

Literary Pairs in
Comparative Readings
across National and
Cultural Divides

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For Sarkis and Lucia

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INTRODUCTION

The tendency of recent literary critical thought to cut across many fields of the humanities (which in their latter-day development have become far less culturally homogeneous), has led to the ever increasing significance of the cross- and interdisciplinary research with a strong emphasis on key concepts such as comparison and interaction between cultures, across national and cultural boundaries. As a result, “comparison is no longer a matter of intentional choice” as Cheah argues, but it has become “an inevitable and even unconscious perspective.”¹ And it is not difficult to “foresee” that researches based on trans-cultural (literary) patterns of parallelism and interaction will further increase the significance of comparative studies in the future, providing us with analytical tools to improve our understanding of both self and the other.

It is a fact that contemporary critical research has been strongly affected by the recent cultural turn in literary studies. As a result, it emerges as a “flexible” discipline which explores literature in relation to other disciplines and fields of expression within the humanities and social sciences (such as history, psychology, art and sociology) and, as such, it can serve as a challenge to the “intellectual primacy and subsequent institutional power of national languages and cultures.”² This phenomenon can certainly facilitate trans-cultural communication and cross-cultural exchange of ideas between different peoples belonging to different language families, but it can also pose many issues which we have to face and solve in our attempt to reveal and estimate the complex character of the contemporary world, which is an age of rapid change and progress in many spheres of human experience.

The unlimited possibilities for “researchers cum travellers” to cross, both literally and metaphorically, numerous language cultures and heterogeneous literary contexts, enable them to change the rigid

¹ Chea qtd. in Ludmilla Kostova and Mihaela Irimia. Introduction to *Comparisons and Interactions Within/Across Cultures* (Veliko Turnovo St Cyril and St Methodius University Press, 2012), 18-19.

² Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, *Comparative Literature. Theory, Method, Application* (Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta GA, 1998), 16.

boundaries of traditionally established models and formulas of comparison. Their adventurous “migration” across spaces and borders, no doubt, paves the way for more flexible attitudes and perspectives on texts, inter-textual relations and transnational links between authors belonging to different cultural and geo-political milieux. This continual intellectual (and physical) mobility, however, can easily blur boundaries and points of departure and can thus make the classical Odyssean journey impossible to complete. What is more, it can make the very identity of Odysseus unrecognizable even by the scar on his thigh.³ In this sense, contemporary comparatists who can freely enter the boundless spaces of a Baudelairean voyage⁴ should also be aware that they can easily get lost in the formidable labyrinth of the Minotaur if they fail to supply themselves with the life-saving red ball of thread; they can easily fail to discern a Virgilian guiding light, should they find themselves in a chilling Danteyan Inferno. It is thus necessary for us, who have undertaken the journey across spaces, gaps and borders to weave carefully and masterfully our own thread of Ariadne in order to be capable of mastering and organizing potentially chaotic elements into a coherent form. It is indispensable that we supply ourselves with reliable analytical tools and methods in an attempt to construct, define and justify the perspective of our own “Ansatzpunkt,”⁵ to use Erich Auerbach’s term, which is a necessary prerequisite for the successful achievement of the aims pursued.

The authors included in this volume, for the most part belong to essentially different historical, cultural and geopolitical contexts. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on and organize my basic argument around significant issues which *recur* throughout their works. With this end in view, I have grouped them into “literary pairs” on the basis of what I call

³ I’m referring to the scene in which the old housekeeper Euryclea who had been his nurse recognizes him by the scar on his thigh.

⁴ I’m referring to Charles Baudelaire’s famous poem “The Voyage.”

⁵ “Point of departure.” In his essay “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” Erich Auerbach emphasises the centrality of the concept “Ansatzpunkt” in literary-historical critical researches as follows: “In order to accomplish a major work of synthesis, it is imperative to locate a point of departure [Ansatzpunkt], a handle, as it were, by which the subject can be seized. The point of departure must be the election of a firmly circumscribed, easily comprehensible set of phenomena whose interpretation is a radiation out from them and which orders and interprets a greater region than they themselves occupy.” Erich Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” *The Centennial Review* 13 (1969): 13-14.

“similar typological schemes, perceptions and literary strategies” which I trace and analyze in their writings. My critical approach, although not based on or justified by the identification of direct literary borrowings or transmissions of one literary text to another, relies on the broader contextual frame of intertextuality to explore the devices and writing strategies which the literary pairs systematically apply in their poetic (fictional) and artistic representations of various ideas, states and conditions. Probably, the most appropriate generic descriptor for the conceptual frame of my research can be best expressed through Detienne and Ricoeur’s formulation “constructive comparative studies,” a definition which transcends the restrictive formulas of traditional ideas of comparability (“we can only compare that which is comparable”⁶) and enables me to bring together authors from essentially different cultural spheres and contexts. This strategy in no way commends the principle that “anything could be compared with anything else”⁷ but it certainly aims to bring to the fore the transnational aspects of contemporary literary-critical thought.

In the first essay, “Wandering With(out) a Muse: Intertextuality and Romantic Disguise,” I dwell on the literary “pair” William Butler Yeats–Percy Bysshe Shelley. In it I trace and analyze the Irish poet’s post-romantic intellectual conditioning, which was widely influenced by the texts of his literary predecessor, the English Romantic poet Shelley. The subject of my investigation and comparison in the second essay, “New Dimensions in Conceptualizing Beauty and the Principle of Originality,” are selected writings by the “pair” Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, authors whose literary formation, although conditioned by different socio-cultural milieux, was marked by their similar sensibilities: both had an acute perceptibility of the weird and the bizarre, the ominous and the macabre. They were irresistibly attracted by the supernatural and melancholy aspects of life which finds expression in the originality of their thought and writing. The next essay, titled “A Word That Breathes Distinctly Has Not the Power to Die,” is a comparative critical study of select works by another literary pair: the American poet Emily Dickinson, often regarded as a *sui generis* precursor of modernism in the American context, and the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, an author ranking among the few perfect masters of stylistic

⁶ See Detienne, Ricoeur in Kostova and Irimia. Introduction to *Comparisons and Interactions Within/Across Cultures* (Veliko Turnovo St Cyril and St Methodius University Press, 2012), 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

compression and expressionist avant-gardism in the Russian modernist context. Irrespective of the fact that their lives and work diverged not only chronologically, but also in terms of their geographical, historical and cultural specificities, I will nevertheless attempt to deduce a concept of what I call “common typologies” which I trace in their poetry. The focus of my comparison in the fourth essay, “Haunting Romanticisms,” is on the American “one-man modernist” Edgar Allan Poe and the Bulgarian modernist poet Peyo Yavorov: the “pair”’s similar ideas will be identified in the authors’ “philosophies” of love and composition and analyzed in their works. In “Concepts of National Mythopoeitics” I bring to the fore the “pair” William Butler Yeats–Peyo Yavorov. This study is an intertextual reading of some of their seminal works in which they attempt to build, through the inseparable “woman-motherland” image, their own “national mythopoeia.” Yeats was inspired by Celtic and Greek mythology to mythologize his Ireland, whilst Yavorov relied on Bulgarian folk tradition in his endeavour to create a sacred mythopoeic image of the motherland. “Receptacles of the Foreign: Aspects of Intertextuality and Ontological Self-Reflexivity in Two Contemporary Bulgarian Novels” is an essay which is motivated by the problematics of otherness, specifically, “the foreign.” It will analyze the representation of “foreignness” in two contemporary Bulgarian novels, “Elenite” by Svetlozar Igov and “The Glass River” by Emil Andreev—texts which explore Bulgarian identity and foreignness through encounters between the national and the foreign.

The exceptions to the analytical approaches based on the theoretical paradigm of “similar typologies” (i.e., that we can compare what is comparable), are the two critical essays dedicated to the “pairs” W. B. Yeats–Charles Baudelaire, W. B. Yeats–Edward Said, entitled “Charles Baudelaire’s “The Voyage” and W. B. Yeats’s “News for the Delphic Oracle” and “National Transnationalism: Concepts of Irishness—from Within and from Without,” respectively. The texts present comparative critical perspectives based on *contrastive* analysis. I undertake a comparison of the tropes of “travelling” and “arrival,” “home” and “away,” “self” and “other,” “national” and “transnational” in an attempt to reveal the authors’ divergent conceptualizations of the issues in their works.

The studies included in this volume are not simply informed by a heightened awareness of the trans-national and trans-cultural tendencies which pervade our globalized human condition. By dwelling on the intertextual and inter-cultural links between the authors and their writings, I set myself the task of gaining substantive insights both into their original individual texts (and identities), and into what may be termed their “shared

literary textuality”—an imagined “transnational” space into which they have inscribed their similar (contrastive) ideas, understanding and knowledge of human nature and existence. The authors’ perspectives and views were, no doubt, engendered by their specific, often essentially different linguistic and cultural conditions, and the cultural milieu inevitably exerted a powerful influence on their literary formation and development. My strategy of juxtaposing different texts and applying various analytical tools, however, differs to a considerable degree from literary-critical views which hold that it is the specific socio-cultural (and geo-political) climates that determine *exclusively* human existence and consciousness.⁸ These understandings of the relationship between the literary text and society are essentially historicist, and give us no answers on the trans-historical existence and the complexity of meaning of the literary work. Historical readings can explicate the causality between certain forms of social development and the genre/form of the writing, and can even trace the mechanism of its reception through the social and ideological forces at work at a specific time period, but they can shed little light on the work itself or on the way it has been produced.

In my attempt to account for the “life” of a literary work outside history, its existence beyond the historical event, I will combine approaches to its historicist manifestation in time with methodology and readings which deal with its form and content, but will rely more heavily on the latter, the formalist approach. My basic argument is that the researcher can probe deeper into the work’s poetics, and ultimately perceive and unravel its very meaning and value through a critical approach which bridges the gap between external and internal, or historicist and formalist readings. Each critical trajectory which does not confine the literary work to a single mode of existence and advocates a synthesized approach to it can best reveal the work’s character. The Czech-American comparative critic René Wellek maintained that the best literary critic must “do what every scientist and scholar does: to isolate his object, in our case, the literary work of art, to contemplate it intently, to analyze, to interpret, and finally evaluate it by criteria derived from, verified by, buttressed by, as wide a knowledge, as close an observation, as keen a sensibility, as honest a judgment as we can command.”⁹

The multi-perspectival method is a most useful strategy for approaching the text, for it can also reveal if the author has achieved what

⁸ See, for example, McCall’s and Becker’s theories (among others), which hold that cultural and social structures set the course of what people do.

⁹ René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. S. G. Nichols, Jr. (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1963), 17.

should be, in my opinion, his ultimate goal in writing: “victory over impermanence, relativity, and history.”¹⁰ Although created at a specific point in time, each valuable literary work “transcends” the historical span of its own creation and carries its messages farther into the future. Being an event in history, it proves its value as an “enduring” work beyond the historical moment. Only those authors who write “not merely with his own generation in his bones,” as T.S. Eliot once wrote, “but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer [...] has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order”¹¹ will be rewarded with the enduring authority of their work well beyond the time of their own generation.

In this sense, my argument, which transcends (but does not in any way exclude) historicist readings, advocates above all, the necessity of an atemporal and immanent apprehension of the text. It focuses mostly on and attempts to reveal and compare, through a close reading of the text, the distinctive features of the writers’ *powerful and original creative impulses*, thanks to which they ranked amongst the most pre-eminent pens of their contemporary world. Quite contrary to any form of philosophical determinism, my critical position is a consistent defence of the freedom of human choice and creativity, and as such, it is also a departure from the grand narratives and totalizing schemes and conceptions of culture which “minimize the role of both contingency and human agency.”¹² I consider the human factor as the major driving force behind our behaviour as creative human beings, as the genuine agency which endows the surrounding world with a meaningful existence and value, and brings what Said called in his Introduction to Erich Auerbach’s “Mimesis” “enduring reputation” and “staying power” to literary criticism and the literary work.¹³ The “enduring reputation” and “staying power” of the text are the

¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1997), 41.

¹² Ludmilla Kostova, Iona Sarieva, and Mihaela Irimia. Introduction to *Comparisons and Interactions Within/Across Cultures* (Veliko Turnovo St Cyril and St Methodius University Press, 2012), 22.

¹³ In his Introduction to the Fiftieth-anniversary Edition of Erich Auerbach’s *Magnum Opus* “Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,” Said observed: “The influence and enduring reputation of books of criticism are, for the critics who write them and hope to be read for more than one season, dispiritingly short. [...] Only a small number of books seem perennially present and, by comparison with the vast majority of their counterparts, to have an amazing staying power. Certainly this is true of Erich Auerbach’s magisterial “Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature”...” (x). Erich

essential prerequisites for it to “survive,” to achieve a trans-historical significance and value.

In conclusion, the origin of what is nowadays known as “comparative literature” is associated by many modern scholars with Goethe’s notion of *Weltliteratur*, “a universalist conception of all literatures of the world seen together as forming a majestic symphonic whole.” (Said, xvi) In conformity with the Goethean ideal Kenneth Guthrie believed that the aim of comparative studies is to

break[s] over the walls of linguistic ignorance, of provincial prejudice and sectional animosity, merging national into international expressions of living endeavor. Its duty is to gather, sort, grade and combine the literature of all languages, so as to discover and formulate its purport, meaning, and trend, summing up its differences, similarities and significance for the guidance of the lives of men and women who wish to live in the light of their humanity.¹⁴

At the core of present-day comparative studies is the inevitable interconnectedness and interaction between literatures and cultures on a worldwide scale, a phenomenon which Goethe foresaw and defined as *Weltliteratur*. Nowadays, when scholars read across languages, disciplines and cultures whose boundaries have become more and more flexible and difficult to outline, no literature can be conceived and studied in isolation. For all our similarities and differences, we all desire to live in the light of our humanity, as Guthrie put it. In our attempts to preserve and enrich, both personally and professionally, our humanitarian knowledge, we are all striving to create “a face which does not get dissolved in the face of death; a face through which we could see the faces of all people,”¹⁵ to use Exupéry’s beautiful metaphor. We are all yearning to be part of that “majestic symphonic whole,” which maps the history of writing and

Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2003), ix. Hereafter cited by page number.

¹⁴ Kenneth Guthrie, *The Spiritual Message of Literature: A Manual of Comparative Literature with Topical Outlines and Lists of Useful Books for School, College, and Private Use* (Brooklyn: Comparative Literature Press, 1913), i.

¹⁵ “Tu es l’Homme et tu m’apparais avec le visage de tous les hommes à la fois.” Antoine De Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des hommes* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1973), 73. Exupéry explained that all difference—in terms of race, ethnicity or colour—gets dissolved in the face of death.

reading across cultural and temporal boundaries. For, as the poet John Donne wrote in his famous Meditation XVII poem,

No man is an island,
Entire of itself.

WANDERING WITH(OUT) A MUSE: INTERTEXTUALITY AND ROMANTIC DISGUISE

The text is an attempt at a comparative critical study of select works by the English romantic poet Percy B. Shelley and the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, whose post-romantic intellectual conditioning was widely influenced by the texts of his literary predecessor. Distinctive Yeatsian concepts such as “self” and “anti-self,” “life” and “work,” “man” and “poet,” which recur throughout his work, are traced and analyzed in their relation to the romantic tradition; specifically, to those discourses concerned with the principles of continual conflict, ambivalent experience and overwhelming phantasms which haunt and exhaust the romantic quester’s persona to the utmost limit.

On Shelley’s and Yeats’s Concept of the “Demonic” poet

Shelley’s “Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude,” is a very useful point of departure in locating the influences in Yeats’s own formation as one of the “last romantics.”¹ Written in 1815, it is generally considered to be among the most significant works of Shelley’s early creative years. The word “alastor,” derived from Greek and meaning “an avenging spirit,” is a very indicative label which functions both as a physical and a metaphorical construct in the text: it signals the figurative wandering of the protagonist’s thought (or as Shelley himself put it in his Preface, it is “allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind,”²) and it also triggers the literal wandering of the verse narrative’s main figure, a Poet, who embarks on a quest for a transcendent vision of a maid in an attempt to establish a highly desired union with it. “From early infancy,” the narrator suggests, was “by solemn vision and bright silver dream” “[he] nurtured,” and

¹ I’m referring to the book by Graham Hough *The Last Romantics*.

² Percy Shelley, “Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude,” *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, H. Bloom and L. Trilling, eds., (New York, London, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), 401. Hereafter cited by page number.

When early youth had past, he left
 His cold fireside and alienated home
 To seek strange truth in undiscovered lands. (403)

The word “wandering” (i. e. “his *wandering* step, / Obedient to high thoughts has visited / The awful ruins of the days of old”; “the Poet *wandered* on, through Arabia / And Persia” [403-404]), calls up a wide range of associations linking the Shelleyan Poet to, inter alia, the figure of the Wandering Jew. The original story has been the focus of wide discussion and interpretation by different literary figures from various periods in literary history. The concept of wandering, however, is most notably related to the Romantic tradition and its emblematic representatives throughout Britain and continental Europe. “I believe it to be no accident,” notes Julien Scutts, “that the word “Wanderer” enjoyed the greatest use and significance in the Romantic period when poets and philosophers began to recognize the nature of what we now understand as the subconscious and the unconscious.”³

There is an explicit mention of the name of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, in Shelley’s “Queen Mab” and in “Hellas.” In “Alastor,” although not explicitly mentioned, the concept of wandering underlies the whole structure of the verse narrative. Yeats, who was indisputably highly influenced by Shelley in his early work, “pursues” this concept in his youth as much as he flees away from it in a most “unromantic” fashion in his later writings. The idea of wandering can be traced in all his earlier short verse, as well as in most of his longer verse narratives such as “The Wanderings of Oisín.” Its thematic paradigm in fact dominated, as John Harwood rightly points out, the poems of 1885 to 1889.⁴ It is important to note at this point the common root of the words “error” and “wander.” The verb “to err” comes from the Latin “errare” and means “to stray,” “to wander.” In the Preface to “Alastor” Shelley identifies the Poet as one “deluded by a generous error” (401) and, logically, the equivocality of the oxymoronic “generous error” re-affirms Shelley’s own ambiguous attitude towards the quester’s yearning, “infinite and unmeasured,” (401) as the Preface defines it. And if one can identify the contradiction in the state of being “deluded by a generous error,” the

³ Julien Scutts, “‘Wandering’ in Poetic Imagery and Structure” (Classics Network, 2002), 2.

<http://www.classicsnetwork.com/essays/503/>. Accessed 18 Jan 2005.

⁴ John Harwood, “Secret Communion”: Yeats’s Sexual Destiny,” in *Yeats and Women*, ed. Deirdre Toomey (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 1997), 265. Hereafter cited by page number.

Poet from "Alastor," then, appears to be a species of the knight errant of chivalric romance. These paradigms evidently constituted the semantic cell of Shelley's romantic and Yeats's post-romantic formula of love which underlay the greater part of their poetic and dramatic output. "I gathered from the Romantic poets an ideal of perfect love..." Yeats maintains. "Perhaps," he goes on to say, "I should never marry in church but I would love one woman all my life."⁵ This essential paradox, however, eventually turned to be a reality, and Yeats's life-long obsession with the personality of Maud Gonne is a proof of this. Shelley's concept of Alastor in fact finds its particular post-romantic analogue in the notion of the "Daimonic" poet, whose nature is contemplated by Yeats in his "Per Amica Silentia Lunae":

When I think of life as a struggle with the Daimon who would ever set us to the hardest work among those not impossible, I understand why there is a deep enmity between a man and his destiny, and why a man loves nothing but his destiny. In an Anglo-Saxon poem a certain man is called, as though to call him something that summed up all heroism, "Doom eager" ... Then my imagination runs from Daimon to sweetheart, and I divine an analogy that evades the intellect. I remember that Greek antiquity has bid us look for the principal stars, that govern enemy and sweetheart alike, among those that are about to set; and I even wonder if there may not be some secret communion, some whispering in the dark between Daimon and sweetheart.⁶

It becomes evident from this passage that the relationship Yeats postulates between poet and muse (daimon) is in fact a reconstructed version of the relationship between Poet and "veiled maid" in Shelley's "Alastor." If to Yeats's mind Daimon and Sweetheart bore identical connotations, they should be seen as originating from the destructiveness and equivocality of Shelley's muse. In William Blake's work this paradigmatic image is referred to as Vala (veil) in "The Four Zoas"⁷ and is linked to the Great Mystery from "The Book of Revelation." Seen as a whore, covered with precious stones from head to foot, she is spurned and despised because of her deceptive nature. This is the point where Yeats drastically diverged from Blake who never assigned positive connotations

⁵ Yeats quoted in Elizabeth Cullingford, "At the Feet of the Goddess," in *Yeats and Women*, ed. Deirdre Toomey (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1997), 44.

⁶ William Butler Yeats, *The Major Works*, ed. E. Larissy (Oxford University Press, 1997), 414. Hereafter cited by year and page number.

⁷ William Blake, *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, M. Johnson and J. Grant, eds., (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1979), 216.

to “her.” In contrast, both Yeats and Shelley conceived of the “muse” as a vision rather than a deception, and her nature was regarded to belong within the realm of necessity as part of the Poet’s fate. Eventually, as the Preface to “Alastor” reads, the Poet was doomed because his notion that such a prototype existed in real life was false. However, a transcendent vision seen as an image of his alter ego persists:

A vision on his sleep
 There came, a dream of hopes that never yet
 Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veiled maid
 Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.
 Her voice was like the voice of his own soul
 Heard in the calm of thought; its music long,
 Like woven sounds of steams and breezes, held
 His inmost sense suspended in its web
 Of many-coloured woof and shifting hues.
 Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,
 And lofty hopes of divine liberty,
 Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,
 Herself a poet. (404)

“The passions,” wrote Yeats, “when we know that they cannot find fulfillment, become vision.”⁸ The Poet’s passion, enkindled by the object of desire, turns into a vision when he realizes its unattainability. From this point onward the ever-increasing tension and conflict between the “demonic” self and the “natural” self of the Poet’s personality is revealed. The ideal is attainable only beyond time and the grave, the end of Shelley’s poem suggests. The failure of the quester’s “human” self is intended to highlight the eternal nature of the vision, which, once captured and “photographed” in the Poet’s mind, is subsequently preserved in the lines of the poetic narrative itself.

A difficulty arises if we take into account the “instructive” significance of the second part of the Preface, in which Shelley states that “the Poet’s self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin.” (401) It can be inferred that the state in which the Poet finds himself is a condition dominated by the powers of, to use Blake’s terms, Jehova-Urizen, the cruel god seen as inducing an abstract solipsistic absorption into remorse, inner doubts and self-torture. But the dialectic of love as represented by both Shelley and Yeats, although “verging dangerously near to an apparent exaltation of

⁸ Yeats quoted in John Harwood, 266.

solipsism,” as Harold Bloom rightly suggests,⁹ is refined and subtle, and thus it should not seem strange that even Blake could not (or rather ignored to) recognize the dual nature of this solipsistic state which can either lead to an inevitable downfall, or originate visionary experience and inspiration, the Romantic pattern positing the equivocal relationship between Poet and Muse (Poet–Daimon): In “A Vision” Yeats elaborates their respective roles:

This relation (the *Daimon* being of the opposite sex to that of man) may create a passion like that of sexual love. The relation of man and woman, in so far as it is passionate, reproduces the relation of man and *Daimon*, and becomes an element where man and *Daimon* sport, pursue one another, and do one another good or evil. (1997, 428)

This pursuit as it is perceived by Yeats evidently requires the absence of the real person, or rather, the loss of its substantiality. “A poet writes always of his personal life in its finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness,” wrote Yeats.¹⁰ The transformation of this loss into a vision, however, is eventually effected through the imaginative power of the romantic mind that performs a specific retrospective affirmation of the very state of having been in love, which may at present have disappeared. The imaginative product of this activity, conventionally seen to emerge in a condition of distress or depression, thus relevantly comes to replace, through its phantasmagoric form and content, real-life experience. This process Yeats identifies as “the assuming of Mask,” or the creation of an “antithetical self.”¹¹ The poet has to put on a mask, the antithesis to his experience in daily life, so that he can perform skillfully his “theatrical” role on stage. In this sense, as Yeats remarks in “Essays and Introductions,” 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.”¹² The same pattern which had once fired Shelley’s imaginative thinking is “reborn as an idea” in Yeats’s own notion of “self” and “anti-self,” “poet” and “muse,” “self” and “mask.” All these concepts, Yeats insists, are connected with what he terms a “buried self,” (1992, 273) the hidden personality of his alter ego which like a phantom peeps every now and then through the eyes of that same self.

⁹ Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 241.

¹⁰ Yeats qtd. in Harwood, 262.

¹¹ William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Papermac, 1992), 152, 274. Hereafter cited by year and page number.

¹² William Butler Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 509. Hereafter cited by year and page number.

Thus, in Yeats's view, the mask, the image and the ghost emerge as a result of the poet's capability to play the role of a theatrical hero, to become himself a *dramatis persona*. And this performance requires "a discipline upon ourselves, the wearing of a mask. It is the condition of arduous full life..., the self-conquest of the writer who is not a man of action," it "is style." (1992, 461, 469)

That Yeats was striving to achieve "style" is demonstrated by a short poem from "The Green Helmet and Other Poems" entitled "The Mask." Its structure is dialogic, the argument is carried out by two speakers (probably lovers), and it is likely that, though standing in two opposite directions, they represent one coherent form:

"Put off that mask of burning gold
With emerald eyes."

"Oh, no my dear, you make so bold
To find if hearts be wild and wise,
And yet no cold."

"I would but find what's there to find,
Love or deceit."

"It was the mask engaged your mind,
And after set your heart to beat,
Not what's behind."

"But lest you are my enemy,
I must enquire."

"Oh, no my dear, let all that be
What matter, so there is but fire
In you, in me?" (1997, 43)

The poem does not reveal any sentimentality and affection between the lovers as we might have expected, but instead, it is full of tension. A great quantity of ardour but strain as well can be felt throughout, for both persons are obviously striving to disentangle a psychological puzzle. In this argumentative battle neither character gains the upper hand. There is no definitive answer to the puzzle, the answer seems to hang somewhere in the air like a rope which is pulled at both ends by two equally powerful rivals. The "mask of burning gold" with "emerald eyes" stands for an unfathomable inscrutability which dazzles the mind of the male counterpart with its shiny contrast to daily life. "Love" and "deceit" skillfully interchange their places to add further tension to the mysterious dialogue between the two speakers. As a result, both parties lose their significance, for they seem to be struggling with one another in a torturous vicious circle, the voice of each

trying to get the better of the other: “But lest you are my enemy, / I must enquire.” Like a sarcastic echo from behind the mask the other voice, that of the “anti-self,” resonates: “What matter, so there is but fire / In you, in me?”

Logically enough, the rivalry between the lover and the beloved, the self and the anti-self, the mask and what stands behind the mask blend their separate delineations in order to give rise to the poem, to engender a unified perspective—that of the poet—who is to articulate, through his own bitterness and pain, a reconciliation with the impossibility for an easy denouement. John Harwood further elaborates the point:

By 1917 Yeats had made the “the discovery that informs...the whole of “*Per Arnica Silentia Lunae*”...that he had not, after all, been attempting to portray an existing self.” In the moment of vision, the anti-self seems to consume the I that has invoked or invited it like “medicinal grass,” in order to disgorge poetry. But the poem remains a joint enterprise; the anti-self supplies the vision, but the I has to take up the hard toil of knocking the rhymes into shape. (261)

Though the content which informs Shelley’s “Alastor” highly influenced Yeats’s ideas about the “daimonic” poet, the two authors’ conceptions diverge in a considerable degree. The demonic torturer Alastor is no doubt effecting the ecstatic vision of the dreamy emblematic “veiled maid” described as “herself a poet” (which finds its analogue in Yeats’s conception of the “anti-self”), but this vision leads Shelley’s poet to the non-entity of death, while Yeats’s torturer drives “the I” to perform the “heroic” task of “knocking the rhymes into shape.” We can undisputedly identify, though they are lurking somewhere in the background, the self-ironizing practices of both Shelley the skeptic and Yeats “the hero,” realized, however, in two entirely different ways and directions. Shelley achieves the ironic effect by explicitly mentioning in the second half of the Preface the Poet’s self-centredness and seclusion, while Yeats plays with tricky perspectives and effects interchanges of roles and characters in affirming the “rebirth of an idea.” Spencer Hall, who comments on Shelley’s text, convincingly argues that the ironic function is performed by the Gothic elements in Romantic poetry, which, in his view, “challenge the “traditional” Romantic affirmations of transcendence and the unitive self.”¹³

¹³ “Thus the Gothic can be construed,” writes Spencer Hall, “to borrow Rajan’s terminology, as a “subtext”—a Dark Interpreter—that subverts, unconsciously and unintentionally, the conceptual and structural unities of the Romantic “text.” Or the Gothic might function as a “countertext” that questions, consciously and

The concept of romantic irony springs from a deliberate mixture of different voices and levels of meaning. In “Alastor” the voices are those of the narrator, the speaker of the Preface and the Poet, while in Yeats’s “The Mask” the two voices are those of the lover and his beloved (or “self” and “anti-self”), who enter into a playful game in which they interchange their roles. On the semantic level the ironizing practices are achieved through the elaborate structuring and mutually subversive influence of different texts and subtexts identified in Shelley’s poem by Spencer Hall as “Gothic” and “Romantic,” or what may be termed “conversational” and “philosophic” ones, as far as Yeats’s poem is concerned. Indeed, “overleaping the bounds” by the Poet is to a certain degree neutralized by the witty warning of the speaker who revealingly moralizes “actual men” what might happen to them if they follow the lead of the protagonist. However, to me, it seems that the irony, proclaimed to be a major concern of the canonical romantic poets by some literary critical theories of the 70-ies and early 80-ies¹⁴ is in fact induced by these critics’ biased reading of romantic poetry. That romantic irony was not an end in itself can be proved not only by the Preface in which Shelley identifies the Poet’s error as “generous,” but also by other texts written by him at about the time of “Alastor.” In his collected letters with Mary Shelley: “So intimately are our natures now united, that I feel whilst I describe her excellences as if I were an egoist expatiating upon his own perfections,”¹⁵ and in his “On Love,” written three years after “Alastor,” he comments:

Love is an imagination which should enter into and seize upon the subtle and delicate peculiarities which we have delighted to cherish and unfold in secret; with a frame whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres, strung to the accompaniment of one delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own; the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends.¹⁶

intentionally, the overt affirmations of the text, thus participating in the construction of Romantic irony and Romantic skepticism.” Spencer Hall, “‘Beyond the Realms of Dream’: Gothic, Romantic and Poetic Identity in Shelley’s *Alastor*,” *Gothic Studies* 3.1. (2001), 8-9.

¹⁴ I am specifically referring to certain literary-critical theories of post-modernism (post-structuralism, feminism and deconstruction) which have challenged the established status-quo of canonical literary works through the typological worldview of irony. They presuppose an understanding of irony as a *mode of consciousness* which, under certain historical circumstances, can be seen as inevitable, as an end in itself.

¹⁵ Yeats quoted in Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1993), 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

The atmosphere of profound confession which pervades the excerpt (and is reminiscent of the line from “Alastor” “her voice was like the voice of his own soul”) definitely excludes Shelley’s ironic attitude. That Yeats also took seriously what Shelley explicitly called in “On Love” the “anti-type” is proved both by his life and his work. In “Autobiographies” he wrote:

As I look backward upon my own writing, I take pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me I have found something hard and cold, some articulation of the Image which is the opposite of all that I am in my daily life. (1992, 274)

Yeats projected the “anti-self” of his own “inmost sense” in Maud Gonne’s personality, for, as the poet himself pointed out, “she seemed to understand every subtlety of my own art and especially all my spiritual philosophy.”¹⁷ That Yeats was savagely questioning, especially in his later years, his entire textual practice remains beyond any contention, but the impression we get in our attempts to trace the poet’s own retrospective glance on earlier prose and verse is of his bitterness and self-sarcastic regard rather than of irony. The confessional facet of both Yeats’s and Shelley’s personalities and writings evidently excludes the ironic attitude. In a weighty and solemn overtone the speaker of “The Choice” declares:

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life or of the work. (1997, 130)

According to the text, the most important requirement for the rise of the “daimonic” poet is the impossible equality of life and art. In Yeats’s view, there was a kind of “cause-and-effect” relationship between them. However, what is characteristic of Yeats is that, unlike Shelley, the “transcendent moment” never destroys either self or anti-self, poet or life, mask or what’s behind the mask; rather, they all merge to give rise to a poem. Subsequently, each of these entities retires into its separate independent existence but leaves behind those powerful traces that may help the poet, who is larger than them all, to identify and preserve the uniqueness of his own character.

¹⁷ William Butler Yeats, *Memoirs: Autobiography—First Draft: Journal*, ed. Denis Donoghue (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 61.

Yeats and Shelley's "On the Medusa"¹⁸

The "romantic" account of the Medusa myth can be traced in Shelley's poem "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery"¹⁹ which was published by Mary Shelley in "Posthumous Poems, 1824." The poem, an ekphrasis in genre, is also an excellent example of Shelley's mythmaking faculty (usually associated with works larger in scale, such as "Prometheus Unbound," "The Witch of Atlas" and "Epipsychidion"). In "On the Medusa" Shelley makes use of the ancient myth without drastically subverting its original content and meaning. What he adds to the ancient story are a few colouring touches of his romantic imagination whereby his Medusa emerges even more extraordinary than the original one. The description of Medusa's head and the effect which it exerts on the onlookers is the following:

It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,
Upon the cloudy mountain peak supine;
Below, far lands are seen tremblingly;
Its horror and its beauty are divine.

Upon its lips and eyelids seem to lie
Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,
Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,
The agonies of anguish and of death.
Yet it is less horror than the grace
Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone.²⁰

The impact of Medusa's head on the "gazer's spirit" (and of the poem on us as readers) is strong not only because it is produced by two mutually

¹⁸ The classical story runs in the following way: Medusa had originally been a beautiful maiden and was thus eagerly pursued by many suitors. She rejected their advances but Neptune managed to rape her in the temple of Minerva, the goddess presiding over the useful and ornamental arts. Minerva, infuriated by this outrage, turned Gorgon's lustrous golden hair into a swarm of snakes, banished her to a distant and desolate place and decreed that each and everybody who looked on her would turn to stone. Subsequently, Perseus who was urged by Minerva to kill her, cut off Medusa's head and was duly honoured with immortality for his deed. From her serpent locks sprang forth Pegasus, the winged horse of inspiration.

¹⁹ Medusa was not painted by Leonardo, as Shelley wrongly thought.

²⁰ Percy Shelley, "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery", *Romantic Circles* (1997).

<https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/shelley/medusa/mforum.html>. Accessed 3 March 2017.

contradictory notions which characterize it (“anguish” and “terror,” on the one hand, and “beauty” and “grace,” on the other), but also because they seem to be unified in a single image. The horrific effect of the Gorgon persists both because the possibility for the maiden to retrieve her initial state of innocence is precluded, and because she has become an object of undeserved victimization, cursed as she is “through no fault of her own,” as McGann rightly suggests.²¹ The “tempestuous loveliness of terror” is “kindled,” as the text itself reads, by an “inextricable error.”

The motif of victimization re-echoes in many of Yeats’s later poems. In “A Thought from Propertius”²² his beloved Maud Gonne is described as a virgin goddess, walking through the “holy images / At Pallas Athena’s side,” untainted by the “troubles” of sexual intercourse. But she is also said to be “a fit spoil for a centaur / Drunk with the unmixed wine.” (1993, 153) Contemplated in yet another poem, “Peace,” (1993, 92) are both her “noble line” and her unquiet life (“Were not all her life but storm”), evidently correspondent with Shelley’s description of Medusa’s “grace” and “tempestuous loveliness of terror,” which re-establish the same kind of ambivalence characteristic of the better part of Shelley’s work. “Such a duality in the imagination’s function,” writes McGann, “was always a fundamental part of Shelley’s thought in both politics and art.” (5)

Analogous to Shelley’s “On the Medusa” is Yeats’s post-Romantic poem “Leda and the Swan” which is iconographic in its use of the motif of divine rape. It describes the victimization by Zeus in the shape of a swan of Leda, who begets, through a *terrible* experience, the mythical beauty Helen who would subsequently cause the destruction of Troy, the fall of the Greek and the rise of the Roman civilization:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies? (1993, 215)

²¹ Jerome McGann, “The Beauty of the Medusa: A Study in Romantic Literary Iconography,” *The “Romantic Circles” Electronic Edition* (1972), 3-25. <http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/shelley/medusa/mcgann.html#one>. Accessed 18 Jan 2005. Hereafter cited by page number.

²² William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems. A New Edition*, ed. R. Finneran (The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1993), 153. Hereafter cited by year and page number.

“On the Medusa”’s additional stanza, which was discovered later than the original poem, may help us to establish a further, even more essential link to the influence Shelley might have exerted on Yeats’s significant poems, namely those from the later collections “The Tower” and “The Winding Stair and Other Poems.” The initially unknown version runs as follows:

It is a woman’s countenance divine
 With everlasting beauty breathing there
 Which from a stormy mountain’s peak supine
 Gazes into the night’s trembling air.
 It is a trunkless head, and on its feature
 Death has met life, but there is life in death,
 The blood is frozen-but unconquered Nature
 Seems struggling to the last without a breath,
 The fragment of an uncreated creature.

Medusa’s “inextricable error” (her rape by Neptune) is an event which engendered the fatal necessity of converging life with death. The phrase “Death has met life, but there is life in death” points to the familiar paradox in Coleridge’s ballad “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” “Life-in-Death,” the deadly female figure that wins the ancient mariner. Her impact upon the literary imagination was so strong that it became a recurrent motif in the next century in many works, including Yeats’s famous and emblematic “Byzantium”:

A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
 Breathless mouths may summon;
 I hail the superhuman;
 I call it death-in-life and life-in-death. (1993, 248)

The inevitable clash between the violence of physical abuse and the “divinity” of Medusa’s rape (corresponding to what Yeats subsequently saw as the imposition of “disdain” by the dome of Sancta Sophia on “all that man is”) forces life out of death and vice versa, and all this baleful struggle can be traced, Shelley suggests, on “the lineaments of that dead face.” The fatal meeting of life and death is shown in a brilliant way through the phrase “thrilling vapour of the air,” an apt metaphor for Medusa’s breath, seen as something indefinite: neither dead, nor alive. Her breath spreads mortality because it issues from a dead head, but it also signifies life because it produces steam and thus impresses the notion of movement. The secrets of life and death discovered by Medusa have turned her face into an “ever-shifting mirror”

which not only reflects her inner fright and loveliness, but also helps her to discern, though only through terrific death, the beauty of heaven:

A woman's countenance with serpent locks
Gazing in death on Heaven from those wet rocks.

Shelley very aptly establishes the link (maybe unconsciously) between Medusa's "thrilling vapour of the air" exemplifying the process of inspiring and expiring, and the *inspiration* it effects. Not only did the motif of inspiration (engendered at the fatal meeting of life and death), become a paradigmatic archetypal romantic pattern, but it also came to function in other discourses and literary contexts. The vapour issuing from a dead head in fact became a source of *inspiration* for other authors who also emphasized the link between life and death, and further developed the analogy between "breath" and "inspiration," initially posited by Shelley's genius. "All legends agree," writes McGann, "that at her death the winged horse Pegasus, traditional symbol of poetic inspiration and energy, sprang forth from her body." (4)

Irrespective of whether Yeats investigated Shelley's poem or not, its impressive meaning is re-enacted in one of his last poems entitled "A Bronze Head," a "crowning double" of "On the Medusa," in which Yeats describes a bronze head of his beloved Maud Gonne in the Dublin Municipal Gallery. I will quote it at some length in order to demonstrate the striking similarities between this poem and "On the Medusa":

Here at right of the entrance this bronze head,
Human, super-human, a bird's round eye,
Everything else withered and mummy-dead.
What great tomb-haunter sweeps the distant sky;
(Something may linger there though all else die);
And finds there nothing to make its terror less
Hysterica-passio of its own emptiness?

No dark tomb-haunter once; her form all full
As though with magnanimity of light
Yet a most gentle woman's; who can tell
Which of her forms has shown her substance right
Or may be substance may be composite,
Profound McTaggart thought so, and in a breath
A mouthful hold the extreme of life and death. (1993, 340)

The thematic interdependence and interchange of the concepts of "death" and "life" (the link Eros-Thanatos is implicit), familiar from "On

the Medusa,” pervades the whole content of “A Bronze Head.” The effect, which this exhibit exerts on the surrounding world may be summarized as “destruction”: “Everything else withered and mummy-dead.” The “tomb-haunter sweeping the distant sky” in the next line is undoubtedly reminiscent of the disposition of Medusa’s head, “gazing” as it does “in death on heaven from those wet rocks.” The original image of Maud Gonne rendered as “a form all full as though with magnanimity of light” recalls Medusa’s extraordinary beauty as expressed in the line “her horror and her beauty are divine.” Further on, the same drama of a grace which has turned “the gazer’s spirit into stone” is re-enacted here: Maud Gonne, “a most gentle woman,” must have gone through “a vision of terror” which “had shattered her soul,” the text points out, and this experience subsequently effected “hysterica-passio” and brought the person who contemplated the head to a state of inexplicable wildness: “I had grown wild / And wandered murmuring everywhere “my child, my child” (the effect of astonishment and petrification is lurking in the background).

If the curse which Minerva put on Medusa is the curse which Medusa herself had laid on the decaying world of poisonous and hellish creatures, then, by analogy, the curse laid on Maud Gonne, described as “a vision of terror” that “must have shattered her soul,” resulted in the “withering” of all the surrounding world on which “the bird’s round eye” of the bronze head at present stared. The two poems thus aim to enact the annihilation in death of worlds “symbolizing corrupted forms of civilization,” as McGann rightly observes. He goes on to write that

to Shelley a corruption has invaded the beauty of the Medusa’s original form, but his poem turns her death into an apocalyptic event distinguishing the forms of light and darkness. Her impassive gaze upon heaven is at once a triumphant rebuke of the powers of the air, an image of the undying vitality of “unconquered nature,” and her definitively petrifying and defiant gesture: the gods of death will not survive this stony glance. (5)

The atmosphere in the last stanza of Yeats’s “A Bronze Head” is analogous:

As though a sterner eye looked through her eye
On this foul world in its decline and fall,
On gangling stocks grown great, great stocks run dry,
Ancestral pearls all pitched into a sty,
Heroic reverie mocked by clown and knave
And wondered what was left for massacre to save.