Can a coin – model of the drama of exchange – become emblem and embodiment of the unified vision of a people? The drachma? The fiorino? The scilling? Is it possible for a monetary unit to forge the visionary unity sought by the poet-nationalist?

For senator W. B. Yeats, it could. His presidency of the commision for the design of the saorstát coinage marked an artistic turning point. The process left him with a lasting impression of how false was the dichotomy of medal and monument, implicit in Pound’s rejection of the (mini-)lapidary (“Mauberley”) for the (mega-)lithic (“Cantos”). All four of the major international artists Yeats had invited to submit to the committee – Manship, Mestrovic, Milles and Morbiducci – were medallists as well as monumentalists on the grand scale. His role convinced him that the monetary monument (‘the silent ambassador’ of a nation, in the form of the tetradrachm of Syracuse, for example, or the Byzantine solidus) could surpass even the colossal statue as an embodiment of a people’s absolute and immutable unity of vision. Beyond his governmental functions, it seems, the poet-senator took literally his role of ‘master of the mint’ and set about recasting his artistic identity as a virile incarnation of the unity of durable form and of enduring value: as the gold standard (stud) of an extreme poetics.

In order to examine this extreme poetics, this paper analyses several stanzaic poems from the twenties and thirties, especially those that reproduce the metrical patterns [matrices] of Italien Quattrocento octaves. In these enclosed forms we find the typical matrix-monuments of saorstát Yeats: circumscribed dra(ch)mas of the reproduction of temporally transcendental values, whose enduring durability can almost be grasped. They stand as ‘utterances of (uterine) utterness’: speech acts that engender the absolute… coinages struck with a totalitarian die.

It would be easy to dismiss this kind of quasi-fascist phallogocentrism if it weren’t for the fact that Yeats himself never leaves his mon(e)ymental oeuvre unmarked by irony, doubt, the suspicion of impotence, or a hint of Keatsian dejection. In fact, this self-effacement in the harsh glare of a hyper-virile, hyper-valorous imagination is not merely his saving grace; it is arguably the crowning achievement of a measured and highly polished body of work. By the end of his career (after the Steinach operation and the collapse of the gold-standard), in spite of it all, Yeats appears resigned to the fact that the timeless unity (the ‘utterness’) he had foreseen is not possible… not passable even; it is (like all money, all bodies, all words and all symbols) subject to usury and to erosion. But the worn effigy shines all the brighter for all that!

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1. And now for the duration / Maintaining duration : Yeats the master of the dies’
2. maître des matrices. Matrice is literally ‘matrix’; hence ‘die set’, ‘superstructure’ and ‘uterus’.
3. étalon-or ‘gold standard’, but literally ‘gold talent’ and homonymically ‘gold stallion’.
4. (main)tenue
5. possible de l’usure. The play on usure (usury / wear and tear) is Derrida’s: in Donner le temps : l la fausse mannaie 1991