Yeats, who lamented Maria Edgeworth’s address to “that section of Irish society which is, as are the upper classes everywhere, the least national of all” may have found in Owenson’s prose something closer to his own sense of “the book of the people” (Yeats, “William Carleton” 298). Yeats’s romanticism may be “recognizable in Wordsworth’s encounters with the poor, in Blake’s vision of contemporary London as a loathsome sewer, and in Shelley’s confrontation with the grimmer aspects of post-Waterloo British history” (O’Neill 34) but it also must be understood in oblique relationship to the hungry, crowded, miserable landscapes of pre-Famine Ireland.

**“We were the last romantics”: Coole and Ballylee, 1931**

On the first page of the first draft of his “Autobiography,” Yeats assesses his role in history with reference to the idea of the romantic: “I was a romantic in all.” On the envelope containing the manuscript, he wrote “Private. A first rough draft of Memoirs made in 1916-17 and containing much that is not for publication now if ever. Memoirs come down to 1896 or thereabouts. W.B.Y. March 1921” (Yeats, *Memoirs* 19; Bornstein 20). Yeats’s conception of the romantic is once more arranged in relation to time, place and audience, subject to revision and reconsideration over his long career.

Some years later, we find Yeats returning to the romantic within the beautifully patterned late poem, “Coole and Ballylee, 1931.” The poem written as a kind of an ode for his friend Lady Gregory who had died in May 1932—the poem was originally titled “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1932.” Its title imagines a relationship between Yeats’s tower in Ballylee and Lady Gregory’s nearby home in Coole and the opening stanza visualises that connection via an evocative but imaginary topography. He draws on the real and highly particular karst landscape of South Galway, with its disappearing lakes, to invent a stream that joins his tower at Ballylee to Coole:

Under my window-ledge the waters race,  
 Otters below and moor-hens on the top,  
 Run for a mile undimmed in Heaven’s face  
 Then darkening through “dark” Raftery’s “cellar” drop,  
 Run underground, rise in a rocky place  
 In Coole demesne, and there to finish up  
 Spread to a lake and drop into a hole,  
 What’s water but the generated soul? (1-8)

Part of the poem's "continual dialogue with Romantic poetry" (O'Neill 51) is its imagined connection to Antony Raftery (1779-1835), an eighteenth-century Irish bardic poet. Raftery, a writer closely associated with Lady Gregory's part of south county Galway, is supposed to have been invited to drink from cellar of the tower inhabited by Yeats, where the river goes underground. The spreading river relates to the passage of time and opens up channels of connection: as the poem links Raftery to his landscape, it deepens its roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture and goes on to evoke the idea of the "romantic" as a kind of avocation:

We were the last romantics—chose for theme  
 Traditional sanctity and loveliness;  
 Whatever's written in what poets name  
 The book of the people; whatever most can bless  
 The mind of man, or elevate a rhyme;  
 But all is changed, that high horse riderless,  
 Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode  
 Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood. (41-48)

What does Yeats mean by "the last romantics"? It is commonly argued that

[t]he "we" to whom Yeats refers are probably best taken as Lady Gregory, Synge, and Yeats, to begin with, and then such of their associates at Coole and the Abbey Theatre as maintained the true Irish themes. They were the last romantics in the sense that they attended upon Romantic Ireland, kept the sense of it alive by sustaining in themselves and a few others the desire for such glory and elevation. (Donoghue 23)

As in the draft autobiographical reflection, “romantic” not only names a relationship with the past, but also silently speaks of Irish names and places: “when Yeats, in old age, wrote of his contemporaries Synge and Gregory he knew that there had been First Romantics before him, whose effort to construct a tradition which could incorporate nationally minded Protestants prefigured the projects of his own generation” (Foster 90). He may also have Edmund Burke in mind here, as Michael O’Neill suggests, in his elegiac treatment of a dying aristocracy (52).

Yet the reluctance to count out names (as he does, for instance, in “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”) is surely significant, especially given the missing pronoun (“we”?) in the second half of the first line. There may be a kind of aristocratic disregard for the ownership of thought at work here; or perhaps the absent collective pronoun already belongs to the receding past, along with vanished companions and imagined progenitors. The line “all is changed” echoes “Easter, 1916” (“All changed, changed utterly” [15]) but offers no redeeming future. This is a poem of loss that is paradoxically anchored in the present from where it recedes through the generations and presages future danger: “Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.”

“Coole and Ballylee, 1931,” at once decrying decline and calling up powerful images of creativity, allows us to see how Yeats is positioned between empirical and imaginative forms of certainty: the world darkens, but “the poem remains in control” (O’Neill 49). The metre of “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” consists of a stately sequence of sounds that suggest aristocratic order down the centuries, within the “the roomy spaces of the *ottava rima* stanzas preferred by Yeats in many of his later meditative poems” (O’Neill 47). Vendler described the *ottava rima* stanza as “a station, a place, a location”



(264). In later poems these are often numbered using roman numerals to create the effect of formal sequencing. Although not numbered in this way, there is a stately progression from stanza to stanza within this tightly constructed, carefully paced poem, as if structuring its reflections on place and date.

As with “Septemter 1913,” a contradictory stance is assumed—the poet writes against contemporary expectations and values, and “romantic” is the name of an oppositional stance. The very idea of being the last romantic suggests that the others have been counted off—given the number, perhaps a countless number, of romantics that have preceded him/them, then the poet can place himself at the end of a sequence. The compelling romantic fiction of the last man may also be at play here: the poet locates himself as lone survivor of a vanished race, facing into an unknown future whose shape is determined by powerful past experiences.

**“Nor may I less be counted one ...?”**

If Yeats was “a lifelong if sometimes ambivalent Romantic” (Bornstein 19), then numbers were a central form of expression of this dilemma. Counting is, for Yeats, a way of meeting the cultural and political world of nineteenth-century Ireland and measuring his relationship to that particular past. Within the poems, certain numbers acquire vitality, force and meaning, whether as dates from the calendar, units in a list, or sounds in sequence. The relationship to the past that numbers express can seem hesitant and uncertain as well as confident and secure. Consider Yeats’s negatively phrased question from “To Ireland in the Coming Times,” the poem in which he announces a relationship to his poetic predecessors: “Nor may I less be counted one . . . ?” (17). That

central phrase, “counted one,” expresses anxiety about the poet’s place in the linear succession literary history while emphatically placing him in a singular relationship to time.

Numbering in Yeats often relied upon the resources of cabalistic numerology and the question of numbers is inseparable from his occult beliefs.<sup>5</sup> “The Statues” begins with Pythagoras, and links Pythagorean mathematics and numerology directly to Irish nationalism: “When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side / What stalked through the post Office? What intellect, / What calculation, number, measurement, replied?” (25-27). *A Vision* imagines human personality and human history in terms of a fixed set of numerical types. Yet numbers are associated not only with forms of “supernaturalism” but also with “the peculiarity written into the modern fact” (Poovey 4). To return to “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” the sensuous and sonic particularity that Yeats inscribed in the number nine—the very qualities that Edward St Aubyn’s narrator finds so annoying—remind us that numbers have not always possessed “qualities of transparency and impartiality” but rather have operated as sites of contest between imaginative and empirical forms of certainty.

My discussion of the ways in which Yeats counted on the past participates in a renewed effort to join aesthetic with historical understandings of the temporalities layered within his writing. As Marjorie Howes and Joe Valente put it,

the broad based cultural renaissance for which Yeats was symbol,  
spokesman and literary architect took up the Irish past not as a nostalgic  
lost origin, but as a reality that persisted, in suppressed or marginalized

form, in the ongoing Irish present and could, accordingly, provide a renovated cultural foundation on which to build an Irish future. (2)

To consider questions of counting in Yeats is to be reminded of the quantification of the contemporary self, of the current significance of quantitative and computational methods within the digital humanities, and of the processes by which humanities disciplines are held to account in universities across the globe. Such concerns return us to Yeats, who helps us to think critically about how numbers have shaped both knowledge and practice; how numbers are caught between different kinds of certainty; and how, suspended within poetry, numbers can reactivate moments in the past and summon new futures; among them, perhaps, a future Irish romanticism that can take fuller account of itself and its legacies in the Irish Literary Revival.

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### Notes

All quotations from Yeats's poetry cite the first volume of the *Collected Works*.

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<sup>1</sup>See however Marjorie Perloff's essay, "The Pursuit of Number: Yeats, Khlebnikov, and the Mathematics of the Modern," in *Poetic Licence*. Perloff argues that Yeats's interest in number is modernist: "But suppose we read Yeats's geometries, or more specifically, his mathematical paradigm . . . as versions, not of a belated English romanticism, but, on the contrary, as analogues to European modernist works of their own period?" (72).

<sup>2</sup>"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" formed part of a larger project of repairing what he saw as a broken relationship between speech and song. As read or rather chanted by Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" acts as a kind of link in a chain of bardic connection, shaped for Yeats by the example of the Romantics. His father had read Walter Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* aloud to his son and the young poet went on to follow in the

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Swift wrote memorably about his enforced residence in Ireland in poems such as "Ireland" (1728). Lady Morgan remarked that "Swift himself, the patriot *par excellence* among Irish literary characters, was resident in his own land from necessity; and the sense of that necessity pressed upon his mind, embittering his latter days, and discolouring all his views, if it were not among the immediate causes of his deplorable insanity." (*Book of the Boudoir* II 212-213).

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<sup>4</sup>The classic (and much debated) study is Connell's *Population in Ireland*.

<sup>5</sup>Helen Vendler associates such an "unusual form of extreme numerological control" ("The Later Poetry" 80) with the early poems in particular and argues that the power of numbers continue to resound within his later work. Her reading of "Easter, 1916" in *Secret Discipline* argues for the magical power of poetic form to reorder and transform lived reality.

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