

(Et/en) maintenant la durée : Yeats le maître des matrices*

[From stater to stanza: money, monument and matrix in Saorstát Yeats]

Et la médaille austère
Que trouve un laboureur
Sous terre
Révèle un empereur.

And the austere medal
A ploughman finds buried
In earth
Wakens an emperor

Théophile Gautier « l'art » in *Emaux et camées* (1872, li. 45-48)

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 commission 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'¹ 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)² 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 Italian *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.³ 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(ey)umental 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.⁴ But the worn effigy shines all the brighter for all that !

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* 'And now for the duration / Maintaining duration : Yeats the master of the dies'

¹ *maître des matrices*. *Matrice* is literally 'matrix'; hence 'die set', 'superstructure' and 'uterus'.

² *étalon-or* 'gold standard', but literally 'gold talent' and homonymically 'gold stallion'.

³ (*main*)tenue

⁴ *passible de l'usure*. The play on *usure* (usury / wear and tear) is Derrida's: in *Donner le temps : I la fausse mannaie* 1991