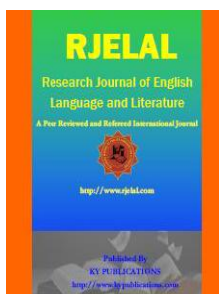




## YEATS AND NIETZSCHE: KINSHIP AND INFLUENCE

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### ABSTRACT

W.B. Yeats has certainly not suffered lack of critical attention, but the Yeats-Nietzsche connection has not been dealt with fully. Yeats's later work can, more accurately be read and understood in the light of Nietzsche's role in the development of Yeats's thought. Yeats's connection with Nietzsche is not simply a matter of literary influence; both of them are united by a common philosophic temperament and way of understanding the world. This paper is an attempt to study the influence that Nietzsche had upon Yeats, and what made it possible: the underlying kinship of a similar disposition.

**Key Words:** Disposition, Existence, Imagination, Influence, Kinship, Philosophy, Tragedy.

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### INTRODUCTION

The question of influence among writers is never an easy one. Even if the mysteries of the process of influence cannot be identified, one can, by reading with a comparative eye, illuminate important areas of one writer's work by a simultaneous response to an analysis of another's thought. The case of Yeats is not an exception. A clearer understanding of Yeats's poetry and thought would be possible by seeing them against the work of those writers and philosophers from whom Yeats took inspiration, of those "singing masters" (Sailing to Byzantium) of the poet's soul. Among these masters Nietzsche must be recognized as being one of the most prominent and powerful. Nietzsche was not only a man, a writer, and a body of philosophical work, but also a whole climate of ideas in the nineteenth century (*Yeats and the Logic of formalism*, 18). Although the fact that Yeats read and embraced parts of Nietzsche's thought is noted by many Yeats critics, the absence of a major published account of the relationship may suggest

that commentators have not fully taken the depth of this relationship into consideration. Yeats's interest in Nietzsche was by no means momentary; rather Nietzsche regularly hovers in the foregrounds of Yeats's mind when he writes of Blake and Tagore (Bohlmann, 3). Further, Norman Jeffares writes Mrs Yeats confirms that Yeats continued to read Nietzsche until the very end of his life (*W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet*, 294). Ellmann and David Thatcher have given a good and concise account of Nietzsche's influence (*Identity of Yeats*, 91-98).

Apart from these references which so clearly reveal Nietzsche's prominence at the centre of Yeats's thought, what precisely it was in Nietzsche that interested and impacted Yeats? Secondly, what are the specific points of contact between their respective outlooks? The lineaments of this special kinship may be sketched initially and synoptically through the direct references to Nietzsche and his work that we find in Yeats's writings, particularly his letters and other prose writings. What these

references serve to reveal are the deep emotions that Nietzsche seemed to stir in Yeats.

There is uncertainty as to exactly when W.B. Yeats, the great Irish Nobel laureate (1865-1939) first encountered the ideas of F.W. Nietzsche (1844-1900). Yeats probably first came into contact with Nietzsche's writings in 1902, either in Thomas Common's translated anthology *Nietzsche as Critic, Philosopher, Poet and Prophet* (1901) or in a copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (one of the few works of Nietzsche to have been translated in whole at the time) given to him by John Quinn. Doubtless, however, Yeats was familiar with some of Nietzsche's major concepts before this date, even if on a less authoritative basis than direct reading would have provided. There are passages from his 1897 essay that might attest to his earlier familiarity. The Nietzschean vogue (or "Neo-Nietzschean clatter", in Pound's words) that existed in literary circles in England during the late 1800's and early 1900's has been explored thoroughly and comprehensively by David S. Thatcher and Yeats must have absorbed something of Nietzsche's thought simply by virtue of having been part of this particular milieu. A letter of May 15, 1903 credits John Quinn with having first introduced Yeats to Nietzsche's work and suggests clearly that Yeats was at this time familiar specifically with *The Birth of Tragedy*:

I have always felt that the soul has two movements primarily: one to transcend forms, and the other to create forms. Nietzsche, to whom you have been the first to introduce me, calls these the Dionysiac and the Apollonic, respectively. I think I have to some extent got weary of that wild God Dionysus, and I am hoping that the Far-Darter will come in his place (letters 403).

Although perhaps marginal, this is an interesting early example of Yeats's attempts to read Nietzsche's thought in relation to his own. Especially important is Yeats's linking Nietzsche's Apollonian/Dionysian duality with his own dialectical conception of life, a concept which would remain the basis of Yeats's attempts to understand and express the nature of reality and human personality.

This idea shall be explored and expanded upon later. More relevant to our purpose is the sense of kinship in the parallel movements of two minds that is in evidence here. In the fragments of Yeats's diary for 1909 which were later gathered together under the title *Estrangement*, we are given another brief but interesting example of Yeats's efforts to interpret Nietzsche's thought directly. The other direct references to Nietzsche that deserve introductory mention are from "The Phases of the Moon" and *A Vision*. The poem, written in 1918, assigns Nietzsche a very prominent place in Yeats's lunar scheme:

• • • Nietzsche is born

Because the hero's crescent is the twelfth  
(Collected Poems 183)

The following section in *A Vision* (1937) gives us a more elaborate prose explanation of Nietzsche's position:

The man of this phase, out of phase, is always in reaction, is driven from one self-conscious-pose to another, is full of hesitation<sup>1</sup> true to phase, he is a cup that remembers but its own fullness. • • • The nature is conscious of the most extreme degree of deception, and is wrought to a frenzy of desire for truth of self. If Phase 9 had the greatest possible "belief in its own desire", there is now the greatest possible belief in all values created by personality. It is therefore before all else the phase of the hero, of the man who overcomes himself, and so no longer needs, like Phase 10, the submission of others, or, like Phase 11, conviction of others to prove his victory (127).

Here Yeats's assessment of the Nietzschean stance carries a greater degree of validity and assuredness than his earlier understanding of the Superman, and, one senses, takes its strength from the fact that Yeats is discussing something very close to his own bone. The phrase "the man who overcomes himself" is a deliberate evocation of Zarathustra's frequent admonition that "man is something that is to be surpassed" (Complete Works XI, 6), but also, the "frenzy of desire for truth of self" that characterizes the man of Nietzsche's phase seems to anticipate

the later lines from "An Acre of Grass" in Last Poems:

Grant me an old man's frenzy,  
Myself must I remake  
Till I am Timon and Lear  
Or that William Blake  
Who beat upon the wall  
Till truth obeyed his call;  
••••( Collected Poems 346).

These examples are by no means exhaustive and could be discussed at much greater length, but I cite them only to indicate something of the immediate and spontaneous affinity that Yeats himself felt toward Nietzsche, and to point out the central position that Nietzsche came to occupy in Yeats's imagination. This peculiar consanguinity that existed between the two writers' thought is perhaps best expressed in Erich Heller's observation, "Nietzsche's imagination burrowed in the same soil from which Yeats's imagination grew" (Heller 331).

In any case, there are, I think, three major coordinates of thought and feeling, each with its own component categories that mark the connection between Yeats and Nietzsche: first, the conception of life as an aesthetic phenomenon, second, the theme of tragic joy and third, the notion of strength or power.

Thus, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche writes that "only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified" (Complete Works I, 50). Similarly, Yeats writes in "A General Introduction for my work" that the poet "is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast", he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete" ( *Essays and Introductions* 509). By conceiving life as art--that is, as an image or idea to be created and completed--the individual asserts the shaping, organizing, and creative powers of imagination and intellect against the meaninglessness and fortuity of existence. In this way the individual can affirm life by investing it with dignity and significance. And as we shall see, it is this principle of affirmation that functions as the generative agent in both Yeats's and Nietzsche's art and philosophy. Nowhere is this particular conception of life more actively conveyed than in

the two writers' idea of style. We might first turn to Nietzsche's exposition of this notion.

Both Yeats's and Nietzsche's conceptions of style are closely related as well to their respective ideas of tragedy and tragic joy. Existence was for both a form of art and the highest art for both was the tragic. Tragedy, then, for Nietzsche, comprises both an aesthetic and a world-view. Both lead to a transcendent affirmation. Tragic art surmounts the pain and contradiction of its subject matter, as well as questions of morality, and moves the reader or audience to a state of pure aesthetic perception in which all opposites are reconciled and harmonized. The value of tragedy for Nietzsche is not to be found in its characterizations or moral instruction, but purely in its aesthetic effect, which affirms all that has gone before. Similarly, the individual who possesses a tragic world-view is able to transcend the flux and turmoil of life and history and affirm through his tragic joy all of existence. We shall see that this same idea of affirmation through art and a tragic world-view is a strong element in Yeats's work as well. Yeats's major statement on tragedy, however, is to be found in his essay, "The Tragic Theatre" (1910). In this essay he asserts the supremacy of tragedy as an art form: "••• tragic ecstasy. •• is the best that art--perhaps life--can give" ( *Essays and Introductions* 239). Further, tragedy is always "a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man" (241) and elaborates:

••• in mainly tragic art one distinguishes devices to exclude or lessen character, to diminish the power of that daily mood, to cheat or blind it's too clear perception. If the real world is not altogether rejected, it is but touched here and there, and into the places we have left empty we summon rhythm, balance, pattern, images that remind us of vast passions, the vagueness of past times, all the chimeras that haunt the edge of trance;. •• Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance (243).

Again, this is very similar to Nietzsche's conception of tragedy as it is expressed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, particularly, in the insistence on the difference between tragedy and everyday reality, and on the essentially mythic, symbolic and non-literal foundation of tragedy. In chapter twenty-four of *The Birth of Tragedy* we find:

For the fact that things actually take such a tragic course would least of all explain the origin of a form of art; provided that art is not merely an imitation of the reality of nature, but in truth a metaphysical supplement to the reality of nature, placed alongside the purpose for its conquest. Tragic myth, in so far as it really belongs to art also fully participates in this transfiguring metaphysical purpose of art in general (Complete Works I, 182).

In Nietzsche too we find a similar expression of a morality rooted in a deep sense of strength and power. As with Yeats, it is the strong individual who can take on the weight of his own uniqueness and create his own values in transcending conventional morality:

Behold the good and the just! Whom do they hate most? Him who breaketh up their table of values, the breaker, the law  
- breaker:--he, however, is the creator (Complete Works XI, 20).

Just as, in Yeats's view, all "minds that have a wisdom come of tragic reality seem morbid to those that are accustomed to writers who have not faced reality at all" (Essays and Introduction 322). So Nietzsche's creator is both feared and hated by those who do not have the strength to give 'style' to their personalities, master their baser impulses and affirm life through a passionate joy. "A trouble and a terror is the hero to them, I' Nietzsche writes (Complete Works XI, 49).

However, strength is not an end in itself for Nietzsche. Like the Dionysian impulse, strength too must be mastered and controlled in order for it to be of value. Otherwise, it becomes merely animal brawn and is used to enslave and subjugate. Such is the essence of political power for Nietzsche. A far greater and more refined power is required to master oneself rather than others. It is this element

of self-mastery that proves an individual's greatness. This is why the most powerful, and therefore the best, human specimens were, for Nietzsche, the artist, the saint and the philosopher. It was they who, through their strength of vision, had created their own lives and also created new values for life and cultures. Weakness, for Nietzsche, was exhibited both by those who could not master the crude power of their will (tyrants and dictators) and by those who did not possess the strength that required mastering (slaves and "the good and the just"). To be good simply because one is incapable--whether through weakness, fear or hypocrisy--of acting in any other way is no virtue for Nietzsche. The good only has meaning when the individual has the power to do harm but does not use that power. This idea is expressed most clearly in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, when Nietzsche writes;

All evil do I accredit thee: therefore do I desire of thee the good.

Verily, I have laughed at the weaklings, who think themselves good because they have crippled-paws! ( Complete Works XI, 141).

This same relation of power to morality is given by Yeats in the third section of his *The Tower II* when the poet praises:

The pride of people that were  
Bound neither to Cause nor to State,  
Neither to slaves that were spat on,  
Nor to the tyrants that spat, •••  
(Collected Poems 218)

It is in the light of this relation that one should understand both Nietzsche's and Yeats's alleged celebration of violence and totalitarian politics.

From the above discussion it is clear that there is a remarkable frequency of Nietzschean echoes in Yeats. He was heir to a vast tradition of which Nietzsche happened to be the most accessible proponent. In confirmation one can say that Nietzsche's influence on Yeats's developing thought has been most powerful, acting as the final nutrient in the germination of seeds long sown.

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