"Surely Some Revelation is at Hand": Yeats, Disaster, and the Generative Void

Elysia Balavage

Department of English, University of North Carolina Greensboro

Abstract

In this article, I extend the critical discussion of Yeats's interpretation of crisis and catastrophe. To do this, I examine Yeats's reading of nihilism and show that he adopts a generative formulation of the philosophy, one that is represented by the works of Benedictus Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Hegel. Together, their understanding of the idea removes the negativity of nothingness and imbues it with generative capabilities. Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel all illustrate the subject, whether the individual person or the idea of God and Nature, as using the void of nothingness for redemption after experiencing a dissolution of "everything." I then interrogate the ways in which Yeats borrows representations of "disaster" from generative nihilism and executes this imagery in his later poetry, including Michael Robartes and the Dancer *(1921),* The Tower *(1928), and* The Winding Stair and Other Poems *(1933). Considering his interest in creation that these volumes exhibit, Yeats uses the gnostic catastrophe of Spinoza, Kant's reduction of the subject into a non-substantial void, and the Kantian and Hegelian sublime to diminish chaos to stillness. This allows him to extract the creative capacity from nothingness and imbue the void with creative possibility, an aim that he ultimately reaches at the conclusion of* The Winding Stair.

Three years before his death, Yeats recalls his merriment with the Rhymers' Club at the Cheshire Cheese in London in the essay "Modern Poetry: A Broadcast" (1936). His talks with the club members at the tavern stirred up weighty issues, including the pessimistic considerations that "nothing of importance could be discovered" and "only philosophy and religion could solve the great secret" (Yeats, 1961, p. 491). Paradoxically, though, neither philosophy nor religion could illuminate the darkness of secrecy because they had "said all their say years ago". However, Yeats seems to offer an alternative that could reinvigorate philosophy for a modern audience: a nihilistic mix of terror and the abyss. He declares:

> I think profound philosophy must come from terror. An abyss opens under our feet; inherited convictions, the pre-suppositions of our thoughts, those Fathers of the Church Lionel Johnson

> expounded, drop into the abyss. Whether we will or no we must ask the ancient questions: Is there reality anywhere? Is there a God? Is there a Soul? We cry with the Indian Sacred Book: 'They have put a golden stopper into the neck of the bottle; pull it! Let out reality!' (Yeats, 1961, pp. 502-503)

As Kuhn (2011, p. 13) argues, one of the most "significant modernist questions" is how one should "respond to a world of dislocation and fractured temporality in which identity has become fragmented beyond recognition." For Kuhn, Yeats's answer is intensity. Indeed, intensity for Yeats sees the stable center breaking loose and things falling apart but left in the wake of that destruction is not complete and unredeemable nothingness. Instead, he fashions a state of productive emptiness.

In this article, I investigate Yeats's interpretation of disaster and catastrophe, and explore his engagement with the centuries-old idea of nihilism. To do this, I examine the consequences of disaster's failure in the transitional volume *Responsibilities* (1914). This failure, I show, leads to cyclical dissatisfaction. After publishing *Responsibilities*, however, Yeats encounters certain works by Benedictus Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Georg W. F. Hegel, who all participated in a concept of nihilism—though they never named it so explicitly—that existed centuries before the publication of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Will to Power* (1901). The conception of nihilism I use borrows from two sources: first from Gillespie's investigation of nihilism's lineage in *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (1995), and next, from *Genealogy of Nihilism* (2002), where Cunningham (2002, p. xiv) frames nihilism as productive and states that it "endeavours to have the nothing as something" and "provides something out of nowhere." This is precisely what Yeats accomplishes in his later volumes of poetry. For the purpose of this article, I refer to the aforementioned consideration of nihilism as generative nihilism, to distinguish it from its post-Nietzschean connotation. As previous scholarship has more than adequately shown, Nietzsche's stimulus on Yeats is undeniable; yet, Yeats's images of disaster, on-loan from Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, offer an avenue primed for further exploration in Yeats's sphere of influence. Thus, I interrogate how Yeats borrows representations of disaster from these philosophers, adapts such images, and implements them in his later poetry volumes, including *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933). Considering his interest in creation that these volumes exhibit, I argue that Yeats uses the gnostic catastrophe of Spinoza, Kant's reduction of the subject into a non-substantiality, and the Kantian and Hegelian sublime to diminish chaos to stillness and draw light from the void.

The Poetry of a Failed Disaster

Disaster, apocalypse, and catastrophe. Critics have employed each of these words to characterize Yeats's mystical, philosophical approach to writing. Smith (1990, p. 12) notes a "pervasive" vision of all three in Yeats, particularly after *A Vision* (1925). Similarly, as Hough (1984, p. 63) states, Yeats writes *A Vision* in a mode of "apocalypse" and "revelation." Holdridge (2000, p. 150) then connects Yeats's rhetorical use of disaster to an approach that instigates transformation; he argues that Yeats sees "violence and mockery" as "prophetic of change that 'Heaven suffereth violence and the violent bear it away.'" The epochs that form the poet's system in *A Vision* therefore begin and end in violence and catastrophe, which shows Yeats's use of a negating, destructive, but generative force. For Yeats, the choice to explore disaster through poetry is rooted in his philosophical influences. In "Anima Hominis" (*Per Amica Silentae Lunae*, 1918) he declares:

> He only can create the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs, for only when we have seen and foreseen what we dread shall we be rewarded by that dazzling unforeseen wing-footed wanderer. We could not find him if he were not in some sense of our being and yet of our being but as water with fire, a noise with silence." (Yeats, 1959, p. 334)

Only through disaster and suffering can one find a meaningful sense of magnificence. For Yeats, the "wing-footed wanderer" arrives at the point of utter "dread" and reclaims catastrophe as prolific.

The formal and contextual characteristics of Yeats's poetry changed utterly by the time he read Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel. *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) demonstrate the language of catastrophe that destroys its subject while longing for a redemptive outcome. "Catastrophe" finds its lineage in the Greek *κατα* and *στρέφω*, which together mean "I overturn." This represents Yeats's view of history, and it aligns rather seamlessly with an old nihilistic determination of nothingness. Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel all illustrate the subject, whether the individual person or the idea of God and Nature, as using emptiness for redemption after experiencing a dissolution of everything.

Interestingly, though, it is the disaster's failure for Yeats that incites more fear and discontent than its success, and he explores this restlessness in *Responsibilities* (1914). Yeats externalizes genuine creation as a presence made from absence as he meditates on his own confrontation with the disaster (Engelberg, 1982, p. 57). He depicts the consequence of missing the disaster's

redemptive qualities in “The Magi”. The poem shows a speaker who envisions the Nativity scene from the perspective of an outside, bewildered individual. Painting a scene for the lifeless statues, he superimposes his own observations onto the figures:

Now as at all times I can see in the mind’s eye,
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depths of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
Being by Calvary’s turbulence unsatisfied,
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor. (Yeats, 1997d, p. 126)

Far from occupying a scene of chaos, the poem’s subjects are static. The Three Kings, as the speaker perceives, sport “stiff, painted clothes” and their “rain-beaten” stone-like faces reveal an antiquated longing. The poem’s unvarying ABAB rhyme scheme confines these figures; they cannot escape through a break in form, as the poem leads the “mind’s eye” to the concluding “floor,” the lowest point in the space of the poem. Even the progressive tense of “hovering” and “hoping” traps the figures; while “hoping” might suggest desire or potential for movement, the lingering impression of “hovering” immediately quells any expectation of liberation. Their unsatisfied “fixed” eyes reveal a vexation that plagues Yeats himself. As Jeffares (1984, p. 126) argues, the Magi are unsatisfied “because they represent Yeats’s belief that the Christian revelation was not final . . . Christ is uncontrollable because he is not final.” It seems clear that Christ’s resurrection and the upheaval it triggered could deliver neither the Magi nor Yeats from dissatisfaction. Disaster, in this case, fails to completely negate the metaphysical space of the poem, and thus a generative void cannot form. The lack of finality that Jeffares highlights vexes both the Magi and the speaker, who “now” and “at all times” see a vision of the “unsatisfied,” motionless figures. Both are confined in an apocalyptic circle of inaction that disaster’s failure directly causes.

Despite the failure of Christ’s disaster, the Magi nevertheless long for a deliverance from their immobility. For Wood (2010, p. 11), they eagerly seek unrest and the promise of “Calvary’s turbulence,” the event that summoned them to the child in the manger. The Magi, rather than

pursuing a transformation, seek the turbulence itself; they ignore what might hide in the core of turmoil as their eyes "still fix" on the next disaster (2010, p. 12). For Yeats (1916, p. 187), these figures represent "the habitual image suggested by the blue sky," as if they are doomed to remain chronically unsatisfied. Rather than acting as a generative void, the sky in this poem seems to swallow the figures as they episodically "appear and disappear" into the abyss of blue, unable reap the disaster for its creative properties.

The Disaster of Generative Nihilism: Yeats, Gnostic Catastrophe, and the Levelling of Everything

When it comes to comprehending and depicting the disaster in his poetry, Yeats garners information from Gnosticism, a perhaps unlikely adjacent philosophy to generative nihilism. However, the poet gains his knowledge of Gnosticism from a perhaps equally unobvious source: his reading of Spinoza. While critics have attributed Yeats's writing of the disaster and apocalyptic mode to Gnosticism, Spinoza is largely overlooked as a possible source for these ideas. As Bloom (1976, p. 212) suggests, Yeats did read Gnostic texts, but "generally in dubious versions or misleading contexts." Since, if Bloom is correct, Yeats studied Gnostic texts under ambiguous and even questionable circumstances, it is possible that he instead absorbed these concepts through Spinoza's nihilism. For instance, we know that he owned and most likely read Spinoza's *Ethics and de Intellectus Emendatione*, which scholars have previously linked to Gnosticism. Two statements in particular link Yeats's consideration of the Gnostic vision to Spinoza's nihilism. He uses one to end one of his final letters: "The last kiss is given to the void" (Yeats, 1955, p. 404). The second appears in *Where There Is Nothing*; Yeats (1966, p. 634) writes "We sink in on God, we find him in becoming nothing—We perish into reality." Martin (1986, p. 30) highlights both statements as exemplifying the same message. If so, Yeats's Gnostic vision moves compellingly close to Spinoza's nihilism, whose One Substance leads us to the abyss of emptiness but transforms that nothingness into divine plentitude, therefore imbuing it with infinite possibility.

Though they may seem at odds, Gnosticism and generative nihilism share perceptible similarities. For Hans Jonas (1958, p. 433), the Gnostic movement's connection to disaster is clear. He argues that the Gnostics grasped the particularly unnerving idea that the human condition has been fulfilled and performed "with all the vehemence of a cataclysmic event." Consequently, he

maintains that we may illuminate nihilism's disaster by juxtaposing it against Gnostic catastrophe. Additionally, in *Agon: Towards A Theory of Revisionism*, Bloom argues that any "adequate theory of poetic creation also must be a catastrophe theory. What is called creation, in art, is both a creation of catastrophe and a creation by catastrophe" (1983, p. 73). He elaborates, stating that catastrophe is "already in the condition of language, the condition of the ruins of time" (p. 74). For Bloom, the act of writing a poem entails a crisis: the external calamity that the poet reacts to reflects an internal struggle that he/she must also confront. Bloom contends further that poems themselves are "gnostic catastrophe creations" (p. 81). Creation is itself a catastrophe, a succession of tragedies created by an imperfect designer.

Yeats takes the nothing that his system needs from Spinoza, and this enables him to efface both God and Nature. The disaster seeps into Spinoza's philosophy rather unexpectedly: that is, through the erasure of Nature and a lingering Gnostic specter. On one hand, Spinoza's iteration of nihilism appears antithetical to Gnosticism; however, like the Gnostic God, Spinoza's deity, so to speak, does exist beyond attribute and negation because it is *only* attribute and negation. Spinoza's philosophy contains a dualism within-monism that collapses God, or the "One Substance," and Nature into one article. For Cunningham (2002, p. vix), this duality embodies the "logic" of nihilism because each entity cannot exist apart from the other: "God is made manifest in Nature, Nature manifests in God." Consequently, Spinoza can allot efficacy to "both" in the absence of "each," a formulation that enables him to interpret the "nothing" as "something". Such a provisional nothingness animates the void while banishing the negativity from nothingness. For Spinoza, the One Substance consequently "provides" Nature with existence and vice versa (Cunningham, 2002, 170). Through its negating power, the One Substance thus supplies a nothingness that fosters existence. As Badiou (2000, p. 101) suggests, "Let us say of [Spinoza] . . . he offers a salvation that promises nothing." This "nothing" ultimately directs Yeats's rendering of disaster to the void.

In addition to the *Ethics* and Gnosticism, Yeats obtains his understanding of generative disaster through his reading of Kant. For instance, in the *Opus Postumum* (1804), Kant aligns the phenomenal "World" with the noumenal God and vice versa. Kant's disaster materializes when he reduces the subject, the "absolute I," to a functional nothingness. While we cannot be certain how much of the *Opus Postumum* Yeats read, he did own and annotate a copy of *Kant's Critical Philosophy for English Readers* (1915), which outlines many of the concepts that the *Opus* tackles

(O'Shea, 1985, p. 144). And, like Spinoza, it appears that Kant found usefulness in diminishing a something to a nothing, and even further utility in using that negated space to function as something. His reduction of the subject to a nothing is an obvious example of this, but like Spinoza before him, Kant proposes a dualism that provides nothing. In humans, as Cunningham (2002, p. 94) states of Kant, a purely phenomenal object—that is, the thing as it appears—remains as such, while the noumenal—the thing-in-itself—transforms to exist simply as the phenomenal; this act functionally negates and dissolves the object. Ultimately, Yeats's endeavor aligns with Kant's own: to unite God and the World through humans in the wake of a negating force.

Finally, Yeats's thorough reading of Hegelian nihilism gives the poet a picture of a destruction that annihilates destruction itself. The annihilation and the emptiness that the disaster leaves behind is thus a conditional, transitionary space—the consequential void that fosters creation. Of the three old nihilists, Yeats read Hegelian philosophy most extensively; he housed eight different books on Hegel in his personal library, including *The Logic of Hegel* (1892); *What Is Living and What Is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel* (1915); and *Studies in the Hegelian Dialectic* (1918) (O'Shea, 1985, pp. 70; 64; 123). For Hegel, the absolute is the nothing that negates itself, or, the annihilation of annihilation. This iteration of disaster, like the disasters that Spinoza and Kant postulate, is not the harbinger of absolute destruction. However, it requires that the individual recognizes the disaster's creative potential; if the individual can do this, the provisional nothingness that disaster leaves behind is truly provisional. As Hegel (1802 cited in Gillespie, 1996, p. 117) declares, "out of this abyss of nothing . . . the highest totality . . . at once all-encompassing and in the most joyful freedom of its form can and must arise." Yeats revises this language when he commands reality to be released in "Modern Poetry", and he gestures toward this idea in "The Cold Heaven" when the speaker "[takes] the blame out of sense and reason." Here, the hollowing out concludes in crying, trembling and rocking, and if the speaker can transcend these tumultuous emotions, the highest totality becomes an accessible consequence.

A Sublime Transformation: The "Terrible Beauty" and the Void

Yeats's representation of the disaster in his poetry noticeably borrows from the generative nihilism of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, owing at times a particular genetic inheritance to Kant especially. Yeats stands on the precipice of depicting a generative disaster in *Responsibilities*, but he stops

just short of lucidly presenting this outcome in these poems. Beginning with *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, the first volume after he began reading these philosophers, the poet's disaster suggests a transformation, and in his later volumes, a transcendence. By combining disaster with a generative will, Yeats reaches a void that yields plentitude and creation. Kant's sublime shows an object existing as objectively terrifying, but the individual viewer does not truly fear it. He clarifies this point in *The Critique of Judgment* when he declares, "The sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense" (1790, p. 98). The sublime is therefore a part of the "supersensible" world, unbound by temporal and physical constraints, and formless and free (Holdridge, 2000, p. 33). Its nebulous properties and detachment from the realm of particulars make the sublime a vehicle that helps thrust the subject away from visible objects and toward a non-substantial void. The subject thus reaches beyond the idea of terror and toward a generative levelling. Extending Kant's implementation of the concept, Yeats latches onto the sublime's transformative quality and distills that into transcendence through his tragic joy. Yeats calls upon Kant's sublime to transform terror of annihilation into a state of near divine perfection. Such an action, as Holdridge (2000, p. 36) notes, will transport the individual to another plane.

In "Easter, 1916" (*Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, 1921), Yeats combines the ideas of tragedy and ecstasy together in his haunting refrain "a terrible beauty is born." Repeated three times, as if to actively evoke a movement beyond the physical world, his phrase suggests that the Easter Rebellion of 1916 possessed a nearly God-like power that not only "changed" but "transformed utterly" the trajectory of Ireland. The terrible beauty, devoid of definite form, positions the subject for a movement beyond physical understanding. In this way, the Kantian limitlessness that Yeats adopts does not lie in the possibilities for Ireland's future; rather, the subject vanishes because of this transformation, which can lead to a transcendence. At the poem's beginning, the speaker recalls the insignificant interactions he experiences with the people of his town in a foreboding tone that matches the disconcerting change about to take place:

I have passed with a nod of the head

Or polite meaningless words,

Or have lingered awhile and said

Polite meaningless words . . .

Being certain that they and I

But lived where motley is worn:

All changed, changed utterly (Yeats 1997b, p. 179)

Through repetition, the speaker emphasizes the inconsequential exchanges that he shares with the townspeople. "Meaningless" here conjures notions of action without intent. That is, the speaker partakes in these routine pleasantries because they are expected, or "polite," rather than substantial. However, tapping into the Kantian sublime changes the "meaningless words" that the speaker twice admits to uttering and replaces them with the "terrible beauty." Likewise, the sublime event that introduces the "terrible beauty" removes and replaces the "motley" fabric, a symbol that evokes images of foolish jesters. This act consequently eliminates the subject in the process: the "they" and the "I" are transformed, but the speaker does not reveal into what. In the poem's final stanza, the sublime event's transformative reach expands past the speaker's town to "wherever green is worn." Through this transformation, Yeats leads us to the Kantian non-substantial void: the entire erasure of what used to exist. The birth of the "terribly beauty" concludes the poem, an indication that the subject's vanishing is complete. It seems, then, that transcendence is a Yeatsian rendering of the Kantian non-substantial void. For Yeats (1961, p. 255), tragic joy marries two contradictory perceptions of a single feeling that is "the nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy." Yeats expresses Kant's formless limitlessness in the space between those extremes.

One way that Yeats accomplishes this feat is through the figure of Oedipus. For Yeats, Oedipus represents a human embodiment of the sublime. In *A Vision*, Yeats asserts that the tome will "proclaim a new divinity" in Oedipus:

> Oedipus lay upon the earth at the middle point between four sacred objects, was there washed as the dead are washed, and thereupon passed with Theseus to the wood's heart until Amidst the sound of thunder earth opened, "riven by love," and he sank down soul and body into the earth. I would have him balance Christ who, crucified standing up, went into the abstract sky soul and body . . . He raged against his sons, and this rage was noble . . . He knew nothing but his mind, and yet because he spoke that mind fate possessed it and kingdoms changed according to his blessing and his cursing. Delphi, that rock at earth's navel, spoke through him, and though men shuddered and drove him away they spoke of ancient poetry, praising the boughs overhead, the grass under foot, Colonus and its horses. (Yeats [1937] 1956, pp. 27-28)

Yeats's language is striking and ferocious in this passage. Words like "thunder," "rage," and "shuddered" give life to the daemonic as it entirely trembles the landscape. But amidst all this

frenzy lies a transformation and a "balance." Delphi possesses and transforms Oedipus into a medium that leaves him enraged but also triggers the men to "bless joyfully" the language of poetry (Ramazani, 1990, p. 108). As Ramazani argues, the transformation of terror into joy is:

> the sublime's affective structure, and the spontaneous movement of language from one mind to another is the intersubjective course of the sublime. The powerful speech of Yeats's Oedipus makes overt the violence of the sublime. (1990, p. 108)

Another significant aspect of Yeats's Oedipus is his association with metaphysical disappearance. He sinks "soul and body" into the void of the earth and seems to surface knowing "nothing but his mind." The character seems to emerge as a transformed subject, a result that closely resembles Kant's vanishing and the philosopher's view of the sublime. By making Oedipus disappear and leading us to the void of the "terribly beauty," Yeats injects transformation into an atmosphere filled with destruction and catastrophe. Thus, Yeats's disaster edges even closer to uncovering the new beginning that he desires.

The "Unsatisfied Ones" Satisfied: Yeats's Fruitful Void

Through his reading of generative nihilism, Yeats applies a version of the sublime to uncover a generative transformation that the daemonic façade masks. We stand now on the precipice of creation that must be birthed into existence. For Yeats, birth is intertwined with his reclamation of the disaster and destruction. The speaker of "The Second Coming" asks what newness will be "born" out of the old world's demolition and "Easter, 1916" declares the nativity of a transformed reality. Both poems were born of real-world disasters: Ireland's Easter Rising and the First World War. Furthermore, Yeats also sees the terror, the daemonic consequence of the rebirth. In "The Mother of God" (*The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, 1933), a dramatic monologue spoken by the Virgin Mary, the speaker asks, "What is this flesh I purchased with my pains, / And bids my hair stand up?" (Yeats, 1997e, p. 249). Yeats, donning the mask of the new mother, embodies humans' reaction to a sublime event: an all-consuming fascination with its beauty and terror; the mother contemplates, "This love that makes my heart's blood stop / Or strikes a sudden chill into my bones." Her simultaneous attraction and repulsion, love and fear, solicits a forward-progress. Although the mother fears the "fallen star that [her] milk sustains," the birth has already transpired. Only the uncertainty left in the wake of such new-ness remains. If Yeats sees a rebirth spring from

the destruction's aftermath, he continues to fashion this void and clarifies it in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*.

In *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), Yeats descends ever closer to the unforgiving abyss, but before it can consume him entirely, he finds the redemptive void that he seeks. Perhaps befitting of such a descent, the temper of the poems in both these volumes is indeed, as Yeats calls *The Tower*, "bitter," and "verges on nihilism." (Bradley, 2011, p. 110). As Bradley perceptively notes, "the idealizing dream" of Ireland that dominated the early romantic verse of Yeats has become "a modernist nightmare" in *The Tower*. The order of the poems in the volume *The Tower* is perhaps noteworthy as well, since Yeats deliberately chose their placement. It follows, then, that Yeats may have conceivably intended the relative calmness of "Sailing to Byzantium" to frame and put in heartening perspective the poems that come directly after; that is, "The Tower", "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen", because their systems, content, and sentiments are quite perplexing and alarming (Bradley, 2011, p. 111). For Bradley, however, he more likely intended to simulate the slope from order into near chaos and anarchy mapped by several of his later poems. But, as we shall see, *near* is a vital additive to Yeats's chaos: like Spinoza and his substance monism, he leads us to the edge of the absolute emptiness, but he does not leave us to be consumed by the abyss. Rather, the generative qualities of nihilism redeem annihilation and cultivate the void.

Yeats's poetic masks often long for nothing. In "Meditations in a Time of Civil War" (*The Tower*, 1928) the "daemonic rage" which "imagined everything" haunts the poem's landscape, and the "rage-hungry troop" magnifies the discontent chaos. However, the troop appears to so desperately long for emptiness that he "plunges toward nothing" with his "arms and fingers spreading wide / For the embrace of nothing" (Yeats, 1997f, p. 206). The figure seems frenzied in his quest for nothingness: the speaker calls him "belabouring" and "tormented," "biting at arm or at face" as he moves head-on into the abysmal scene. While the speaker fails to understand the trooper's desire and Yeats does little to describe this nothingness, it is clear that the trooper is drawn to it. His outstretched extremities long and reach for it, as if this nothingness will offer him something more than he currently possesses. It is this alluring quality to nothing that tempts and terrifies, but also leads the speaker to "abstract joy" and "half-read wisdom of daemonic images" at the poem's close. While still incomplete, nothing's glimmering of a gratification from within the void begins to form.

Nothingness appears as transformative in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (*The Tower*, 1928). Here, Yeats extends the image of the rage-driven troop who longs for the void to include a sublime vanishing of the subject that edges closer. Although rooted in the Irish Home Rule struggle, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is a poem full of vanishing. The speaker recalls, "Many ingenious lovely things are gone . . . " and even the things that otherwise seemed impervious to the vanishing, like "Phidias' famous ivories / And all the golden grasshoppers and bees" also are "gone" (Yeats, 1997g, p. 207). Human accomplishments in art, law, and philosophy are reduced to "pretty toys," but the toys now belong to the past. Time, for Mutter (2017, p. 152), changes everything, and human perception is quite susceptible to such an alteration. A vanishing of all material objects in a subject's world lays the foundation for a non-substantial void. Yeats primes the human subject for transformation by negating all achievement and physical items, but it is the swan that undergoes this change first.

The swan appears in several of Yeats's poems as a symbol of imagination, timeless existence, and conquest. In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," though, this mysterious bird connects visibly to the void. First, Yeats (1997g, p. 208) bonds the swan directly to the human soul; the speaker expresses, "Some moralist or mythological poet / Compares the solitary soul to a swan; / I am satisfied with that." As Billigheimer (1986) shows, we can credit Plato for first connecting the swan with the soul. In the *Phaedo* (1927, p. 462), Socrates pronounces:

> Will you not allow that I have as much of the spirit of prophecy in me as the swans? . . . because they are sacred to Apollo, they have a gift of prophecy, and anticipate the good things of another world; wherefore they sing and rejoice on that day [of their death] more than ever they did before.

Given that Yeats read the *Phaedo,* we can assume that he understood the swan's connection with a creative spirit as well as the bird's celebration of its own destruction.[i] More fascinating still, however, is that the sublimity that Yeats's swan embodies shares similarities to Kant's sublime disaster and transformation.[ii] Through the swan, Yeats stages the soul's advancement into sublime change, a move that leads it to the void's edge. The posture that the swan takes before "that brief gleam of its life be gone" is dignified and undaunted: its wings are "half spread for flight" and its "breast is thrust out in pride / Whether to play, or to ride / Those winds that clamour of approaching night" (Yeats, 1997f, p. 208). The swan, and by extension the human soul, then shifts to an active seeker of the disaster and destruction, as it "has leaped into the desolate heaven". In a move that alludes to Kant's view of the sublime, this bird fails to fear the desolate heaven's immensity or

vastness, despite the object's quantitatively terrifying sensation. The terror that this void elicits exists as incredibly real and hostile. The speaker states:

The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven:

That image can bring wildness, bring a rage

To end all things, to end

What my laborious life imagined, even

The half-imagined, the half-written page (Yeats, 1997f, 209)

The vision of the soul leaping into the desolate heaven can bring wildness and even existence-ending rage; for Billigheimer (1986, p. 60), the life, the half-imagined and the half-written page that the poet has imagined may terminate. Additionally, as Mutter (2017, p. 149) elaborates, the poet is "half persuaded to join in the prevailing mood of cynicism and destruction; it is tempting to acquiesce in nihilism, even to jettison his own poetry." The speaker's use of "can" in this passage rather than "will" or "does," however, is noteworthy: while the soul's deliberate bounding has the power to potentially summon such disaster and wildness, this outcome is not guaranteed; it is merely a possibility. Attaining order and renewed creation are the unspoken alternative consequences to leaping into the desolate heaven of this poem's void.

Whereas the vision of the swan-soul leaping into the void elicits a potentially fearsome outcome, it is an act which Mutter (2017, p. 150) connects directly to "good violence," which he calls "aristocratic, heroic, creative, and passionate." This "good violence" bears similarities to the redemptive disaster of generative nihilism, an Apollonian force that enters in one of Yeats's most diminutive poems: "Fragments" (*The Tower*, 1928). This poem meditates on language and truth as springing from the void of darkness and is one of the clearest instances of Yeats's void at last fostering creation. His title, which indicates a whole entity that experienced a destructive dismantling, implies a necessary reconstruction from the remains of the disaster. The speaker attacks John Locke for leaving us with the waste of the physical world and for underestimating the source of their own inspiration (Holdridge, 2000, p. 150). As an empiricist, Locke denied the existence of an innate truth; for Yeats, he failed to see that the "Garden died." By contrasting the empirical with the unperceivable, Yeats (1997b, p. 214) positions nothing-as-something; in this case, a something that prophesizes:

Where got I that truth?

Out of a medium's mouth,

Out of nothing it came,

Out of the forest loam,

Out of dark night where lay

The crowns of Nineveh.

Revelation in this poem comes after disaster. Nineveh, once a powerful city and capital of Assyria, fell at the hands of Babylon. But that nothing finally reveals something definite: the truth, born from the bare soil and darkness. The truth springs from the void of darkness, an entity that negates the ability of the sense to perceive.

Finally, Yeats imbues his void with creative properties, an achievement that only amplifies in *The Winding Stair*'s "Byzantium." Each of the poem's stanzas moves from pentameter to tetrameter to trimeter lines, only to end with a pentameter line that now seems expansive; this reflects the narrowing and intensity of the experience the poem strives for. While we are accustomed to reading this poem as an allegory of the aesthetic process, it is yet another exercise in Yeats's rendering of the Kantian sublime. In the commentary to his *Collected Poems*, Yeats reveals that he "warmed [him]self back into life with Byzantium" after falling ill. A "poem that befit [his] years," the structure of "Byzantium" oscillates between varying line lengths that perpetuate the "images that yet / fresh images beget" (Yeats, 1997a, p. 248). The aroma of flame that "no faggot feeds" and no storm "disturbs" hovers menacingly over the landscape, threatening to consume metaphysical reality and drag it into utter terror. In a move that Holdridge (2000, p. 180) casts as the "negative" sublime latching onto the "positive" sublime, the fire threatens to eviscerate all *a priori* truths and leave us "with nothing but the abyss." Yeats crafts the soundscape of "Byzantium" with harsh, abrupt dins; a cathedral gong reverberates and night-walkers warble their song, but these sounds "recede" as the distained "complexities" of "all that man is" enters the scene. "Unpurged images" are unrefined, as if the flame has not yet lapped their edges. For these entities, transformation to sublimity has not yet occurred. Once the flames envelope the day's images, as Ramazani (1990, p. 160) articulates, they will "simplify through intensity" and "burn away the accidents of the chaotic life."

Just as the "rough beast" of "The Second Coming" appears out of *Spiritus Mundi*'s desert, the speaker experiences another vision that sees the potential in disaster. He reveals:

Before me floats an image, man or shade,

Shade more than man, more image than a shade;

For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth

May unwind the winding path;

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. (Yeats, 1997a, p. 248)

The "superhuman" image is the embodiment of contradiction: the speaker first describes it as an image, refines his description to form a human, only to negate the first statement and cast it once again as mere image. This figure seems wrapped up in circularity: it has a mouth but cannot use it because the figure lacks moisture and breath; however, the potential for utility nevertheless exists, even if not yet actualized. Furthermore, Yeats's superman sees the proclivity for creation beyond the disaster. Death and life collapse into one image to form a nothing that functions as something, a nothing devoid of negativity. In Kant's dynamical sublime, there is the sense of annihilation of the sensible self as the imagination tries to comprehend a vast might. As Bloom (1976, p. 225) highlights, the negative formula in this poem mirrors Phases 15 and 1 of *A Vision*, where "human incarnation is negated." However, Yeats's annihilation is neither absolute nor finite; instead, it is provisional. This is what the speaker achieves by collapsing death into life and life into death: the fusing of each negates the other, thus preparing a space for transformation. In this case, the transition between lives.

This is where the disaster of generative nihilism enters the poem most prominently. Amid the fury, fire, and "mire" of the landscape, a regeneration of sorts begins to transpire. The "smithies," who the speaker surrounds with hellish descriptions of metal and flame, surge the landscape's bedlam forward and bring the destruction, but the scene is not one of utter annihilation. "Begotten" and "beget" appear a total of three times in the poem's second half. As if they spring from the void itself, the flames are their own cause and "begotten of flame," and the "spirits" "blood-begotten," made of flesh, are "dying into a dance / An agony of trance" (Yeats, 1997a, p. 248). Their death, however, exists as celebrated, as "dance" and "trance" amalgamate into a sublimity that fuses merriment and pain. These images, sprung from the destruction and disaster of the action appear

to process in a never-ending litany that fills the space of the poem. Through this sublime, Yeats seems to gesture toward Kant's postulation that no phenomenon can disappear as the "images . . . yet / fresh images beget."

After the sublime, the idea of negation enters the poem to add supplementary explanation of Yeats's procreative disaster. As Miller (1965, p. 113) argues, Yeats aims to yield to God in this poem as a phase of "total objectivity." For Miller, "Byzantium" comes close to removing all distinctive qualities from the soul so that it might reach God without qualities. Unlike Miller, I do not suggest that Yeats means to reach God in this poem, but the purging of an excess firmly anchors this idea in a generative nihilism. Spinoza's Gnostic erasure of God and Nature, an act of pure negation, promises the purged nothing to which Miller and Yeats allude. This process of losing idiosyncrasy to reach total objectivity relates to Kant's vanishing of the subject and Hegel's absolute. For Hegel, absolute negativity is supposed to be a first principle, a ground from which everything else flows. While Miller uses the phrase "total objectivity" to characterize Yeats's yielding to the divine, the poet depicts this surrender as anything but quiet and passive. Instead, he leaves us with a "dolphin-torn . . . gong-tormented sea." For all of the poem's eradicating language, a ferocious rage still overwhelms the final line. In this ultimate line, Yeats reveals that exorcism is violent: Kant's vanishing, Hegel's annihilation of annihilation, and Spinoza's gnostic disaster all require fury.

Conclusion

Reaching the non-substantial void is an arduous task; it requires both trauma and catastrophe: an utter change and a loosening of anarchy. However, Yeats harnesses this chaos and mixes it with an order that enables the dark to finally grow luminous in his poetic system. His reading of the generative nihilism of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel aids the poet in his endeavor. In his last letter, written to Elizabeth Pelham on January 4, 1939, three weeks before his death, Yeats concluded:

> I am happy, and I think full of an energy, an energy I had despaired of. It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put all into a phrase I say, "Man can embody truth but he cannot know it." I must embody it in the completion of my life. The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence. (Yeats, 1955, p. 922)

Yeats finally reaches the still point and achieves a satisfaction with his life and poetic vision, and this satisfaction imbues much of his late poetry. As he concludes in his "Supernatural Songs"

(*Parnell's Funeral and Other Poems*, 1935),

There all the barrel-hoops are knit,

There all the serpent-tails are bit,

There all the gyres converge in one,

There all the planets drop in the Sun. (Yeats, 1997h, p. 285)

The circularity that characterizes this stanza sees the Sun acting as a stable center, with the wild gyres all finding unity in the amorphous "there." Through his mode of disaster and catastrophe, Yeats finds the new center that he seeks. He finds this center in the void that the disaster of generative nihilism—"the logic of nothing as something"—leaves behind (Cunningham, 2002, p. xiv).

Endnotes

[i.] In the "Great Year of the Ancients" section of *A Vision*, Yeats writes extensively on the "Platonic Year." In this section, he includes parables from the Phaedo, including Plato's tale of dividing an egg with a hair.

[ii.] In a note to "The Tower", Yeats connects the swan to transformation. He recalls, "When I wrote the lines about Plato and Plotinus I forgot that it is something in our own eyes that makes us see them as all transcendence. Has not Plotinus written: 'Let every soul recall then at the outset the truth that soul is the author of all living things . . .'"

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