'Stitching and Unstitching': Yeats material and immaterial

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At the opening of W.B. Yeats's short story *Rosa Alchemica* the narrator, a figure as prosperous as Yeats himself wished to be, sits in his study, surrounded by religious paintings by Carlo Crivelli and Piero della Francesca, 'every book bound in leather, stamped with intricate ornament, and of a carefully chosen colour', everything enclosed by 'tapestry, full of the blue and bronze of peacocks, [which] fell over the doors and shut out all history and activity untouched with beauty and peace'.¹ The reader is to picture an arrangement Whistler might have designed and the William Morris Company might have executed: on cloth, not that dissimilar to Whistler's Peacock Room, created for magnate Frederick Leyland, now housed in the Freer Gallery, Washington DC. The narrator's position perched amid such opulent aestheticism is bound to be disturbed, and it is, by the intrusion of his old friend the alchemical researcher Michael Robartes. The tapestry glows and fades, and the narrator is inducted onto a Rosicrucian plane as Robartes, 'speaking with a slightly rhythmical intonation', works his spell, becoming 'in [his] waking dream a shuttle weaving an immense purple web whose folds had begun to fill the room'.² This peacock tapestry, representing the finest of the material world, functions but as a curtain to the immaterial world, imaged by the weaving of even finer purple cloth, and later by 'men and women dancing slowly in crimson robes' that 'wound in and out [...] to the sound of hidden instruments'.³ Yeats's use of textiles in poetry and plays is various, but nearly always contains a similar suggestion: that material, whether tapestries, or costumes, or curtains, or veils might be lifted to reveal a life beyond this one. So 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' asks his beloved to 'tread softly' on 'the heaven's embroidered cloths'.⁴ The cloths' softness of texture is delicately transferred to the gentle weight of footsteps, and even, potentially, to a quiet intonation of the poem. So often in Yeats's poetry material's revelation of the immaterial comes through sound. In *Rosa Alchemica* Robartes' metaphysical weaving begins with the sound of his voice. William Morris, a famous practitioner of both, nevertheless included textiles and fine-speaking amongst 'the lesser arts', although his interest in what he also described as 'decorative arts' is plain.⁵ Yeats's recurring preoccupation with these so-called lesser arts and their interwoven connections should give us pause. These have long been arts traditionally associated with women, and so they are in Yeats's poetry. Yeats was no feminist, evidently, but his abiding interest in the art and work of women deserves scrutiny. Examining his use of these arts together uncovers an aesthetic not merely interested in a world beyond but invested in the labour and economic exchanges of this one.

¹ W.B. Yeats, 'Rosa Alchemica', *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 268.

² Yeats, *Mythologies*, 275.

³ Yeats, *Mythologies*, 287-8.

⁴ W.B. Yeats, *Yeats's Poems*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 108.

⁵ William Morris, 'The Lesser Arts' (first printed as 'The Decorative Arts' (1878), from *Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. Asa Briggs (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 84-105.

Fig. 1. William Morris, 'Prologue', *The Earthly Paradise*, Vol. 1, (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1896).

William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* knew where good cloth was made. The opening features Geoffrey Chaucer as a customs officer beside the Thames presiding over imports of

Florence gold cloth, and Ypres napery,
And cloth of Bruges, and hogsheads of Guienne⁶

The ornamental bordered page from Morris's Kelmscott Press on which these lines appear evokes medieval textiles as much as manuscripts. Indeed the textiles of Morris & Company were world famous: as well as soft furnishings like curtains they designed and produced printed cloths, wallpapers, and textured 'leather papers' on the Japanese model. Although Morris had taught himself medieval stitch techniques, it was women who managed the firm's embroidery. Jane Morris's embroideries were entered in the 1862 International Exhibition, and from 1885 their daughter May Morris ran the embroidery workshop at Kelmscott House in Hammersmith, producing finished designs and home-kits for folding screens, quilts, cushions, and table linen. Her *Decorative Needlework* was published in 1893.⁷ Tutored in French and socialism

⁶ William Morris, 'Prologue: The Wanderers', *The Earthly Paradise Vol. 1* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1896) lines 12-13.

⁷ May Morris, *Decorative Needlework* (London: Joseph Hughes, 1893).

at Morris's Kelmscott House,⁸ W.B. Yeats was exposed to a textile revolution, a revival of handcraft still influential today.⁹

Yeats's sisters, moreover, were in the thick of this revolution, tutored as they were by May Morris in embroidery and design. It was at their nearby home in Bedford Park, as Yeats's sister Lily remembered, that 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' was 'brought forth' in an atmosphere of handcrafts:

In Bedford Park one evening, Helen Acosta & Lolly painting & I there sewing – Willy bursting in having just written, or not even written down but just having brought forth 'Innisfree', he repeated it with all the fire of creation & his youth – he was I suppose about 24.¹⁰

Lily Yeats had just begun her career as fulltime embroiderer for May Morris, working and dining there 'every day': hence her evening sewing. With Helen Acosta, Yeats's younger sister Lolly also spent considerable time at Kelmscott House. Having trained as painter and educator she pioneered a method of teaching art for young children through watercolour designs, supporting the family by publishing a series of successful books with titles like *Elementary Brushwork Studies* (1895).¹¹ By Lily's account then the poem is just one more sibling contribution to a household of handcrafts. I have noted elsewhere how this atmosphere attaches to the poem, especially in an early draft where a 'household cricket sings' and 'the veils of the morning' are joined by a dwelling of 'woven wattles and woodwork made'.¹² Not initially written down, the poem was both produced and reproduced on air. In a 1931 radio broadcast Yeats placed the poem in an oral tradition that included Morris. He describes William Morris 'coming in a rage out of some lecture hall' after a recital of his *Sigurd the Volsung* complaining 'it took me a great deal of trouble to get that poem into verse'. He had taken, says Yeats, the same trouble with 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', 'which is why I will *not* read it as if it were prose'.¹³ The broadcast is an open acknowledgment that Morris's craft had a hand or two in the swirl that created the poem, although Yeats here enlists him as speaker, rather than stitcher, to justify his own hard-won reading method. He follows his story by demonstrating it, speaking with particular intonation those aurally familiar lines conjuring 'lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore'.¹⁴

'Adam's Curse' and the division of labour

⁸ See W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell & Douglas Archibald (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999), 130-8. For a time Yeats made Morris 'my chief of men' (131).

⁹ The influence of Morris & Company on the design and manufacture of textiles and house furnishings is legendary. See Fiona McCarthy, *William Morris*.

¹⁰ Lily Yeats letter to Ruth Lane-Poole (née Pollexfen), 17 June 1930, quoted R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life Vol. 1 The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 79.

¹¹ Elizabeth Corbett Yeats, *Elementary Brushwork Studies* (London: George Philip & Son, 1895).

¹² See Adrian Paterson, 'On the Pavements Grey: W. B. Yeats, William Morris, and the Suburban Paradise', in Tom Herron, ed. *Irish Writing London Vol. 1* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 34-53.

¹³ *The Spoken Word: Poets*. CD recording (London: British Library, 2003).

¹⁴ Yeats, *Poems*, 74.

Such associations between sound and textile-making might have remained at arms' length, but as the nineties progressed, they are elaborated into highly worked connections. This was a decade Yeats's *Autobiographies* describe as 'The Trembling of the Veil', and his studies in magic and alchemy attempted to lift this cloth of material to uncover the mysteries of ancient and medieval art, and their particular resonances in folklore and esoteric tradition. It seems no coincidence that the late-nineteenth-century impulse to embark on the study of things, to examine what we would now call material culture – which can be symbolized by the establishment in Oxford of the Pitt-Rivers museum collection with parallel university lectures on ethnology and what Asa Briggs calls that 'most Victorian of titles "arts and industries"' – came together with the rise of comparative religion and folklore.¹⁵ Anthropology inevitably extrapolated from things to beliefs, and whether in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* or Yeats's own folkloric investigations, material stuff began to help reveal the immaterial. Yeats shared this impulse, and his characteristic things include cloths that lift to reveal the world beyond, as in the 'Veil' of his *Autobiographies*. But while lifting veils he never neglected what went into making them; an attention this essay tries to repay.

It matters then that the stuff of 'Heaven's embroidered cloths' is so often made by sound. Yeats's 'Spinning Song' beginning 'There are seven that pull the thread' depicts the 'holiest, holiest seven' wandering stars as makers of the heavens, tracing the correspondence between these seven (traditionally Sun, Moon, and the five planets up to Saturn) and music's seven tones. Composed for *Diarmuid and Grania* (1901), Yeats's co-authored play with George Moore, 'Spinning Song', was given to Edward Elgar to set to music – which he did, choosing for its elaboration a woman's mezzo-soprano voice. Interesting that the agency of women is required for this creation: the poem's simple unrhymed singable condition rather belies the complexity and antiquity of the tradition evoked in this music of the spheres. Its numerological resonance recurs in the thirteen and a bit lines of the interrupted sonnet prefaced in 1900 to *The Shadowy Waters*, 'The Harp of Aengus'. Here Edain is the creator who

wove seven strings
Sweet with all music out of his long hair,
Because her hands had been made wild by love.¹⁶

She requires the collaboration of young Aengus who, after lending his hair, makes the harp-frame out of 'Druid apple-wood', but it is her feeling that initiates this music, and she hand-crafts its initial material form. Metamorphosed into a fly, 'among her winds', she becomes closely associated with a wind-blown Aeolian harp figure, long-familiar from Romantic verse, and the seven strings of magical tradition.¹⁷ Yet notwithstanding the long history of this resonant image-cluster, and the complex metaphysical imagery

¹⁵ See Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 30.

¹⁶ Yeats, *Poems*, 145.

¹⁷ For examples of wind-blown Romantic harps see Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Eolian Harp' and 'Dejection: An Ode'. According to traditions known to Ficino and recorded by a scholiast on Virgil, 'Orpheus's lyre had seven strings corresponding to the seven circles of heaven'. See Angela Voss, 'The Musical Magic of Marsilio Ficino', *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. Michael J.B. Allen, Valery Rees, Martin Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 235.

of what are sometimes fugitive poems, what they describe prefigures a more tangibly Modernist making in which women have a role.

In 'Adam's Curse', then, the veil of the workshop is lifted, and sound and textiles are worked into a central allegory for the making of poetry. 'To articulate sweet sounds together' is made poetry's defining project; 'stitching and unstitching' this project's defining metaphor.¹⁸ Such poetic stitching recalls the Greek practice of *rhapsodia*, the art of epic recital by a *rhapsode*, an oral performer whom Pindar characterises as 'a singer of stitched verse'.¹⁹ Etymologically a *rhapsode* is a sewer of songs who selects and stitches together (from memory or extemporaneously) patches of his own or others' verse, often pictured on vases with his traditional staff and cloak.²⁰ In a post-Romantic world sound clings to the concept via the musical (or quasi-musical) genre known to Thomas Moore, John Field, Frederick Chopin and others as the rhapsody. (In Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* therefore lurks a double-dyed meaning in its colouring of music).

Such classical allusions are the more potent in a fallen Christian world. Genesis had decreed that division comes between women who must labour to give birth, and men who are to till the ground. 'It's certain there is no fine thing / Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring' says the poem. Like Genesis, 'The Sorrow of Love' attributes the fall to the intervention of woman, and the word 'labouring' attaches to her arrival 'with red mournful lips', which recall 'all the sorrows of her labouring ships'. They are returning from Troy, an allusion sharpened in revision to the line 'Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships'.²¹ If this picture of one man's labour against fate aggrandizes the poet's heroic role against troubles brought by women, 'Adam's Curse' at least begins to undercut such male authority. This same word 'labour' is associated with work gendered both male and female, whether to 'break stones' or to 'scrub a kitchen pavement'.²² Indeed the poet's labour of 'stitching and unstitching' to produce 'sweet sounds' is 'to work harder than all these, and yet / Be thought an idler' by a distinctly masculine list of professions, including 'bankers, schoolmasters and clergymen'. 'Unstitching' perhaps distantly recalls Penelope's fruitless labour of unpicking the loom every night to avoid her suitors, although as the poem makes plain, the male speaker was himself once a fruitless suitor. Still, this only confirms poetry as literally a labour of love. The particular invisibility of the arduous labour of 'stitching and unstitching' to a utilitarian male audience almost says as much about gender and labour relations as about the art of poetry, whose importance is such it must include women – if only, it seems at first, as an appreciative audience for the poet.

It has struck some as an excessive claim that poetry could be so difficult. Is rhapsodically stitching away at words really so hard as to 'go down upon your marrow

¹⁸ Yeats, *Poems*, 132.

¹⁹ Though the word is post-Homeric, Pindar calls the Homeridai, the singers of Homer, 'singers of stitched verse' (ῥαπτῶν ἐπέων ἀοιδοί). See Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 2, line 2, *The Odes of Pindar*, trans. Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1947), 99.

²⁰ For more see Andrew Dalby, *Rediscovering Homer* (New York: Norton, 2006), 157-168.

²¹ W.B. Yeats, *Variorum Poems*, 120; *Poems*, 75.

²² Yeats, *Poems*, 132.

bones'? All the same, Yeats had precedent. Morris's first public lecture diagnoses just such a fall, following which

art grew a heavier thing to deal with, and its labour was more divided. [...] The artist came out from the handicraftsmen, and left them without hope of elevation, while he himself was left without the help of intelligent, industrious sympathy. Both have suffered; the artist no less than the workman.²³

This sundering of artist and maker borrows from the division of labour in Genesis, and more precisely mirrors the classic account of the manufacture of steel pins for textiles in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*.²⁴ After this a revaluation of all values is required to revive the totality of modern civilization and culture, not just the decorative arts, the ostensible subject of the lecture. Only with the eradication of poverty and the coming of 'equality' and 'fraternity' alongside 'liberty', only 'amidst renewed simplicity of life we shall have leisure to think about our work, that faithful daily companion, which no man any longer will venture to call the Curse of labour: for surely then we shall be happy in it'.²⁵ For Morris this quickly became a socialist ideal. Adam's curse, according to Morris, was caused by the industrial revolution and the resultant flow of capital. This was to blame, for instance, for the 'production of the heaviest of heavy black silks, or the biggest of useless guns', and the consequent environmental pollution of the rivers of Leeds by 'superfluous black dye'. But more than this, by dividing labour and the joy of creation it damaged all of our 'simplicity of life, begetting simplicity of taste', which in turn stimulated demand for industrial quantities of heavy Victorian textiles in the first place.²⁶ Stitching together arts and crafts, artist and craftsperson, was therefore an important part of the solution.

Yeats shared Morris's diagnosis of the ills in the industrial revolution, and for a time his socialist ideals.²⁷ The same disconnect between artist and worker comes in 'Adam's Curse' to characterize the classic difficulty of the modern(ist) artist, condemned to 'sedentary toil and so driving him out from his fellows', as the poet was separated from his audience.²⁸ Yet in the divide between men and women 'Adam's Curse' suggests a wider personal, even spiritual estrangement. Yeats was becoming less convinced that socialism opened a route to happiness. George Bernard Shaw, also a frequent guest at Morris's socialist evenings, had inspired Yeats's characteristic nightmare, in which he dreamed of a smiling sewing machine 'that clicked and shone'.²⁹ Illness and cure might be equally estranging. The poem takes stitching (and un-stitching) as emblematic labour. As in Morris's embroidery workshop, this stitching is surely done by hand, with considerable effort. Sewing by hand was notoriously hard work, as Yeats had observed in his own home. Thomas Hood's 'Song of the Shirt' had yoked a plaintive voice to the plight of female dressmakers:

²³ Morris, 'The Lesser Arts' (1878), *Selected Writings*, 89.

²⁴ see Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (London: W Strahan, 1776).

²⁵ Morris, *Selected Writings*, 104.

²⁶ Morris, *Selected Writings*, 102-3.

²⁷ Yeats notes that he had 'turned Socialist because of Morris's lectures and pamphlets', *Autobiographies*, 135.

²⁸ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 138.

²⁹ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 222.

Stitch! Stitch! Stitch!
 In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
 And still with a voice of dolorous pitch, –
 Would that its tone would reach the Rich! –
 She sang this 'Song of the Shirt'.³⁰

Through a more genteel poverty Yeats's mother, reduced by anxiety and a series of strokes to near-silence, continued working: 'I always see her sewing or knitting in spectacles and wearing some plain dress'.³¹ And, notwithstanding the Morris family's socialist ideals, after six years with 'the Gorgon' May Morris 'sewing away amid such depressing associations', taking holidays on her own time, ill and under-paid, his sister Lily was spent. By far the longest serving employee at the Morris workshop, she wrote a polite letter giving notice. May's irascible response, saying she should have dismissed her long ago as Lily was so 'delicate', only determined her further. 'Dear May', she wrote 'I have received your malicious and impudent letter and will leave at once. Lily Yeats.'³² She never saw May again. Manifestly the 'sedentary toil' of sewing and making poems was only a symptom of a larger malaise, to which the Morrises did not have all the answers. So while the poem advocates that arts associated with women are due a revival, this must accompany a profound reinvestment in personal relationships. In particular the division between men and women must be solved by dialogue.

Fig. 2. John Butler Yeats, Portrait of Susan Mary Yeats (1893)

³⁰ Published in *Punch* in 1843, the poem is quoted in Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 207. By 1863 the poem was anthologized, and a painting based on it by John Everett Millais, 'Stitch, Stitch, Stitch' was exhibited in 1876.

³¹ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 58.

³² Quoted William M. Murphy, *Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 180-1. See also Lily Yeats, 'My Six Years I Spent with May Morris', Lily Yeats's Scrapbook, Yeats Family Collection.

The poem's dialogue, however, is distributed unequally. The self-important male persona has rather more to say than the two listening women. His speech however gradually falters – 'we sat grown quiet at the name of love' – as if, with love now 'an idle trade enough', distance between men and women might be a condition of the fall. In anguish he claims 'I had a thought for no one's but your ears', although in so doing he puts a woman in the position of passive listener. This role is not comfortably occupied by either woman. However in both the poem's stated aesthetics and in its making, women do play a role. 'We must labour to be beautiful' is the poem's central perception, spoken by a woman. Her own beauty is defined less by looks than by a voice that is 'sweet and low'.³³ This kind of cliché can jar, but it does at least position a woman centrally in the poem, as well as centrally in poetry's production.³⁴ Because if it does not quite practice it, the poem pictures an art of love which privileges mutual, careful speech, in which lovers 'sigh and quote with learned looks / Precedents out of beautiful old books'.³⁵ Like the 'trade' of love, the craft of poetry requires both men and women to 'articulate sweet sounds together'. For this, Morris's own language was not adequate, as Yeats would argue in a metaphor drawing from weaving: 'Instead of the language of Chaucer and Shakespeare, its warp fresh from field and market – if the woof were learned – his age offered him a speech, exhausted from abstraction'.³⁶ While remaining indebted to Morris, to go beyond his example meant returning to earlier models of applied making for both poetry and audience – which meant finding a new way of speaking. Speaking well is thus made integral to the making of verse; and indeed integral to all forms of artistic and social revival.

Sympathy for this kind of leisured conversation might be in short supply. In real life the auditors in the poem, Kathleen and Maud Gonne inherited a fortune and had in this sense no need to work, unlike the poem's author. Nevertheless, Mary Wollstonecraft (whose father was a weaver) had observed long before the reduced opportunities for women's work as the industrial revolution damaged traditional cottage industries like spinning and sewing, and sought to expand the conception of work for women to include child-rearing and all kinds of labour and service including writing. According to her women were doubly cursed as both bound to have families and bound to labour to 'maintain their children by the sweat of their brow'.³⁷ In 'Adam's Curse' the persona regrets but finally accepts the biblical gendered division of labour, something Wollstonecraft argued passionately against.³⁸ All the same it helps explain the poem's provocative nature. With the rise of the middle classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the idea of work itself had been 'rewritten' so as to become 'the primary activity in forming adult identity'. Almost inevitably, then, writing's claim to be a form of labour would help to 'masculinize the literary',

³³ Yeats, *Poems*, 132-3.

³⁴ For more see Adrian Paterson, 'Listening to the Women', *Dublin Review of Books* (December 2017).

³⁵ Yeats, *Poems*, 133.

³⁶ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 132.

³⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: 1792). Her assessment of economic conditions is disputed by some authorities, but her thesis received strong support in the early twentieth-century in research from such as historians as Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1930).

³⁸ For more see Jennie Batchelor, *Women's Work: Labour, Gender, Authorship, 1750-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

gendering textual production as male.³⁹ While in passing skewering a whole host of 'useful' middle-class professions, 'Adam's Curse' by contrast comes down pretty clearly on the side of work so often defined as female, or even 'feminine': labour that has do with beauty, textiles, appearance, and speaking. According to the poem, this is what has value, and is currently unvalued, and just the same is true of poetry and love. What is interesting is that a lover's laboured self-pity is transformed into a poem, perhaps Yeats's first, of characteristically modernist sensibility, at once because it is deeply self-conscious, because it takes aim at contemporary economic and social conditions, and because it has abandoned all hope to persuade even its intended hearers. Yeats cannot by any means be described as feminist, but in choosing, in dialogue with women, to define poetry as labour by virtue of stitching, 'sweet sounds', and fine-speaking, by the terms of the age he was conspicuously feminizing the role of poet. Moreover he was doing so in the teeth of prevailing economic assumptions about the value of work and leisure.

The question is why? 'Adam's Curse' had appeared to describe a fall rather than a rise, an end rather than a beginning. The faded blue-green colours at the poem's close bring to mind Yeats's monochrome costume and fabric-screen set designs for *The Shadowy Waters* and the 'exercise in the speaking of verse' that the play became, but the twilight atmosphere of all this hardly promised a new dawn.⁴⁰ The closing image of the moon as a washed-out empty shell seems if anything to sound the death-knell for material symbolisms. On the other hand, a shell's empty but therefore resonant space might just be available to be filled with sound. In a lament for a fallen, unbelieving, industrial age might lurk the germs of new possibilities.

Joining the labour of 'stitching' with quoting 'out of beautiful old books' recalls nothing more than the nascent Dun Emer Industries. As the self-conscious labour on 'Adam's Curse' drew to a close, his sisters, together with Evelyn Gleeson, were forming Dun Emer, a co-operative that brought the crafts of bookmaking and stitching together. By the time 'Adam's Curse' was published in the *Monthly Review* of December 1902, the 'Albion' hand press on which Lolly Yeats built what became the Cuala Press had arrived in Dublin. Its first proper job was printing Yeats's *In the Seven Woods*, Lolly and her team of apprentices taking trouble to print the text in two colours, including on facing pages the strange lineations of her brother's new poem. On the other side of the curtain Elizabeth Yeats and her apprentices worked on embroidery commissions, and Gleeson's team on carpets and other textiles. Material manifestations of the labour of Yeats's poem were quietly enacted in a Dublin suburb.

And this was exclusively female labour. All of the workers and directors were women. Explicitly nationalist and implicitly feminist, this was an Irish co-operative that tried to do things differently. A Dun Emer publicity leaflet of 1904 noted: 'Everything

³⁹ Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 107, 216.

⁴⁰ W.B. Yeats, *The Arrow*, 1.2, 24 November 1906 (Dublin: Maunsel, 1906). Yeats insisted 'the play is dreamy & dim & the colour should be the same', positing 'a blue green sail, against an indigo blue back-cloth, & the mast & bulwark indigo blue. The persons in blue & green with some copper ornaments'. Yeats, Letter to T. Sturge Moore, 26 March 1903, *The Collected Letters Of W.B. Yeats* Vol. 3, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 338.

as far as possible is Irish: the paper, the books, the linen of the embroidery and the wool of the tapestry and carpets'.⁴¹ Notably there is no mention of cotton, whose production was associated with the British Empire in India and Afghanistan, with the slave trade in North America, and whose trade helped forge the links and conditions for modern global industrial capitalism.⁴² Or indeed of the 'Albion' Press, and the work of Morris's master printer Emery Walker, omissions which increased the distance from England.⁴³ While the co-operative faced economic hardship, and a fractious history – WB and Lolly disagreeing over money and control, the sisters breaking away from Gleeson to form Cuala Industries in 1908 – its legacy is unquestioned. The prophecy that 'things made of pure materials made by these Irish girls must be lasting and more valuable than machine goods' proved, on balance, to be true.⁴⁴

Quite consciously the co-operative operated at a conspicuous distance from industrial-scale production. Conceptualizing and realizing this organization, and developing its radical simplicity in design, required the development of a creative co-operative, and the training of young women apprentices in handprinting, embroidery, and textiles, into teams of expert workers. Women workers of the time tended to leave on their marriage. This was unfortunate, but it did allow new generations of apprentices to gain valuable skills, and many like Esther Ryan stayed loyal to the company to the end, even following the deaths of the Yeats sisters. Though historically the Yeats family had once been Dublin linen merchants, there is no question at Dun Emer, and then Cuala Industries, that workers whether involved in textiles or printing faced better conditions.⁴⁵ In the Dublin lockout of 1913 W.B. Yeats and his sisters found themselves on the side of the strikers, if only because they shared an enemy in the Catholic industrialist and newspaper owner William Martin Murphy. Even as he used his newspapers to break the transport workers strike, a contemporary Irish Textile Workers Union (ITWU) poster addressed itself 'To the Linen Slaves of Belfast', urging their solidarity. The 'Irish girls' of Cuala were not linen slaves, however much economic conditions militated against the organization's commercial success.

This was not 'some vague Utopia' of women's making. There remained a division of labour, as designs or books generally conceived by men were made by women. But not always. Dun Emer's first major commission in 1903 was to embroider

⁴¹ Anonymous, (Dublin: Dun Emer Press, 1904). Probably authored by Evelyn Gleeson. Quoted in Gifford Lewis, *The Yeats Sisters and the Cuala* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 61.

⁴² So argues a recent study by Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).

⁴³ The cast-iron hand-operated Albion Press was made by E. & W. Ullmer at Fetter Lane in London (a similar model was later used by Laura Riding and Robert Graves for the Seizin Press in Majorca). Morris's own views on Ireland were relatively sympathetic: he had supported Home Rule in Ireland as damaging to the Empire but hoped that Ireland would choose a socialist course so 'their revolution shall be part of the great international movement'. He lectured on these themes in several venues in Dublin during his April 1886 visit, where he met Yeats at the Contemporary Club. See Fintan Lane 'William Morris and Irish politics', *History Ireland* 8.1 (Spring 2000).

⁴⁴ Qtd Lewis, *The Yeats Sisters*, 61.

⁴⁵ The Yeatses were descended through Church of Ireland clergymen from a family of Dublin wholesale linen merchants; on W.B.'s mother's side the Pollexfens and Middletons of Sligo were ship's chandlers, merchants, and millers. See Murphy, *Prodigal Father*, & Lewis, *The Yeats Sisters*, 9-11.

saints banners for sodality societies in St Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea. Designs were done by the husband and wife team of Jack and Cottie Yeats (with contributions from George Russell and Pamela Colman Smith), finished and worked by Lily and her apprentices. This was a genuinely co-operative labour, and the results were a fascinating combination of the material and spiritual. The stance of St Colman, for example, holding up a scroll with head raised and mouth open, anticipated Jack Yeats's designs for more earthy figures in the Cuala Press 1908-1915 series *A Broadside*, in which street performers holding up printed broadsides compete for crowds. What is this man of the cloth, stitched together by Lily Yeats and her assistants, actually doing? Evidently he is not reading quietly or calmly quoting precedents, but in some way articulating sweet sounds. The ecstasy of his upturned face suggests he must be singing.

Fig. 3 Jack B. Yeats, St Colman (1903). By Dun Emer industries for St Brendan's Cathedral, Loughrea © Estate of Jack B. Yeats, DACS London / IVARO Dublin, 2018

Such a material manifestation of the rhapsode is emblematic. For W.B. Yeats the 'articulation of sweet sounds together' came to require music. That word together implied not just co-operation but something musical about the harmony (even polyphony) made by such sound-weaving. And 'sweet sounds' required an audience.

Raw silk: modernist textile poems

Yeats's essay 'Speaking to the Psalter' declares his concern with conventional 'singing' and natural antipathy to 'print and paper' had been answered. 'I have just heard a poem spoken with so delicate a sense of its rhythm, with so perfect a respect for its meaning, that if I were a wise man and could persuade a few people to learn the art I would never open a book of verse again'.⁴⁶ This was a musical art, but expressly not that of a trained singer. Instead it presented an unconventional trained speaker, a woman, at its centre. She was Florence Farr, stage actress and Golden Dawn survivor, composer of Egyptian masques, forger of parallels to Greek plays and Renaissance operas, educator and author of *The Music of Speech* (1909), a woman who not only through her acting and musical expertise proved the perfect exponent of verse speaking to an instrument, but performed always in beautiful pleated dresses as if she had stepped out of the British Museum's Parthenon gallery.⁴⁷ For a time Yeats saw the 'new art' they forged together as the consummation of all his stitching and unstitching. 'We can now make a perfect record of everything', he enthused, after more than ten years of the two experimenting, performing, lecturing, and training new speakers – again, all women.⁴⁸ Alongside his emphasis on drama, the central place of the psalter experiments in Yeats's life is starting to be understood, and Ronald Schuchard's work has done much to remedy the tendency to think it a mad aside in Yeats's poetic career.⁴⁹ Yet more than this it must surely also be recognised as an indispensable component to modernism. Moreover it was an art that required women, textiles, and song.

⁴⁶ W.B. Yeats, 'Speaking to the Psalter', *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 13.

⁴⁷ See Florence Farr, *The Music of Speech* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1909).

⁴⁸ W.B. Yeats to Lady Augusta Gregory 22 December 1901, *Collected Letters Vol. 3*, 139.

⁴⁹ Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Fig. 4. The actress Florence Farr reclining, c. 1890s

So Ezra Pound's poem, first published in 1914's *BLAST*, tells us:

Come my cantilations,
 Let us dump our hatreds into one bunch and be done with them.
 Hot sun, clear water, fresh wind,
 Let me be free of pavements,
 Let me be free of the printers.
 Let come beautiful people
 Wearing raw silk of good colour,
 Let come the graceful speakers,
 Let come the ready of wit,
 Let come the gay of manner, the insolent and the exulting.
 We speak of burnished lakes
 Of dry air, as clear as metal.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations*, ed. Richard Sieburth (New York: The Library of America, 2003), 570.

In the vociferous typography of BLAST the poem conceives of a new kind of poetry, but one after the manner of the very old. Addressing his own songs, which he calls with old-fashioned punctiliousness ‘cantilations’, the poet-persona exhorts himself to be free of the solidity of the city’s ‘pavements’ and ‘printers’, and this notwithstanding the poem’s own strident printed form. It is a poem of surfaces rather than sounds: of light hitting off planes, of raw silk, burnished lakes, and dry air; but on these face values the poem also in cold print demands, which seems surprising, a return to orality, seeming to privilege the spoken, even perhaps the sung voice in poetry.

The poem is not perhaps Pound’s best, but it is downright puzzling unless it is viewed as marking a not-so-private tribute to Yeats and Farr, exponent of ‘the most perfect poetical elocution’, and their efforts in verse-speaking.⁵¹ Pound himself had spent the summer of 1909 ‘working at Psalter settings’ with Farr,⁵² and it was she who had introduced him to the Café Tour Eiffel where he declaimed with great energy his ‘Sestina: Altaforte’ with its battle-cry ‘let’s to music’.⁵³ ‘Cantilations’ was George Bernard Shaw’s (rude and disputed) name for Yeats’s experiments with Farr (Shaw had fulminated ‘priests, even toasters cantilate’).⁵⁴ It is adopted here by Pound as a semi-detached troubadour label for his own verses – verses with unquestionable declamatory energy. Pound’s enlisting of ‘graceful speakers’ ‘ready of wit’ recalls Baldesar Castiglione’s courtly injunctions towards *sprezzatura* in fine-speaking and dress in *The Book of the Courtier*; that they should be ‘gay of manner, insolent and exulting’ suggests a more Nietzschean daring in speech.⁵⁵ (Together Yeats and Farr had added verses from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* to the psalter repertoire.)⁵⁶ Finding in these experiments the central aesthetic of a new poetic project suggests that Pound too would look backward as well as forward.

Confirming these associations is the insidious weaving of Yeatsian threads into BLAST’s poem. Indeed Pound’s poem conducts a kind of modernist *rhapsodein*, borrowing and stitching together recognisable scraps of Yeats’s verse. The disdained ‘pavements’ are evidently the same ‘pavements grey’ from which the speaker of Yeats’s ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ wishes to escape; the ‘printers’ those ‘newspapers’ or conventional printers working in ‘dead print on dead paper’ that Yeats had hoped to reject. ‘We speak of burnished lakes’ represents that poem’s surfaces polished and made new – potentially by fine speaking. At Stone Cottage in Sussex Pound had secretarial duties; he was working for Yeats, as well as with him, in close collaboration.⁵⁷ It is hard not to suspect Pound of direct imitation. In fact his BLAST poem enacts a plagiarism of two more of Yeats’s poems about plagiarism, ripping

⁵¹ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 219.

⁵² Qtd A. David Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet Vol.1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 98. See also Ronald Schuchard, 262.

⁵³ Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations*, 105.

⁵⁴ George Bernard Shaw, Letter to Florence Farr 6 June 1902, in Clifford Bax, ed., *Farr, Shaw, and Yeats* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1944), 20.

⁵⁵ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, ed. W.H.D. Rouse, trans. Sir Thomas Hoby (London: Dent, 1928), 75.

⁵⁶ See Ronald Schuchard, 154, 176.

⁵⁷ See James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

fabric shamelessly from 'A Coat' and 'Closing Rhymes' in Yeats's book *Responsibilities*. The latter poem is best known for its open and self-conscious borrowing ('dull ass's hoof' is named as 'Ben Jonson's phrase'), and voicing the complaint that through insult and plagiarism, with the grace of 'ancient ceremony' gone, the poet's 'priceless things', poems metonymically made of fine stuff, have become 'but a post the passing dogs defile'. 'Closing Rhymes' articulates a concern about audience, about inspiration, about borrowings, in terms of 'articulation':

While I, from that 'reed-throated whisperer'
Who comes at need, although not now as once
A clear articulation in the air
But inwardly, surmise companions [...] ⁵⁸

Again, material and immaterial conjoin, but here airy inspiration desiccates into the material culture of now-defiled 'priceless things'. Yeats's pessimism about the ever-harder act of articulation, recalling the stance and phrasing of 'Adam's Curse', can, it seems, be resolved only by finding a new audience of companions. Pound, in repurposing Yeats's 'clear articulation in the air' and styling it as modern ('dry air, as clear as metal') advocates that fine speakers might resolve this question of audience and insinuates himself into this tradition.

According to Pound, forging a new kind of poetry based on speech requires speakers wearing 'raw silk of good colour'. This textile metaphor is analogous, and precisely contemporaneous to Yeats's own casting off of 'A Coat' in the poem of that name, first published under Pound's auspices in *Poetry* of May 1914. Here Yeats's poet-persona renounces the coat he had made 'covered in embroideries/out of old mythologies'. The coat is left to his admirers, imitators and plagiarisers. Ironies abound, as Yeats's poem itself is a borrowing from poem seven in Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, a book of songs he had helped translate:

My song has put off her adornments. She has no pride of dress and decoration.
Ornaments would mar our union; they would come between thee and me; their
jingling would drown thy whispers.[...] O master poet, I have sat down at thy feet.
Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for me to fill with
music. ⁵⁹

Yeats repeats *Gitanjali's* attachment to simplicity in dress and song, unusually, by choosing to address his own verse, and as a musical phenomenon at that:

Song, let them take it
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked.

In all these poems a change in style is announced by a change in clothes. All require the removal of decoration, and all, also, pertain to sound. That song should accompany a commitment to renewed simplicity is more than metaphor: Yeats's

⁵⁸ Yeats, *Poems*, 230.

⁵⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*, introduced by W.B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1913), 6.

introduction noted that ‘Rabindrinath Tagore, like Chaucer’s forerunners, writes music for his words [...] something which has never seemed strange, or unnatural, or in need of defence.’⁶⁰ This accounts for Tagore’s humble suggestion that he is an empty instrument to be filled with music, recalling the inspiring ‘reed-throated whisperer’ of ‘Closing Lines’. Both Tagore’s intimacy with song and the poetic self-consciousness which this provokes find direct correspondence in ‘A Coat’. However, Yeats’s determination to walk naked strips away more layers than Tagore’s poem, including, interestingly, its pose of humility. As described by lines with the economy and authority to rhyme ‘take it’ and ‘naked’, taking off one’s clothes can be a proud individual ‘enterprise’, with all of its entrepreneurial implications – even as we suspect Yeats’s doctrine of the masks will lead to further layers and enrobings.⁶¹ All of the ‘let me be free’, ‘let come’, and direct address of ‘Come my Cantilations’ borrows from these self-conscious addresses, as if dress and address are somehow linked. Pound’s speakers remain clothed: but ‘raw silk’ recognisably revisits Yeats’s abandonment of embroidered textiles.

Silk had become a vital symbol for both Pound and Yeats. Pound had employed silk in plenty of poems like ‘The Garden’ where

Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall
She walks by the railing of a path in Kensington Gardens.⁶²

Through silk this imagist poem marks its debt to French symbolism, recalling the Japonaiserie of Whistler’s fan paintings, much as Yeats once recalled his peacocks.⁶³ Raw silk however was something manifestly closer to the real thing. Raw silk suggests an artisanal cloth, coarse-grained and cut, perhaps with knots, veins of the material and even stitches visible. This is a material unembroidered, untempered and yet at the same time ‘of good colour’, acknowledging itself as a worked and dyed artefact. It suggests a poem, in other words, of directness, pure light and colour, with elaborate straddled adjectives banished, but whose working is shown.

So many of these modernist textile poems have precisely this in common. In self-consciously talking about their own procedures, some go so far as to address themselves, as does Pound’s ‘Come My Cantilations’. Such self-consciousness seems

⁶⁰ W.B. Yeats, ‘Introduction’ to Tagore, *Gitanjali*, xv.

⁶¹ Yeats, *Poems*, 230. It is notable in a poem about borrowings (‘take it’) that enterprise too derives from Latin *prendere*, to take. That the determination to walk without encumbrance is borrowed from Tagore, meaning *Gitanjali*’s sincerity has been dressed by a degree of layered irony, suggests there is more shared endeavour in the proceedings than acknowledged, helping explain the economic contradictions sharply noted by Catriona Clutterbuck. See Catriona Clutterbuck, ‘A Thread to the Afterlife’ Textiles and the Otherworld in Irish Poetry: Yeats, Boland, Heaney, and Meehan’, *RISE* 3.1 (2018).

⁶² Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations*, 264.

⁶³ The poem quotes as epigraph ‘en robe de parade’ from the opening line ‘Mon âme est une infante en robe de parade’ (My soul is an Infanta robed in state) of the prefatory poem to *Au Jardin de L’Infante* (1893) by Frenchman Albert-Victor Samain (1858-1900). Samain’s melancholy, musical, artificial style of symbolist poetry was much influenced by Verlaine: Typical titles include ‘Accompaniment’, ‘Arpeggio’, ‘Music on the Water’, and the texture-rich ‘The Orient’, in which appears ‘a royal poet robed in purple dye’. His work was set to music by the composers Jean Cras and Camille Saint-Saëns, and translated by Jethro Bithell.

endemic to post-symbolist textile verse which can no longer gesture quite without irony to the kinds of cloth Yeats and Arthur Symonds once indulged. T.S.Eliot's 'The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock', with its 'skirts that trail along the floor' and Prufrock's fastidious attention to his own 'shirt-sleeves', 'white flannel trousers', and 'My necktie rich and modest' is emblematic in its endemic self-consciousness and distancing ironies; Wallace Stevens's 'Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds' opens with the absurdly overwrought 'Gloomy grammarians in golden gowns'. Such collusion between address and dress suggests that Yeats's 'A Coat' cast a significant shadow. While it rejected the poet's home-spun embroideries, Stevens's 'Explanation' inherits its self-criticism:

Ach, Mutter,
This old, black dress,
I have been embroidering
French flowers on it.

Often, as here, such self-consciousness emerges when an appeal is made to something foreign, as with the affected 'embroidered fantails' of Stevens's 'The Emperor of Ice Cream' or the 'embroidered slippers' and 'pantaloons' of 'Colloquy with a Polish Aunt'.⁶⁴ So Pound's 'Further Instructions' to his songs reverses Yeats's naked austerity, promising one of them a 'green Coat out of China / With dragons worked on it' and 'scarlet silk trousers' to clothe their embarrassing nakedness.⁶⁵

Despite its clarity of articulation 'raw silk' is a patently orientalist borrowing of this kind, but one that at least tries to go beyond superficial colouring. It attempts to harness a new energy of vorticism as Pound's volume *Cathay* and his *Cantos* do in invoking China. Pound wrestled with many of the same issues as Morris and Yeats concerning the economics of art. His monetary investigations and interest in the cost of labour survived his obsession with social credit and highly problematic wartime broadcasts. So the *Cantos* employ the economics of silk manufacture to symbolise 'the music of a lost dynasty'.⁶⁶ The very first ideograph employed by the *Pisan Cantos* emerges as prayers are

plowed in the sacred field and unwound the silk worms early
in tensile [*hsien*]⁶⁷

Used again and again in the later *Cantos*, the character *hsien* operates as a verb to mean to manifest, to display, to be illustrious, and as a noun to signify brightness, radiance, illumination, and therefore a piercing purity of intelligence: 'light tensile immaculata' or what Pound calls elsewhere 'sun's silk' or 'silky light'.⁶⁸ Harnessing the

⁶⁴ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 124,153, 92, 160.

⁶⁵ Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations*, 302.

⁶⁶ Ezra Pound, *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound*, ed. D.D.Paige (New York: New Directions, 1971), 128.

⁶⁷ Ezra Pound, Canto 74, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1971, 1998), 449.

⁶⁸ Pound translates Chung Yung thus 'As silky light, King Wen's virtue / Coming down in the sunlight, / what purity!' Ezra Pound, *Confucius* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 187.

sun (and moon) in the growth of silk and the pattern of its weaving made for Pound an iconic emblem of high civilization.

Concerned of course with their own making, and thus showing their working, the *Cantos* tend to present a male conception of beauty. This same Canto 74 later assures us that (with quotation marks) “‘beauty is difficult” sd/ Mr Beardsley’, ascribing this crystallization of the toil of modernist difficulty to a male oral tradition.⁶⁹ As we’ve seen, Yeats’s genealogy for this idea is strikingly different, involving the work and speech of women who ‘must labour to be beautiful’. It is intriguing then that Yeats’s ‘Upon a Dying Lady’ also associates the Beardsleys with silk. Except here Yeats chooses a sharp-tongued female heroine, not one associated with purity. In ‘Certain Artists Bring Her Dolls and Drawings’ Aubrey’s sister Mabel Beardsley is depicted surrounded by figures made in her own likeness where

a tress
Of dull red hair was flowing
Over some silken dress
Cut in the Turkish fashion,
Or it may be, like a boy’s.⁷⁰

In real life these dolls dressed in silk were made by the artist Charles Ricketts, one half of a gay partnership with the painter Charles Shannon. Ricketts, a notable practitioner of the ‘lesser arts’ with a considerable influence on Yeats’s aesthetic, had designed costumes for some few of Yeats’s plays. They included, over a simple tunic and trousers, an elaborate grand patterned cloak in green and gold for Cuchulain in the 1915 production of *On Baile’s Strand*. According to Yeats, Ricketts’ gift to Mabel Beardsley included ‘women with loose trousers and boys that looked like women’.⁷¹ That such cross-dressing should suggest not merely nineties’ aestheticism or tacit homosexual signalling but a kind of daring female heroism appeared to herald a new gender-bending world in which women wearing trousers were something to celebrate in poetry. Even decorous silk fashions, through changing gender politics, might conspire to make it new.

⁶⁹ Pound, *Cantos*, 464.

⁷⁰ Yeats, *Poems*, 261.

⁷¹ Yeats, *Poems*, 563.

Fig. 5. Charles Ricketts, Costume design for Cuchulain in *On Baile's Strand* (1914/1915)

For the moment Yeats had travelled down the silk road only as far as Turkey, but by the time the poem was published in 1917 (delayed by the dying lady's inconvenient survival) he had ventured much further. While the mature Pound was set on China, the entry into this eastern world was of course Japan, and following the collaboration with Pound on the Cuala Press volume *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, Japanese crafts remained a touchstone for Yeats.⁷² The Noh form co-opted the 'lesser arts' of silk costumes, scenery, and fine speaking together with dance, music, and poetry to create a living drama of travellers and ghosts where material and immaterial worlds met. So Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well* could economically represent the well by a square of blue cloth on the floor, inspired by the folded kimono that represented a sick-bed in the

⁷² Ezra Pound and Ernest Fennellosa, *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1916). See also *Noh, or Accomplishment* (London: Macmillan, 1917).

Noh play *Aoi-no-ue*.⁷³ And every time a new ‘song for the folding and unfolding of the cloth’ began each of Yeats’s *Four Plays for Dancers* it confirmed again the intimate attachment of song and textile.⁷⁴ It is no coincidence that ‘folding and unfolding’ should recall ‘stitching and unstitching’. In a sense the ceremony created the entire *mise-en-scène* of the drama in words and movement; and then uncreated it, folding it away as the musicians repeated the action to a different song at the close. This invented ritual of song and cloth imaged the labour of creation and its magical undoing, highlighting its temporality, strangeness, and fragility.

Fig.6. Edmund Dulac, Design for the Musician's cloth in *At The Hawk's Well* (1916)

Not only vital to the plays, Yeats's employment of Noh theatre left its mark on numerous poems. Here Yeats's appreciation of it as an ‘aristocratic form’ came increasingly to the fore, and its characteristic material came to stand for fineness, femininity, even luxury.⁷⁵ So ‘In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz’ features, twice, the doubled pattern of ‘Two girls in silk kimonos, both / Beautiful, one a gazelle’.⁷⁶ When in the American west Yeats was presented by Japanese Consul Junzo Sato with a gift from the east, of a ceremonial sword wrapped in embroidered silk, tied with silk cord, it became Yeats's chosen symbol, used again and again. ‘My Table’ from ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ makes much of this object's effect on the business of writing and the poet's conscience:

Two heavy trestles, and a board
Where Sato's gift, a changeless sword,
By pen and paper lies,
That it may moralise
My days out of their aimlessness.

⁷³ See Richard Taylor, ‘Assimilation and Accomplishment: Noh Drama and an Unpublished Source for *At the Hawk's Well*’, *Yeats and the Theatre*, ed. Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds (Canada: Maclean-Hunter Press/Macmillan, 1975). 152.

⁷⁴ A similar ritual is employed in *At the Hawk's Well*, *The Dreaming of the Bones*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, *Calvary*, and later plays. The precise phrase is employed in the last three. See W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats* (London, Macmillan, 1952), 281, 431, 449. *At the Hawk's Well*.

⁷⁵ Yeats, ‘Certain Noble Plays of Japan’ (1916), *Essays*, 221.

⁷⁶ Yeats, *Poems*, 347.

A bit of an embroidered dress
Covers its wooden sheath.

Such self-consciousness is here salutary, not ironic, but the sword itself remains partly hidden. This seems to be because of its power. The poem argues that art is created from torment 'only an aching heart / Conceives a changeless work of art'. Being changeless, the sword achieves a kind of immortality, like that of the perfected soul, possible only because it was once steeped in desire and violence. Such symbols as the sword therefore, in perfectly imaging artistic perfection and the soul's purity, can disturb even the most cultured of aristocrats, including one who

Had such an aching heart
That he, although a country's talk
For silken clothes and stately walk
Had waking wits; it seemed
Juno's peacock screamed.⁷⁷

The horror and strangeness of this apocalyptic scream, in this civil war poem representing the piercing intrusion of history through *Rosa Alchemica's* comforting 'tapestry full of the blue and bronze of peacocks' should not distract all our attention. Silk matters. Against the terrifying purity of the sword the embroidered dress, it seems, forms a vital counterpart. The association becomes clearer in 'Dialogue of Self and Soul', where around 'the consecrated blade'

That flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn
From some court-lady's dress and round
The wooden scabbard bound and wound,
Can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn.⁷⁸

Silk as courtly feminine material is conventional enough – but as female principle it becomes an emblem of the fragile body housing the soul, wound about 'as mummies in the mummy cloth are wound'.⁷⁹ As Hedwig Schwall points out, with the wooden scabbard present, this scrap of torn textile, judging by its description almost more embroidery than silk, appears barely functional; and yet the poem insists on its utility, even its necessity. Again, a textile poem features unequal dialogue. Here however it is 'My Self' and not 'My Soul' who is speaking, and when 'My Soul' is silenced by considering the ascent to Heaven ('my tongue's a stone'), 'My Self', however 'tattered' and 'faded' its material emblem, gets an extended final word, full of 'sweetness' and song: 'We must laugh and we must sing'.⁸⁰ Once again silk is affirmed by sound.

Yeats's symbol of sword and cloth was used in so many poems it becomes sufficiently self-conscious as to be condensed into a poem entitled 'Symbols':

⁷⁷ Yeats, *Poems*, 310.

⁷⁸ Yeats, *Poems*, 349.

⁷⁹ Yeats, from 'All Soul's Night', *Poems*, 344.

⁸⁰ Yeats, *Poems*, 351.

A storm beaten old watch-tower
A blind hermit rings the hour.

All-destroying sword-blade still
Carried by the wandering fool.

Gold-sewn silk on the sword blade
Beauty and fool together laid.⁸¹

This is abbreviated and gnomic enough to be derived from Japanese forms of poetry, yet it is no haiku. The poem, for instance, allows in no glorious natural thing. Instead it dissonantly thrusts together examples of the well-made and the ill-born, conjuring a definite eugenic note in the conjunction of 'beauty and fool' with the ambiguity of 'together laid'. In this context 'gold-sewn silk' takes precedence over the 'sword-blade', but at the cost of representing female or artistic fragility as well as beauty. The violence and sexual suggestiveness of this conjunction are, potentially, more troubling even than the rape of 'Leda and the Swan'. That these paired images themselves symbolize the operation of the dual nature of symbolism is little comfort, especially as these are symbols stitched throughout Yeats's verse. So in *The Player Queen* the actress Decima refuses the part she has been given of Noah's beaten, subjugated wife, instead singing a strange talismanic song in which a mother's 'needle pulled / The golden and silver thread':

She pulled the thread and bit the thread
And made a golden gown,
She wept because she had dreamt that I
Was born to wear the crown.⁸²

When she then adopts the slippers and gold brocade dress of the queen, it is as if, through a very material form of self-fashioning, she has sung herself into the role. Her free sexuality 'spin ye, whirl ye, dance ye / Till Queen Decima's found her fancy' might let her sleep with her poet or with the scheming Prime Minister (either of whom could be called 'fool') but at the close her destiny is in her own hands.⁸³ Symbols have this power.

Textile wisdoms

If beauty is hard-won and easily lost the arrangement of it is too. 'Symbols' has a curious history: it was composed in 1927, alongside such works as 'Sailing to Byzantium' and 'In Memory', but does not find a home until the Cuala Press volume *Words for Music Perhaps*, a volume whose title sequence is full of textile-related songs such as 'A Bargain' or 'Old Tom Again' where religious incarnation is symbolized by the metonymic 'winding sheet and swaddling-clothes'.⁸⁴ There 'Symbols' competes with these different kinds of materiality, especially with the adjoining 'Veronica's Napkin'. Now heaven's embroidered cloths are erected as 'tent's drapery', held up by the

⁸¹ Yeats, *Poems*, 354.

⁸² Yeats, *Collected Plays* (London: Macmillan).

⁸³ Yeats, *Collected Plays*, 416.

⁸⁴ Yeats, *Poems*, 384.

‘Tent-pole of Eden’, and all of the ‘symbolical glory’ of heaven’s musical fabric is poised about the centre: ‘the magnitude and glory there/ Stood in the circuit of a needle’s eye’. These abundant heavens are contrasted unfavourably with New Testament austerity, Jesus’s coming only imaged by his face in a ‘pattern on a napkin dipped in blood’.⁸⁵ The excesses of the new Irish Free State, increasingly self-defining as Catholic, perhaps provoked this unpicking of St Veronica’s literal vision and the crass materiality of saints and relics. Echoes abound in Samuel Beckett’s contemporary poem ‘Enueg II’ which with dark irony picks up Yeats’s fallen napkin:

veronica mundi
 veronica munda
 give us a wipe for the love of Jesus⁸⁶

‘Veronica’ has conspicuously replaced Yeats’s animating ‘anima mundi’, while the pedantic Latin declension from male ‘mundi’ to female ‘munda’ (of the world) allows in all genders. Already playing games with clichés, Beckett’s double-level discourse puns on a vocal aside, meant also literally, ‘for the love of Jesus’.⁸⁷ Potentially it is this love as much as the world which is gender-inclusive. Yet all genders are also included in desperation: the line’s spoken force signals that a desperate desire for some material manifestation of religion – for a touch, for a sign – has rubbed off on whoever it is begs ‘give us a wipe’. Veronica’s holy veil, transformed by touch into an image of Jesus’s face, has become little more than a shared dirty handkerchief. That Beckett’s ‘grave suave singing silk’ fails to animate his dawn-poem ‘Alba’ – ‘there is no sun and no unveiling’ – suggests he is using Yeatsian kinds of imagery to bleaker ends even than ‘Adam’s Curse’.

Despite such connections with contemporary poetry, Yeats’s late group of compressed, densely-woven, theologically unorthodox Christian poems, some conceived alongside Noh-style plays such as *Calvary* and *Resurrection*, tend to be ignored, despite their political and aesthetic significance. Some however take care to present woman at the heart of religious experience, again through textiles. ‘Fragments’ recalls the rending of a dress, only to tell, again, a compressed story of the fall:

I
 Locke sank into a swoon;
 The Garden died;
 God took the spinning-jenny
 Out of his side.

II
 Where got I that truth?
 Out of a medium’s mouth.
 Out of nothing it came,
 Out of the forest loam,

⁸⁵ Yeats, *Poems*, 353.

⁸⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Collected Poems in English and French* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 13.

⁸⁷ Just as the name Veronica was seen by some in the medieval church as a pun meaning ‘vera icon’, true image, though it seems it was rather a Latinization of Berenice.

Out of dark night where lay
The crowns of Nineveh.⁸⁸

The poem's theme is not silk but cotton. Yeats had pictured 'some obscure person somewhere inventing the spinning-jenny, upon his face that look of benevolence kept by painters and engravers'. This benevolence is an illusion, however, condemning poets and artists to be 'separated spirits'.⁸⁹ A recognisably Morrisian denunciation of the mechanical cloth-making of the industrial revolution is extended to represent all of Locke's 'mechanical' philosophy, and indeed all rationality, all of which fruitless, damaging toil is ironically, cruelly predestined by God, in a version of Dionysus' birth or Jesus's death. That cotton manufacture should so pithily cause the death of the Garden of Eden borrows force from Blake's *Milton*, where 'Newtons Pantocrator weaving the Woof of Locke / To Mortals thy Mills seem every thing'.⁹⁰ But Yeats's poem does not end there. Such a masculine story of descentance ignores Eve. If it still takes labour to make the poem, it takes a woman to spark it. And it is that conventionally feminine profession, mediumship, that provides wisdom.⁹¹ Does this directly represent Yeats's wife George, with whom he collaborated on two editions of his philosophical text *A Vision*? Certainly the system they created was worked out not only through her automatic writing, but by sessions of 'sleeps' in which her oral testimony was transcribed by her husband.⁹² Probably so, then, in which case wisdom must come with irony attached, as George Hyde Lees came from a northern family of cotton millers and manufacturers, whence her modest inheritance. To the poem what matters more is that truth comes by mouth. Of course this truth concerns more than the textile industry: in *A Vision* the rise and fall of civilizations (including our own) are imaged by the spools and windings of gyres threading together opposing principles as the ages of the Platonic great year come around. Only a truth orally delivered, derived from the darkness of prehistory can penetrate these whirring fates.

So far the material making of verse is bound up with literally immaterial manifestations of it in spoken and sung poetry. But following this thread of material leads inevitably to more numinous immateriality, and to a strange poem almost contemporary with 'Fragments' and 'Symbols', called 'Wisdom', first published in the *October Blast* of 1927, shortly afterwards in *the Tower*. It is one of the least celebrated poems in that volume, probably because it compresses syntax and vocabulary to the limit in twenty lines of some of the densest poetry Yeats ever wrought. Nothing like a song, then; nor, overtly, is it a poem about sound. On the other hand, the very title is (with a layer of irony) presented as something pronounced and sounded out for us: 'Wisdom [...] That cognomen sounded best'. This matters, especially as the poem is about how best to tell a story.

⁸⁸ Yeats, *Poems*, 321.

⁸⁹ Yeats, *Explorations*, 358.

⁹⁰ William Blake, 'Milton', *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley: University of California, 1982).

⁹¹ 'There are more women than men mediums today; and there have been or seem to have been more witches than wizards'. W.B. Yeats, 'Wizards and Witches and Irish Folklore', in Lady Augusta Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1970), 308.

⁹² Margaret Mills Harper, *Wisdom of Two* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Wisdom

The true faith discovered was
 When painted panel, statuary,
 Glass mosaic, window-glass,
 Amended what was told awry
 By some peasant gospeller;
 Swept the sawdust from the floor
 Of that working-carpenter.
 Miracle had its playtime where
 In damask clothed and on a seat
 Chryselephantine, cedar-bordered,
 His majestic Mother sat
 Stitching at a purple hoarded
 That He might be nobly breeched
 In starry towers of Babylon
 Noah's freshet never reached.
 King Abundance got Him on
 Innocence; and Wisdom He.
 That cognomen sounded best
 Considering what wild infancy
 Drove horror from His Mother's breast.⁹³

'The true faith discovered was' seems like a bad way to begin. Such contorted syntax immediately suggests a story narrated by a learned, over-learned, antiquarian out of olden time, borrowing Pound's and indeed William Morris's medievalist enthusiastic archaisms to produce something deliberately arcane. This is a Pre-Raphaelite poem, in subject, archaisms, symbolism, and in being a poem about a picture. At issue though is which type of Pre-Raphaelitism, what kind of archaism is meant. That of Burne Jones, whose work for Morris & Co. began with stained glass and painted interiors (both religious and otherwise), therefore 'painted panel, statuary, / Glass-mosaic, window-glass'? Or that of John Everett Millais, whose homely Christ-child, depicted in a carpentry workshop full of sawdust, to the poem suggests a too-literal realist misreading of a rough and ready peasant gospeller? For a poet and folklore collector who claimed with Synge and Gregory 'All that we did, all that we said or sang / Must come from contact with the soil' such discomfort with peasant storytellers is surprising.⁹⁴ But Millais's response to the Gospels represents a story told awry, picturing his tunic-wearing boy Christ with a kind of false simpering humility.⁹⁵ To pretend history is happening now and thus to elide the story's contradictions is not adequate. By acknowledging his ancient divinity, it is understood those anonymous workers in glass told it better.

⁹³ Yeats, *Poems*, 321-2.

⁹⁴ Yeats, *Poems*, 439.

⁹⁵ Critics of the time rather objected to the inappropriateness of Millais's hyper-realism and its 'loathsome minuteness', Dickens describing the young Christ as 'a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-headed boy, in a bed gown' (*Household Words*, 15 June 1850).

Fig.7. John Everett Millais, *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1850)

Telling a story well ought to be about speaking well. But there is not a simple opposition between plain-speaking and fine-speaking. Yeats had once hoped to create a 'sensuous musical vocabulary' for others to use.⁹⁶ Not so here; the lexicon is much too obscure. The juxtapositions in vocabulary are extraordinary. What other poem has 'Noah's freshet' (suggesting a freshwater river in flood) rub together with a 'Chryselephantine' gold and ivory throne? Certainly this almost macaronic thrusting together of rawness and elaboration recalls different tellings; perhaps the different traditions of the Old and New Testament in Hebrew and Greek. The poem rather leans towards highly worked emblems, in which etymology matters and the glories of a Byzantine church stand visible. In this atmosphere, Chryselephantine just perhaps evokes *Chrysostomos*, the golden mouthed rhetorician St John, remembered early in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Mary herself is not humbly dressed but 'in damask clothed', reminding us of a time when the Syrian city of Damascus was the height of civilization, boasting Byzantine and Islamic traditions of elaborate patterned cloth, woven into linen or silk. Like her clothing, all of this arcane vocabulary acts as ornament to the central figure of Mother Mary. So the reader understands she is part of the design, as scripturally she is part of God's design. Yet she is more than this. What, after all, is she doing?

Stitching at a purple hoarded
That He might be nobly breeched

This kind of syntax is deliberately upsetting to the ear and eye, and to the understanding. It works hard to make things difficult. Again, she is a woman working at stitching. Not just in aristocratic leisure, either, it is clear she retreads the fraught traditional labour of the mother preparing birth-clothes.

⁹⁶ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 134.

To consider a moment. Using purple as a noun implies something out of the ordinary, perhaps an imperial cloth dyed in Tyrian purple. Making clothes for an unborn child might be psychologically convincing, but for a mother to be stitching purple so that her son is suitably ‘breeched’ (that is, in an unhappy birth pun, well-trouserred) – this requires foreknowledge, a realization of what is to come. Mary knows not only that she is carrying the Christ-child, but that he must be princely. This puts an interesting complexion on a savagely compressed telling of the Christmas story:

King Abundance got Him on
Innocence; and Wisdom He.

So runs the conventional theological tale. In it Mary is the most innocent of mothers conceivable. In some quarters (namely the Catholic church after Pius IX) she is said to be born through ‘immaculate conception’, with no taint of original sin. For the poem this is a likely story, a tall tale. Like the poem following, ‘Leda and the Swan’ it speculates on the foreknowledge (and lack of will) granted in a sudden divine conception. If Mary knows (thanks to God), it is hard to see her as the paragon of ‘Innocence’. Unlike her son she is rarely seen as a traditional emblem of wisdom, but she seems to know something he does not. Wisdom, as Yeats’s esoteric studies and his collaboration with his wife over *A Vision* showed, was hard won, and required the work of women as well as men.

What then does mother Mary know? More, probably, than the church fathers. The syntax as ever is difficult. Predicting a ‘wild infancy’ she appears relieved that the childhood of Jesus will be anything but angelic, far removed from Millais’s simpering child. Thankfully children are wild, unruly, incorrigible, despite the fact that two poems on, in ‘Among School Children’, Senator Yeats the official school visitor, the ‘smiling public man’, observes they are taught nevertheless ‘To cut and sew, be neat in everything / In the best modern way.’⁹⁷ Mary’s insight here then is that she knows to the bone that Wisdom and wildness are interlinked, perhaps even interdependent. Given the philosophical interest of this idea there may be more to come. All this perhaps she learns as she sits there ‘stitching at a purple’. This stitching perhaps takes a long time: depicted thus in a mosaic or stained glass, her stitching is effectively perpetual. In certain traditions such a never-ending, Sisyphean task, implied something not heavenly but hellish, or at least laboriously purgatorial. On the other hand, she is supposed not to be directly affected by the fall: she is stitching, not unweaving like Penelope in the *Odyssey*. Whatever, she is a maker, and fulfils a tradition of Yeatsian symbolism in representing the artist, if not here the (male) teller of the tale.

Mary is not the only artist rendered in the poem. Others include the gospeller, the stained-glass maker, the carpenter, the sentimental painter (Millais) and of course God. But she might be the most important. Stitching, she is an artist gendered as female. She is silent, yes; but no less important for that. Like Yeats’s mother remembered endlessly sewing she represents a profound creative principle. After all

⁹⁷ Yeats, *Poems*, 323.

Mary as a mother is the maker not only of birth clothes but of something divine, and something human. In a Free State dedicated to marginalizing women's sexuality this makes no small statement. In 1925 the 'Committee for Evil Literature' had been formed in preparation for the 1929 Censorship Act; and the legislation banning divorce to which Yeats had so passionately objected was passed by the Oireachtas.⁹⁸ Yeats's poem remembers the division of labour in Genesis, but unlike the Free State does not enshrine it. It is significant that Mary works, and is a maker of many kinds.

Shrouds of authority: Comforting Cuchulain

If, as it appears, Mary's timely stitching has a role in her foreknowledge, her intimation of what is to come, it opens up a wider field of pagan speculation, hinting at the presence of fate or the fates. The fates who spin and cut thread are of course part of Greek folklore – indeed myths in which the unspooling of fate involves material metaphors are widespread across the globe, and feed into *A Vision's* bobbins. Not surprisingly many of those which involve spun or woven material, like Vishnu in Hindu belief, or the origin myths of the Navajo Native Americans, come from that band of subtropical cultures in which the making of cotton textiles is predominant.⁹⁹ Sometimes the thread runs out, and life is cut. But if, as hermetic tradition attests, things above are as things below, the earthly labour of stitching might continue after death. So Yeats's late poem 'Cuchulain Comforted' considers the end of life rather than its beginning, reviving the association of fine speaking and stitching. Here, conclusively, it is not speaking that is evoked but singing. The culmination of Yeats's actual speaking projects were notably musical: his late radio broadcasts carried both words and music on air.¹⁰⁰ Through textiles this poem enacts an unquestionably musical project, extended into the afterlife. The Aedh who had originally wished for the 'cloths of heaven' was said by the notes to *The Wind Among the Reeds* to represent the principle of 'fire burning by itself'. Later Yeats's philosophical text *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* confirmed there was something musical about the afterlife, previously imaged by *Rosa Alchemica's* patterned dancers, and that in the final state of being for the soul, 'in the condition of fire is all music and all rest'.¹⁰¹ Yeats's views on labour had perhaps evolved since then. No rest, maybe, but undoubtedly music. Cuchulain, that manly warrior, once on stage in a great green and gold cloak, is through the work of sewing tutored by shrouds to sing.

'Cuchulain Comforted' presents a posthumous reimagining of 'Adam's Curse'. The labour is fruitful, productive, but also collective. Catriona Clutterbuck's insight that 'individuality' here is replaced by 'communal identity' demonstrates how this

⁹⁸ For more see Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History of Ireland 1922-2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 34-39.

⁹⁹ See for instance Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Textiles and Weavers in South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), I, 57, Stanley A. Fishler, *In the Beginning: A Navajo Creation Myth* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1953).

¹⁰⁰ Adrian Paterson, 'Music will keep out temporary ideas: W. B. Yeats's radio performances', *Word and Music Studies 12: Performativity in Words and Music*, ed. Walter Bernhart and Michael Halliwell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 43-76.

¹⁰¹ Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae' (1916), *Mythologies*, 357.

process resolves much of the difficulty exposed in 'Adam's Curse'.¹⁰² There, despite the presence of two women as sympathetic hearers, silence descends, and even love is not the craft it was. As Morris contiguously argued, after the economic-industrial modern fall, art had separated itself into the functions of artist and craftsman. Poetry required a maker and a singer, poet and *rhapsode*, in Irish terms a *bard* and a *fili*.¹⁰³ No wonder that poets may not (as in many of Yeats's poems) find an audience. Part of Cuchulain's comfort however (the 'achieved consolation' to which Clutterbuck refers, appreciated as much by the poet)¹⁰⁴ is that after death things are different. As these linen shrouds are stitched together, all are at once makers, singers, audience – and even material. Each shroud is made from a linen bundle, and so like the rhapsode they all rely on stitching together previous work, suggesting a continuing cultural inheritance. Moreover their making is done all together: all the work of threading and sewing, 'All we do / All must together do', all the singing 'done in common'. Morris's socialist collective of makers persists in such powerful communal craftwork – except the poem depicts not earthly paradise but a heavenly one. The division of labour has closed; and being beyond the body the shrouds are beyond precise gender definition. Neither certainly male or female, the shrouds nevertheless follow a tradition of women's work; illuminating then that they cause the most manly of men, 'a man / Violent and famous' to sew so obediently. Again, as well as being stitchers, all are singers, each singing singly but together producing harmony. They might be found among the lowest or the highest, and these are 'convicted cowards all' (excepting Cuchulain, who is rather too much the other way) but their music is harmonious just the same.¹⁰⁵ Crucially, together all of these musicians also make up the audience. Yeats's long complaints about indifferent audience in poems like 'The Fascination of What's Difficult' or even 'Sailing to Byzantium' are quietened but not entirely assuaged. Such an attentive audience is not possible in this world. We cannot be privy to the music they sing.

What then have these music-makers made? Effectively, a 'material' form for themselves, in which to inhabit the afterlife. Grasping the threads of such a song is difficult, so Yeats's *Paradisum* is fittingly made by Dante's *terza rima*, where tercets are interlinked by rhyming lines *aba bcb cdc* weaving in and out. Always requiring a further rhyme, it is a pattern potentially without end, its *perpetuum mobile* never quite done. Syntactically Yeats's poem exploits this, all the more suggesting a fragment of longer cloth, on which another row can always be added. Where the cloth is torn is significant therefore, and indeed the pattern demands the poem can end only with a solitary last line. This stands out from all the twenty-five in its placing, its length, its unique use of single-syllable words, and its strangeness:

¹⁰² Catriona Clutterbuck, 'A Thread to the Afterlife' Textiles and the Otherworld in Irish Poetry: Yeats, Boland, Heaney, and Meehan', *RISE* 2.1 (2018). On this point as on many others I owe a great deal to conversations with Catriona, Hedwig Schwall, and others at workshop organized by Hedwig Schwall, 'Irish Text(ile)s: t/issues in communities and their representation in art and literature', Leuven Centre for Irish Studies, December 2016.

¹⁰³ See among many accounts Norman Vance, *Irish Literature Since 1800* (London: Longmans, 2002) 13-14.

¹⁰⁴ Catriona Clutterbuck, 'A Thread to the Afterlife', 20.

¹⁰⁵ Yeats, *Poems*, 456.

They sang, but had not human tunes nor words,
Though all was done in common as before;

They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds.

This kind of music is incomprehensible, without parallel, harnessing all of the 'anima' in the animal to go beyond 'human tunes nor words'. In such strange metamorphoses is an end. A transformation into otherworldly music, long anticipated by Yeats's poetry, has happened, and so the poem can no longer continue. But then it has no need to. The 'music of what happens', the continuation of 'all history and activity', happens elsewhere.¹⁰⁶ Through the act of stitching the shrouds are becoming their own substance, their own work, singers who are out-of-body. They may or may not in their final incarnation be fully birds, but at the poem's close they possess what matters: throats, organs of song, which in 'articulat[ing] sweet sounds together' create a final, literally ecstatic harmony. The labour of women has been transformed, and Adam's curse lifted. What remains 'is all music and all rest'. This is the poem's comfort, and (in all senses) its resolution.

As a modern solitary artist cut off from audience and tradition, Yeats claimed that he was unable to employ only 'traditional manner and matter' but was 'changed by that toil, impelled by my share in Cain's curse, by all that sterile modern complication, by my "originality", as the newspapers call it'.¹⁰⁷ Compelled to make it new, perhaps because of this, throughout his life he was impelled to collaboration. In correspondence with the poet Margot Ruddock he proposed appending a joint pseudonym to poems she composed and they had both worked on, arguing that all poets (he cites Wordsworth and Coleridge) indulged such cross-fertilizing co-operation. (In the end he merely proprietorially framed her poems by introducing the volume).¹⁰⁸ Lady Augusta Gregory, too, bore some scars from their frequent collaborations: some like *Visions and Beliefs of the West of Ireland*, appearing under her name, others like *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (to her regret) under his. *The Stories of Red Hanrahan* for instance, appearing together with *Rosa Alchemica* in *The Secret Rose*, were later entirely reshaped by her skill in dialect, resulting in acknowledgment but not co-authorship. As collaborator, then, Yeats sought to be the dominant partner, and this back and forth was part of the essential labour requisite for art. Yet unquestionably, and it might be said unusually, he took women seriously as collaborative partners. He worked together on creative projects with a series of extraordinarily gifted artists: among them Augusta Gregory, Ninette de Valois, Dorothy Wellesley, Florence Farr, Margot Ruddock, his wife George Hyde Lees. If this pattern of collaboration began with the women of his own family, no wonder it was represented by stitching. No wonder, too, that it was intimately bound up with the aesthetics of making. These recurrent patterns stitched a thread running throughout his career, ending with Cuchulain's unmaning, and a return to genuinely co-operative making. That moment when textile making became song was an image of ideal making towards which to strive, even if success could only be concluded after death.

¹⁰⁶ Yeats, *Explorations*, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 138.

¹⁰⁸ Margot Ruddock, *The Lemon Tree*. Introduced by W. B. Yeats (London: J.M.Dent 1937).

It could be that textiles and song merely provided Yeats with convenient metaphors of making. Helpfully, one tended to denote effort, and the other a kind of effortlessness, and they happened, by the authority of tradition, in particular the notion of the rhapsody, to be linked. Yet their consistent employment together implies a more intimate connection. Women workers had often sung while stitching, and it is conceivable that memories of Yeats's own mother, so often out of the picture, played a role. But whatever the origins of the connection, together they allowed investigation into the economics of making, the make-up of audiences, religious claims to knowledge and transcendence, and finally provided a philosophical approach to death. The making of stuff into song evidently prefigures this final metamorphosis, and (in Yeats's theology) a rebirth.

Yeats's textiles are employed as markers of all kinds of manufacture, including that of poetry. It matters then that as he aged, his material, mirroring the body's aging as a 'tattered coat upon a stick' became less and less fine, and more ragged. Morris had railed against 'an age of shoddy',¹⁰⁹ meaning not merely the cotton and linen rags of 'Cuchulain Comforted' of which as the Victorian chronicler Matéaux says 'the merest child knows that they are transformed into paper', but

the mixed remainder when these things are all routed out, the shapeless, colourless, unfragrant bits, wrecked shadows of old coats, torn jackets, worn-out dresses, scraps and cuttings, and tangled woollen rubbish of all sorts, which every household helps to accumulate yet never finds a use for, however thrifty it may be¹¹⁰

It seems unpromising, but rather than 'a coat / Covered with embroideries', this is the stuff of Yeats's final poems, the 'old rags' upon which the author 'must lie down' and stitch together in 'the foul rag and bone shop of the heart'.¹¹¹ In a last surprising act of rhapsody, the poet is compelled to act economically, gathering accumulated scraps that even a household of craft might 'never find a use for'. Morris might not have approved, but aging had shifted priorities, and a perhaps confected originality is reduced to the stuff of its constituent parts. As Yeats's textiles become song, they enact a magical transformation that converts the material to the immaterial. Nevertheless, precisely because of their attention to their own making, this process can in part be unstitched to trace both textiles and poems back to their beginnings. Attempting this uncovers many constituent threads drawn from a considerable labour in assimilating wider thought in history, myth, literature, and even economic theory, even as Yeats the poet claimed not to read but to intuit truths 'out of a medium's mouth'.¹¹² He was right, though, to acknowledge (even if it is not always spelled out) this labour and intuition relied upon the work of women.

¹⁰⁹ See Fintan Lane 'William Morris and Irish politics', *History Ireland* 8.1 (Spring 2000).

¹¹⁰ G.L. Matéaux, *Wonderland of Work* (London: 1883).

¹¹¹ Yeats, 'The Circus Animal's Desertion', *Poems*, 472.

¹¹² Yeats, *Poems*, 321. He claimed, for instance, not to have read any economics: see Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 135.

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