

# On Yeats's Aesthetic Modernity Through Self-reflexivity Reflected in His Poems in Ballylee Period\*

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A heated debate over Yeats's problematic modernity emerged in these years. The critics never come to an agreement on this issue. Since modernity, a very complicated term, is hard to define and still in the process of defining itself, in addition, Yeats produced myriad works; it is difficult to examine his modernity comprehensively. This paper targets Yeats's creative period of Ballylee (1915–1939), trying to discuss Yeats's modernity in the perspective of aesthetic or cultural modernity proposed by Matie Calinescu from Yeats's self-reflexivity reflected in his poems.

*Keywords:* William Butler Yeats, aesthetic modernity, self-reflexivity, self-criticism, Ballylee period

## Introduction

As a canonical writer, even before Yeats's death, assessments of his work were beginning to exceed the bounds of routine literary journalism. Now Yeats has been studied for over a hundred years. Critical interests in Yeats vary a lot, however, Yeats's modernity takes up a very particular position in studying for a long time.

In the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, W. B. Yeats pronounced with careful qualification: "I too have tried to be modern". This statement, simultaneously tentative and emphatic, sums up the difficulties both of considering Yeats as a modernist *tout court* and of taking the measure of the undoubted modernism of his work from 1900 onwards. (Fogarty, 2007.p. 126)

On the topic of Yeats's modernity, most critics, reviewers, and scholars at home and abroad focus on the question in their different understanding of modernity. Those critics who take Thomas Stearns Eliot's creation as the criterion of modernism compare Eliot's works with Yeats's and hold that Yeats does not regard himself as part of Eliot's school. Others also take Eliot's comments on Yeats as the only standard to come to an opposite conclusion that Yeats should be signed a modernist label. Since modernity, a very complicated term, is hard to be defined and still in the process of defining itself and in addition, Yeats produced myriad works; it is difficult to examine his modernity comprehensively. This paper, centering itself on a study of Yeats's several poems written in Thoor Ballylee period (1915–1939), tries to reconsider Yeats's modernity in the perspective of two kinds of modernity proposed by Matie Calinescu in *Five Faces of Modernity* from Yeats's self-reflexivity reflected in his poems.

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### Thoor Ballylee Period and Aesthetic Modernity

Although Yeats is a poet, playwright, and autobiographer, it is as a poet that he takes his place as a major figure in English literature. He provided myriad numbers of poetry during the long creative time and the frequent subjects were love, politics, collapse of western civilization, philosophy of history, and personality and paradoxes of time and change, of growth and identity, of love and age, of life and art, and of madness and wisdom. He composed his most esteemed poems in the solitude of his West County retreat, Thoor Ballylee, where he had known the square Norman tower, near the village of Gort in Galway, “since 1896”, according to Partridge, “when he toured western Ireland with Arther Symons<sup>1</sup>, and called at Coole Park to see Lady Cregory. It was among the villagers of the neighborhood that they collected many of their treasured examples of folklore” (Partridge, 1976, p. 103). By the autumn of 1916, Yeats was negotiating directly for Thoor Ballylee, a ruined Anglo-Norman keep. The tower was probably built in the 16th century, though its origins may go back to the 14th century and Yeats certainly liked to date it earlier. In the letter to Sir Henry Doran at the Land Commission, the poet wrote: “For years I have coveted Ballylee Castle” (Foster, 1997, p. 84). Although the tower had fallen heavily into disrepair, to Yeats’s delight, the “winding stair” (which he mentioned frequently in describing the building) was perfect. Obsessed though he was, the poet bargained as hard as he knew. “And after the hard bargain on 27 March, 1917”, as Foster said, “he accepted it for £35 and converted the following year” (ibid, 1997, p. 85).

Since Yeats’s move in this tower as summer residence in 1919, its first function was not domestic. It was a place for writing. It was one of his singing schools, one of the soul’s monuments of its own magnificence. Yeats’s other addresses were necessary shelters but Ballylee was a sacramental site, an outward sign of an inner grace. The grace here was poetry and the lonely tower was the poet’s sign. Within it, he was within his own mind. The posture of the building corresponds to the posture he would attain. The poet was spending summer weeks in Ballylee, making it his symbol of age, endurance, fortitude, and wide observational power. By 1919, when he moved in the tower, Yeats was 54 and he felt that his heart had grown old. He had already moved into a retrospective mode by writing, in 1914, the first of his autobiographical essays, called *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*, to be followed, in 1922, by *The Trembling of the Veil*. He and his wife George were ardently pursuing the practice of automatic writing, which had led, in 1918, to the first sketch—called *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*—of the occult materials that would receive their fullest form in the 1926 publication of *A Vision*. It is said that in Thoor Ballylee, Yeats produced his greatest works. Symbolically in his poetic intention, he situated himself at a flash-point between several intersecting histories that converged on the tower and awkwardly straddled several clashing roles as visionary and victim, custodian and dispossessed, and oppressor and outcast. The Thoor Ballylee period in question in this paper is not strictly from purchase time of this castle—1917 until Yeats’s 1929, when the poet’s health began to fail, but instead, it referred to the time from 1915 to 1939 comprising works in collections of *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair* (1933), and *Last Poems* (1939). The work of this period revealed a considerable extension of vision and aesthetic modernity. In Foster’s highly acclaimed two-volume biography, *W. B. Yeats: A Life* (1997 & 2003), he claimed:

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur William Symons (1865–1945), Yeats’s a friend, was a British poet, critic and magazine editor.

The great majority of the fourteen Yeats poems in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* are post-1920—seven from *The Winding Stair*, two from *The Tower*, two from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*; the earliest dates from 1913, thus excising all the early canon which still defined Yeats's market popularity. (Foster, 2003, p. 558)

Thus it can be seen the greatness of works Yeats was produced in this Ballylee period. The four poems, analyzed in this paper are all selected from the above collections: *Man and Echo*, *The Circus Animals Desertion*, *Among School Children*, *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*, and *Leda and the Swan*.

Concerning Yeats's modernity, one problem arises first—what is modernity? In Calinescu's book, he never gives any exact definition to this protean term. Beginning the work by tracing the origin of the word "modern", he gives us a detailed etymological description of "modern". Moreover, he quotes the classical definition of modernity aesthetically by Baudelaire: "Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art, of which the other half is the eternal and the immutable" (Calinescu, 1987, p. 49).

With Baudelaire's definition, we may grasp the feature of modernity: the transitory, the fugitive, and the contingent. It is because modernity is a concept with complexity and contradiction that it is so hard to define. According to Calinescu's two kinds of modernity theory, the modernity can be divided into two categories. One is the Enlightenment or bourgeois modernity: "the doctrine of progress, the confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, the concern with time, the cult of reason, and the ideal of freedom defined within the framework of an abstract humanism" (Calinescu, 1987, p. 41). It manifests for the rational victory, emphasizes human's greatness, and makes widely known human's entity; it is the science and technology that comprehensively conquers the nature and the society. Another kind is the aesthetic or cultural modernity, it takes cultural activities and art as representative; it emphasizes the perception, opposes instrumental rationality, and supports the different meanings and the ambiguity. It is one kind of reconsidering, the denial and the revolt against bourgeois modernity. The bourgeois modernity and the aesthetic modernity belong to the category of modernity, but they are incompatible.

The bourgeois modernity has brought the huge progress to society. The development of science and technology enables great change of people's life. The Enlightenment or bourgeois modernity, taking reason as value core, on the one hand, brings great improvement to society; on the other hand, it causes serious crises to western countries, leading to the emergence of the other modernity—aesthetic modernity which takes irrationality and life perceptuality as value core. "The aesthetic modernity", Calinescu claimed, "was disgusted with the middle-class scale of values and expressed its disgust through the most diverse means [...] what defines cultural modernity is its outright rejection of bourgeois modernity, its consuming negative passion" (Calinescu, 1987, p. 24). Aesthetic modernity can be understood as the revolt of bourgeois modernity. Bauman claims: "History of modernity is a history of tension between social existence and its culture. Modern existence forces its culture into opposition to itself. This disharmony is precisely the harmony modernity needs" (Calinescu, 1987, p. 10).

The Western scholars have different explanations to the western modernity due to different perspectives. However, among their main concerns are the features of the doctrine of progress, the confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, the belief in tool-rationality and the orientation toward pragmatism, and the cult of action and success. As the betrayal of the western/bourgeois modernity, aesthetic modernity stands against bourgeois modernity with the typical feature—self-reflexivity.

Aesthetic modernity should be understood as a crisis concept involved in a threefold dialectical opposition to tradition, to the modernity of bourgeois civilization (with its ideals of rationality, utility, progress), and, finally, to itself, insofar as it perceives itself as a new tradition or form of authority. (Calinescu, 1987, p. 10)

### Yeats's Self-criticism

As a matter of fact, Yeats's spirit of self-criticism goes through his whole life. His self-criticism makes transformation in which his greatness lies. "Dr. Leavis", according to Dennis Poupard and James Person, "once has said his (Yeats's) power is his self-criticism" (Poupard & Person, 1985, p. 441). People generally agree that there are several Yeatses because of his changes. His lifelong quest for a unique style owed much to his desire to break free from the unsatisfactory literary models and aesthetic philosophies proffered to him in his youth. As he made clear in *Autobiographies*, he felt an aversion to the cold abstraction of much of contemporary English Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian verse (Yeats, 1955, p. 181). By 1903, he had begun to distance himself from his aesthetic, briskly dismissing his earlier writings as "too lyrical, too full of aspirations after remote things, too full of desires" (Pethica, 2000, p. xvii). This forceful self-criticism was often regarded as marking a radical break in his work, but while it signaled his intention to turn from the express of "disembodied beauty" toward a more active engagement with the known and the tangible, it involved continuity as well as departure: The dismissal defines his early writings as "too" lyrical and "too" desiring of remote things, but it falls well short of rejecting outright either the lyrical mode or his interest in the unseen. Yeats had in fact been aware of the dangers of his tendency toward mystical abstraction from the first, fretting to Katharine Tynan<sup>2</sup> as early as 1888 that his work tended to "cloud and foam" (Kelly, 1986, p. 68).

"A Coat" in his *Responsibilities* collection is a searching self-criticism and a manifesto of a new art which would no longer evade actualities, and concisely articulates his new aims. The poem proposes that his old style, having become overly elaborate, like a "coat [...] Covered with embroideries", need to be cast away and replaced by directness and simplicity. After Yeats purchased Thoor Ballylee and took that place as summer residence from 1919, Yeats's self-critical consciousness more sharply emerged in his works. David Holdeman comments that Yeats's self-critical side stands out even more sharply in *Man and the Echo* and *The Circus Animals' Desertion* (Holdeman, 2006, p. 111). *Man and the Echo* and *The Circus Animals' Desertion* collected in Yeats's late poetry anthology *Last Poems* (1938). In these last writings, Yeats is again at his best when his feelings are at their most conflicted, and when his poetry serves as means of self-discovery, rather than self-assertion. As he had written in 1917, in what was perhaps his most incisive moment of self-criticism: "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. Unlike the rhetoricians, who get a confident voice from remembering the crowd they have won or may win, we sing amid our uncertainty" (Pethica, 2000, p. 285).

*Man and the Echo* begins with Man shouting frantic questions into an oracular cleft on the side of Knocknarea, in County Sligo. Did he contribute to the deaths of the 1916 rebels by writing such incendiary plays as *Cathleen ni Houlihan*? Was he responsible for Margot Ruddock's<sup>3</sup> mania? Could he have prevented the ruin of Coole after Lady Gregory's death? The fact that Echo answers by repeating Man's last four words implies continued awareness on Yeats's part that communications from the spirit world may be nothing more than

<sup>2</sup> Irish poetess, W. B. Yeats's friend.

<sup>3</sup> Margot Collis or Ruddock, an English poetess whom Yeats befriended. She temporarily became insane in Barcelona and Yeats paid her return fare to England.

solipsistic self-mirroring. Man himself seems sure that the instruction to “Lie down and die” comes from the great beyond, but he does not propose to obey. Instead, he multiplies the poem’s ironies by arguing with the oracle. In his view, an old man should not seek death until his spiritual intellect has fully woken him from the torpor of bodily experience, thus enabling him to understand and judge himself, dismiss what he has been, and sink without regret “at last into the night”. That Man remains painfully distant from this condition is implicit not only in his remorseful opening questions but also in his final supplication. When Echo confirms only that “night” must fall, Man pleads for reassurance: “O rocky voice / Shall we in that great night rejoice? / What do we know but that we face / One another in this place?” (Jeffares, 1950, p. 282). Man indirectly admits in the cries of a rabbit struck by a hawk or owl distract his stoical thoughts that pursuing the “spiritual intellect’s great work” may have cut him off from the only reality he assuredly faces, the reality of the suffering world around him. The poem centers on the paradoxical possibility that, in making this admission, he advances the process of waking up to that “one clear view” of himself that eventually will allow him to stand “in judgment on his soul”.

*The Circus Animals’ Desertion* stages a similar confession. Here, the poet acknowledges his lifelong tendency to substitute art for life. In doing so, he makes a hesitant but real attempt at being “satisfied with [his] heart”. To be satisfied with one’s heart—to lie down in it despite its foulness, to stop imagining alternatives to it—is to arrive at something very like the strangely joyful, remorse-free state of self-knowledge, self-judgment, and self-dismissal recommended by many of Yeats’s later poems. Indeed, *The Circus Animals’ Desertion* carefully follows the formula outlined in *Man and the Echo*: It arranges Yeats’s life in one clear view, stands in judgment on that life, dismisses it, and begins the final descent back into the primal point of origin, “the foul rag and bone shop of the heart”. One of the poem’s superb ironies is that the poet only acknowledges his art’s limitations after his creativity seems to have failed him; another is that in disclosing these limitations he finds renewed artistic purpose. Are his creative difficulties and broken humanity tokens of failure? Or are they the long-awaited signs that he has exhausted everything he was meant to do and be, and thus is ready to act on the advice of “Vacillation” and “come / Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb”?

### Self-reflexivity

Besides Yeats’s self-critical side, another indispensable element helped him stand on the opposite side of himself to turn back to see his own footsteps is his modern mind—self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity is said to be a typical characteristic of aesthetic modernity. With self-reflexivity, Yeats rejected or reshaped many elements in his youthful poetic self and made himself mature in poetic writing notably in Thoor Ballylee period during which *The Tower* and its sequel *The Winding Stair* published. In the following part, three poems will be analyzed in detail to illustrate Yeats’s self-reflexivity.

Holdeman held the view: “Whether the critics term Yeats a modernist or not, they generally agree that Yeats produced the modern era’s definitive books of poetry since the publication of *The Tower* (1928)” (2006, p. 81). The poems *Among School Children*, *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*, and *Leda and Swan* discussed respectively in the following are selected from the pendant volumes, *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*. Yeats explicitly chooses for his soul reincarnation and he makes an anatomy of his life and creation. The reason of labeling these two collections as the pendant volumes lies in the fact that “*The Tower* is only of a complex pattern that is completed in the following section, *The Winding Stair*” (Unterecker, 1996, p. 69). They may be seen as Yeats’s key

contribution to the annals of modernist poetry. Although their themes had been anticipated by his preceding work, they enunciated a more searching, subtly imagined and differentiated vision of world affairs and of Irish politics. They constituted Yeats's searing philosophical summation of modernity. As will be seen, it is particularly in their assessment of history, their treatment of the themes of alienation and fragmentation, and the conceptualization of the modern subject, whether as the ageing poet-surveyor or as the unruly outcast, Crazy Jane, that they provide a telling and uniquely configured counterweight to *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*. To some extent, *The Tower* volume's reputation derives from its epical scope: It includes the poet's principal artistic responses to Ireland's War of Independence and Civil War as well as such memorable forays into ancient times as *Leda and the Swan*, *Sailing to Byzantium*, and Yeats's self-reflective poem *Among School Children* and *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*.

*Among School Children* is a meditation on existence in time, the world of becoming. It scrutinizes and debates Yeats's life-choices autobiographically. In this poem, Yeats starts with a vivid picture of himself as an elderly senator of the Irish Free State inspecting a convent school. Again there is ironic humor both in the glimpse of the education of the children and in the self-portrait. . . . The extended reverie that follows from this dislocating recognition depicts art neither as a Platonic quest nor as a search for mastery. "The memory of the 'Ledeian body' of his beloved, Maud Gone", Daniel Albright claimed, "leads to a redefined modern aesthetic that is captured by the culminating metaphors of the blossoming chestnut tree and of the performing dancer" (Albright, 1990, p. 261). In this light, art is reconceived as process and embodiment. Moreover, the references to Leda, Plato, and the poet's own scarecrow of a body have created associative links with many other poems in *The Tower*. Such associations prepare readers to hear deep resonances in the four concluding stanzas.

These begin by acknowledging that, because the body withers, it cannot offer "compensation" for the pangs of earthly life (pangs awaiting unborn spirits whose desire for "Honey of generation" betrays them into taking "shape" upon a mother's lap, and who later either accept or resist their mortality depending on whether they remember their former spiritual condition). Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras reacted to the body's limitations by positing transcendent ideals or trying to master the solid world or listening for the music of the spheres. They ended as scarecrows all the same. As for the sacred icons revered by nuns, though they may not wither like human body, by symbolizing heavenly glory they mock all earthly "enterprise" and thereby also "break" their worshippers' hearts. In this respect they resemble the mosaics that summon spirits to consume the heart in *Sailing to Byzantium* or the "changeless work[s] of art" described as keeping ancient Japan's wits awake in "My Table". All of these "images" exemplify what Yeats has once called masks which will be articulated in detail in chapter three: "They are", according to Holdeman, "emblems of adversity that lure us into fulfilling our destinies by simultaneously calling up the passions of our mortal hearts and calling down the daemonic energies that act as those passions' Blakean contraries" (Holdeman, 2006, p. 90). One's admiration becomes all the greater when one reaches last two lines of the famous concluding stanza: "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance / How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (Jeffares, 1950, p. 96).

The last stanza answers all the questions by showing a beauty which is perpetual growth and movement, the wholeness of life which defies analysis. This is poetry in which the outer and inner lives are brought together in a unity which includes realism, wit, lyrical beauty, and philosophic meditation. It is not a synthesis in which we feel a sense of terrible effort and strain as we do in much of the best work of Hopkins, but it seems to arise easily and naturally from the poet's mind.

Yeats achieved this triumphant wholeness of poetic life. His great ambition of creating a “unity of life” for the whole Irish nation was shattered by the vulgarity and insensitiveness of the modern world. In his early poems he uses the vague and beautiful images of flowers, stars, birds, and mythical figures as an escape from the ugliness of his ages. In his later poetry, he uses more realistic images of drunkards and lechers, Crazy Jane and Tom and the Lunatic and finally the figure of the mad, reckless old poet in many poems of Ballylee period. It is his self-reflection that makes him go away from his early style toward a man with modern mind and finally make himself a giant.

If the above poem demonstrates Yeats's sense of self-reflexivity thematically, then the next two *A Dialogue of Self and Soul* and *Leda and Swan* reflect his self-reflexivity through poetic innovation in language style and form the poet made. Originally entitled *Sword and Tower*, *A Dialogue of Self and Soul* was written late in 1927 and early in 1928 (Partridge, 1976, p. 120). In America, a Japanese friend, Sato, has presented him with a sword and with part of a court-lady's silk dress to cover it and this sword became a heroic symbol of Yeats's resurgent life after illness. Another symbol was the winding staircase of Thoor Ballylee, which Yeats associated with the gyre of the theosophical system.

Part one of the “Dialogue” dramatizes the conflict between the poet's dominant passions. The sword represents the worldly self, and its fulfillment through creative energy. The soul's symbol is the winding stair leading by successive incarnations to the Buddhist's nirvana, “extinction (of passion)”. Yeats in part two rejects the latter while announces himself, because personality requires commitment to the genetic character of a man's nature.

In *Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats*, Marjorie Perloff has the following comment:

*The Winding Stair* [...] is [...] the volume which contains the greatest variety of types of approximate rhyme [...] as well as the volume in which pun-rhyme and symbolic association-rhyme become most prominent [...] It represents, in short, the culmination of Yeats's rhyming technique with respect both to the phonetic and the semantic aspect of rhyme [...] The distribution of approximate rhyme in Yeats's poetry is similar to the distribution of rhymes that involves semantic relationships. As Yeats becomes more aware of the phonetic possibilities of rhyme, he also begins to exploit its semantic properties. (Perloff, 1970, p. 113)

The esoteric symbolism of *A Dialogue of Self and Soul* is resolved in the second part of this poem, where Yeats reviews, and absolves himself from, the frustration and tragedy of his post life. Cumulative uses of metaphor and metonymy are observable in the key words blind (“foolish”), ditch (“source of life”), impure (“sinful”) toil (“dreariness”), and clumsiness (“ineptitude”). Adolescence (unfinished man), from the vantage point of age, is seen as the ignominy of boyhood.

If youth is distressful, adulthood is filled with calumny and distortion of the truth. Using two metaphors—the mirror of malicious eyes and wintry blast, Yeats implied that there was no escape from the passions of his fellow countrymen, because honorable neutrality left one out in the cold. He seems here to universalize the hatred of contemporary Irish patriots. Furthermore, the poet argues that a reasonable man must accept his mistakes. The poet finds no consolation in religious remorse, and prefers uncompromising acceptance of the world's evil. Heroic resolution is doubly important, because of the probability of re-incarnation. The poet also convicted further that self-analysis should trace mistakes, whether of action or thought, to their source. It becomes evident that man has complementary existences, the actual and the symbolic; he is therefore invariably

at odds with his destiny. "Three years before his death Yeats wrote to Dorothy Wellesley that he thought of his sick soul only 'from ambition and vanity'; his new resolution was 'to avoid deep places and die blaspheming'" (Wade, 1955, p. 236). This would explain the poet's decision to "cast out remorse". An old man, preparing for the grave, could attain to Yeats's final euphoria only through a feeling of resignation.

The semantic linking of stanza to stanza is important to Yeats's technique in this poem, which late in his career employs numerous devices of rhetoric. Finished man, in line nine, looks back to unfinished man in seven; pitch (18), though used as a verb, has a metonymic relation to defiling in line 11.

Yeats described his regeneration as "heroic ecstasy"; it was in accord with his idealistic quest for a surrogate for religion. In his antithetical philosophy, universal love replaced the disappointments of individual love, benevolence replaced hatred, and contentment made tolerable the ubiquity of corruption. Whether this resignation is different from "escape" depends upon one's approach to the Yeatsian allegory of existence.

By analyzing the language of this work in detail, one can see Yeats's language is vigorous and chiefly memorable in iambic measures, disciplined by stanza forms. Within that framework, he became a master of modulation, and his contribution to the modernist movement lay in the rhythmic flexibility and common syntax he was able, after 1915, to command.

In addition, Yeats's sense of aesthetic self-reflexivity represented by form innovation also finds typical demonstration in "Leda and Swan" of *The Tower* collection. The poet firmly modernizes and radicalizes the legend by restoring attention to its physicality and the brutality of the rape of Leda. Disjunction and division are registered both thematically and formally. The use of a caesura in the opening line ("A sudden blow: the great wings beating still") and of a line division in line 11 underscores the atmosphere of crisis and irregularity. In addition, Yeats deliberately overlays the structures of the European and the English sonnet to magnify the sense of breakdown Leda suffered; the poem may be variously read as dividing into an octave and sestet, in the Petrarchan manner, or as conforming to the Shakespearean mode and splitting into three quatrains and a couplet. Traditional forms are decomposed by the modernist artist to achieve the dissonant effect that he requires. Thematically, what result the rape of Leda brings to human beings is uncertain and ambivalent. By making the formal innovation, Yeats has achieved the perfect combination of form and theme.

To conclude, the above-analyzed poems reflect fully Yeats's self-criticism and self-reflexivity.

### Conclusion

As one of the most important figures in the transitional period from Romanticism to Modernism, William Butler Yeats struggled for a systematic updating of subject matter and style throughout his literary career and wrote extraordinary poems in every school he was involved in whether it was Post-Romanticism, Aestheticism, Symbolism, or Modernism. In his later years, skillfully combining reality, symbols and metaphysics together, he formed his own unique system of philosophy and symbolism, which found the most prominent expression in Ballylee period, thus inscribing his name in literary history of the world as well as that of Ireland.

Based on Calinescu's interpretation of modernity, the paper narrows down Yeats's creative period to take a closer look at Yeats' modernity. With self-critical thought and strong mind of aesthetic modernity—self-reflexivity in the process of producing poems in Thoor Ballylee, Yeats examined his own creation journey and made great efforts to change. Constantly self-criticism and self-examination make Yeats

finally find what he called the “anti-self”. The anti-self gives the poet new creative inspiration and poetic power. It is this self-reflexivity that makes the poet become a great poet. Yeats’s modernist quality remarkably reflected in his poems written from 1915 to 1939. By analyzing the typical poems of this period, the paper illustrates that Yeats’s self-reflexivity makes him stand on the opposite side of himself and modernize his works.

Zhou Xian once claimed:

Self-reflexivity is one of the important concepts of modern sociology and philosophy. In philology, self-reflexivity refers to the meditation of main body on thinking; in the theory of sociology, it indicates the theory itself, that is to say, all knowledge can be interpreted from the aspect of society. He provides an appropriate metaphor that: As concerning modernity; self-reflexivity is one who hurries on with his journey surveys his way and find out his gain and loss. If social modernization is just that man, then aesthetic modernity is the person who reminds his direction and route. (ZHOU, 2002, p. 52)

Thus it can be seen, with the self-critical thought Yeats finally stands on the opposite side of himself. He constantly reminds himself of his own poetic direction and route. The preceding poems analyzed in Ballylee period clearly prove that Yeats’s criticism and examination of his poetic creation reflected in his poems displays the poet’s self-reflexivity of aesthetic modernity.

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