

WAS W. B. YEATS AN IRREALIST?



Michael Colson
with an Introduction by **Marjorie Perloff**

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MARJORIE PERLOFF



#90

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Contents

Introduction by Marjorie Perloff	vii
Part I: Was W. B. Yeats an Irrealist?	1
Part II: The Yeats-Moore Correspondence	7
Part III: Rushkin's Cat Problem	25
Notes	35
Works Cited	43
Author Bio	48

Introduction

– Marjorie Perloff

This essay by the critic-philosopher Michael Colson grew out of his dissertation. For many years, Colson has been grappling with the problem: how can W. B. Yeats be considered a “great” poet even as critics refuse to take his “ideas” seriously? The usual view, as Colson makes clear, is that Yeats’s metaphysics was somehow incoherent and contradictory: this view dates back to W. H. Auden’s dismissal of Yeats’s ideas as “silly.” Auden made fun of Yeats’s flirtation with “spooks”—ghosts and goblins, astrological signs, the 28 phases of the moon, the famous “gyres,” and so on. He dismissed Yeats’s take on the spiritual as “so Southern Californian”! This was in the 1940s. T. S. Eliot dismissed much of Yeats for similar reasons.

Alternatively, there are many critics who label Yeats a Berkeleyan, others who relate Yeats primarily to theosophy and George Russell (*Æ*), still others who call Yeats a Platonist. Colson cuts through all this in his new exciting study of Yeats’s “irrealism.” His conclusion is that “For Yeats, the problem with realism was that in spite of its use in science it cannot eliminate ‘the now obsolete sense-corked bottle of personality.’” That is, when we stop to think about “all the images, sense-images, dream-images, mind-images, as forming a single existence,” “one is forced to concede an equal reality to the conceptual ideas...the ancient pair Intellect and Imagination stand face to face.” Thus, as Yeats said, “the barrier between images of sense and of the

mind does not exist.” “The realm of sensory perception,” in Colson’s words, “is bound only by an individual’s cognitive capacity to conceive of indeterminate material objects in a possible world.”

Yeats thus emerges as indeed a “serious thinker.” But must a great poet be a philosopher? Colson seems to think so; I myself don’t. But I wholly respect his argument. And after all, given how much time Yeats spent poring over philosophy books from Plato and Plotinus on down, given his life-long preoccupation with metaphysics and epistemology, it’s terrific to have this *new reading* of Yeats. Today, when the political has taken such precedence, it’s great to read about a great poet who grappled with the very meaning of life, with our ontology and search for truth, even as he produced the most beautiful sound structures and image complexes of the twentieth century. Read on and see if you don’t think that Colson has made his case with great aplomb!



**WAS W. B. YEATS
AN IRREALIST?**

PART I

Was W. B. Yeats an Irrealist?

In recent years, W. B. Yeats has poorly withstood ideological critique. In regard to Irish nationalism, the Protestant Ascendancy, women's issues, European Fascism, and eugenics, critics have maintained that Yeats simply got things wrong. If these concerns aren't troublesome enough, the poet's philosophy was influenced by the occult, astrology, and the paranormal. The standard view is that Yeats's mix-and-match philosophy was incoherent and irrational.¹ For example, Yeats's typologies of gyres and astral phases are dismissed as "batches of opposites, contraries, contradictions and the like."² Typically, Yeats's poetry draws more attention than his philosophy, and the general consensus is that Yeats was a great poet but not a serious thinker.

Several questions arise: (1) Can we untangle Yeats's orthodox metaphysics from his unorthodox beliefs?³ (2) If Yeats held an orthodox metaphysics, then is it coherent? (3) If Yeats's orthodox metaphysics is coherent, can we genuinely consider him to be a serious thinker? In response to the first question, a few scholars have attempted "ideological bracketing" by addressing Yeats's orthodox metaphysics.⁴ This has led to a widely held position on the second question that Yeats was an "heir of Berkeley," a philosophical idealist, who claimed that reality is mental or immaterial.⁵ However, I shall argue that this conclusion is imprecise and misleading, and I hope to demonstrate that Yeats did not believe that reality is entirely mental or immaterial. Thus, he cannot

be properly labeled an idealist. An obvious alternative philosophical stance is realism—the view that reality is independent of the mind. However, Yeats was not a realist either. Since he was neither a realist nor an idealist, it would be convenient to claim that he had no settled orthodox metaphysics. In my view, Yeats was a serious thinker because he held a coherent metaphysical view called “irrealism.”⁶ This opposes three standard interpretations: (1) Yeats’s philosophy was inconsistent, incoherent, and irrational; (2) Richard Ellmann’s “Assertion without Doctrine View,” which holds that Yeats frequently made seemingly contradictory assertions, but didn’t believe any of them; and (3) Yeats’s orthodox beliefs were committed to Berkeley’s idealism.⁷ As I hope to show, critics have neglected important features of Yeats’s philosophy. As a result, we have reason to reevaluate his status as a serious thinker who held coherent philosophical views.

Undoubtedly, Berkeley was an important thinker for Yeats, and because the philosopher’s motto “We Irish think otherwise” opposed British rationalism, critics have traced Yeats’s stringent opposition of materialism and scientific empiricism to a “lifelong interest in Berkeleian idealism.”⁸ Although evidence seems to support this position, including Yeats’s own sworn allegiance to Berkeley, I shall point out significant points of divergence.⁹ First, Yeats did not believe in a monotheistic Judeo-Christian God, which is fundamental to Berkeley’s views.¹⁰ Second, Yeats was not an immaterialist. Although Yeats believed in apparitions and visions, he made a distinction between mental objects such as hallucinations and other perceptual phenomena that have a material basis. That is, he posited a fluid dualism of mental (*res cogitans*) and physical objects (*res extensa*). For Yeats, mental objects (i.e., perceptions or “sense data” such as visions and hallucinations) are not strictly immaterial but are in fact material. Thought and perception have a material composition of chemical and spiritual energies (i.e., *afflatus*). This position is commonly called “panpsychism,” a doctrine

which posits that mind is a fundamental feature of the world which exists throughout the universe.¹¹ Third, critics dismiss the fact that there are different versions of idealism, from Plato’s classical idealism and Berkeley’s subjective idealism to Kant’s transcendental idealism and Cambridge objective idealism. As it happens, Yeats studied most versions of idealism but it’s unclear which version, if any, he found most persuasive. In spite of Yeats’s interests in idealism, plenty of evidence demonstrates that he didn’t adopt any version of it. In fact, an examination of Yeats’s philosophical correspondence with T. Sturge Moore will support my claim that Yeats solidly rejected Berkeley’s idealism. Given these reasons, I believe that Yeats was not an idealist, and this conclusion permits us to explore alternative metaphysical views that may have appealed to him, such as irrealism.

Although Yeats was not an idealist, he believed that Berkeley had located the central issue of modern philosophy—the mind’s connection to the world. That is, Berkeley inquired into the scope of human knowledge of the external world. How do we know what’s objectively real and not a dream or a pure figment of subjectivity? Berkeley asked how we can know objective truths about the world, given that our ways of knowing are based entirely on subjective experience. Many other modern philosophers are skeptical about such knowledge claims. The problem involves getting “beyond” or getting “outside of” subjective experience and “what’s in our heads” to an objective viewpoint. How can reality be represented directly or indirectly to us as anything but a mere perception? These questions culminate in what’s commonly called “Berkeley’s Puzzle.”¹² In response to these questions, Berkeley argued that we cannot escape our own ways of experiencing the world. Thus, he concluded that the external world is a perception: “To be is to be perceived.” Only our ideas are real.

In 1925, Yeats became interested in idealism when his correspondence with the artist-poet T. Sturge Moore took a

philosophical turn.¹³ Yeats came across an essay entitled “The Refutation of Idealism” written by Sturge’s brother G. E. Moore, a professor of philosophy at Cambridge University, who’s *Principia Ethica* had influenced the Bloomsbury Group. When Yeats realized the connection between the two men, he began quizzing Sturge on his brother’s philosophical views. The subsequent correspondence lasted for over a year, spanning several metaphysical topics, including Berkeley’s Puzzle and “Ruskin’s Cat Problem” on the veridicality of visual perception.¹⁴ Since Yeats had no direct contact with G. E. Moore, Sturge served as go-between. Sturge defended his brother’s commitment to realism—that reality is independent of the mind—and Yeats attacked it.

The Yeats-Moore correspondence indeed confirms that Yeats opposed the materialist worldview of Locke and Newton, who maintained that reality has an entirely physical basis (also known as physicalism).¹⁵ Materialism underlies modern scientism and excludes from reality such phenomena as visions and psychic and spiritual events. As we know, Yeats was not a materialist, nor was he a realist who maintained that reality is independent of our perceptions of them.¹⁶ Rather, for him it is nearly impossible for us to distinguish reality from the imagination. Surely, Yeats believed that there is a multiplicity of worlds: the physical one is no less real than a world constructed by powerful imaginative forces, such as cultural myths. Of course, questions arise about how we can distinguish genuine from spurious worlds. What are worlds made of? How are they made? What role do symbols play in making worlds? How is knowledge related to worldmaking? These questions concerned Yeats even if he did not have full and final answers to them. Another reason that irrealism appealed to Yeats is because it didn’t demand that he reject the viability of many worlds.¹⁷

Yeats’s irrealism neither denied the force of mental phenomena nor adopted strict physicalism.¹⁸ Rather, his version of irrealism embraced both positions and held them in balance. Neither is sufficient in offering a comprehensive explanation of the world. Both physicalism and phenomenalism offer partial versions of the world.¹⁹ Irrealism posits that there are many worlds and the collection of them all is one.²⁰ One world may be understood as many, or many actual worlds may be taken as one. This is largely determined by our descriptions and frames of reference. For example, we have two scientific explanations of light and both versions are equally compelling. Each version offers a different account of the world. Painters and writers also describe their perceptions of the world. Often there is no simple frame of reference or set of rules for understanding versions and visions of reality. Canaletto’s vision will be different from Van Gogh’s, and Van Gogh’s vision cannot be easily transformed into the respective visions of physics, biology, and psychology. Yeats characterized reality as a world version. Indeed, for him there was no one way the world is in and of itself, and no true version that is entirely compatible with our multifarious ways of making the world.²¹

PART II

The Yeats-Moore Correspondence

The bulk of letters between Yeats and Sturge Moore spanned over a year, from December 8, 1925 to June 27, 1926. The main recurring topics were on metaphysics and epistemology: realism versus idealism, the nature of perceptual experience, and human knowledge of the external world. As Yeats knew, any position on perception required a commitment to an ontological and an epistemological viewpoint on what the world is and how subjects perceive it. There are two divided camps: realists and anti-realists. In the first group are direct and indirect realists. Modern philosophers such as Descartes and Locke had serious objections against direct realism, and advanced their own versions of indirect or representational realism (views which Moore and Russell also held). This view maintains that humans cannot perceive the external world directly but can only know it by our ideas or representations of it, such as how we have sensations of primary and secondary qualities of objects.

Locke's primary—and secondary—quality distinction was crucial to his account of representational realism. Primary qualities don't require explanation by appeal to our sensory experience (an object's primary qualities include mass, shape, and movement). Secondary qualities depend on our perception of them, such as an object's color (the way an object reflects and absorbs light)—and its smell, taste, and whether it is hard or soft.

Indeed, Yeats blamed the ills of modernity on Locke's and Newton's abstract thinking, most notably the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.²² In opposition to this distinction, Berkeley posited that all qualities of objects are products of the mind, and thus are purely subjective. This undercuts abstraction, since one does not need to "abstract" qualities that are not directly perceived by the mind.

After a recent visit to Sturge Moore's residence, Yeats reported that he "made an old friend see a vision." According to Yeats's story, his friend "sat turning the pages of a missal invisible to me," and she described the pictures in great detail. Yeats's idea of a missal produced a vision of the very same missal in his friend's mind, and the vision was so vivid that his friend described it at length. Yeats commented, "Hitherto I have always taken the idealist view of such visions but now, thanks to your brother's *Refutation of Idealism*, I am permitted to think they exist outside the mind." That is, Yeats was able to make his friend have an idea of a missal that was identical to his own, so for him that implied that an idea is not strictly mental but can exist outside the mind (since his friend had the very same idea as his own). After reading G. E. Moore's classic paper Yeats went from believing that visions or dreams of objects are strictly mind-dependent to those objects being mind-independent. In this letter and others, Yeats clearly rejected Berkeley's idealism. His friend's missal was not strictly in his own mind. Moreover, Yeats concluded that Moore's paper had supported his belief that the missal was not merely a subjective sensation but an actual object that could be experienced by others, as "the same stuff as the table." His shared experience confirmed the objective status of the missal: "Part of the vision I shared or rather produced by my unspoken thought so we had a common element."

To be clear, Yeats had asserted that his vision or thought produced a world that contained a missal in it, and he shared that world with his friend. He maintained that a mental object or visual picture of a

thing isn't strictly mind-dependent since another person can have a mental image of the same object. The vision wasn't merely private or subjective to a perceiver since it was shared with someone else. The object's mind-independence did not imply that it existed solely in a world of material objects beyond the scope of subjectivity.

Yeats's "mind-independence" didn't imply that an object exists in the external world. For him, the obverse of internal or private subjectivity is not external or publically verifiable objectivity. That is to say, Yeats made a subtle distinction here that several contemporary philosophers have made as well: epistemological claims (subjective or objective) do not imply ontological commitment. Knowing P does not entail that P exists in the external world.

Yeats took issue with G. E. Moore for not making this point explicit. Furthermore, Yeats denied Moore's contention that idealism ("Reality is spiritual") entails immaterialism. Without going into detail, plenty of valid arguments have been advanced for the materiality of the mental (or spiritual). In fact, modern physicalism maintains that reality is reducible to material substance, even that which is called spiritual, including volitional action. Nonetheless, Yeats latched onto Moore's opening statement on the irrefutability of idealism:

For my own part, I wish it to be clearly understood that I do not suppose that anything I shall say has the smallest tendency to prove that reality is not spiritual: I do not believe it is possible to refute a single one of the many important propositions contained in the assertion that it is so. Reality may be spiritual for all I know; and I devoutly hope that it is.²³

Moore's admission on "Reality is spiritual" did not block him from asserting its improbability. Notwithstanding, Yeats concluded that since a mental object is spiritual (inasmuch as it is "inside" an

individual's soul), then it can be real as well, even if it is imagined. For Yeats, an object's conceivability (as an object of the imagination) was veridical inasmuch as it is an idea before the mind. He didn't distinguish objects of the mind from the sensory perception of objects. That is, he didn't distinguish between acts of "perceiving" and acts of "imagining," since both involve cognitive faculties of the mind. As it turns out, the distinction between "imagining" and "perceiving" has been a point of contention among Berkeley scholars for many years, namely in regard to the famous motto, "To be is to be perceived." That is to say, Yeats's interpretation of perceptual experience was similar to (if not the same as) standard accounts on Berkeley's theory of perception.

Nonetheless, G. E. Moore attacked the main idealist premise: "To be is to be perceived." For the most part, Yeats agreed with Moore's argument against idealism, and he believed Moore's assertion that idealism cannot be refuted. For Yeats, Moore's statement was consistent with his own claim that Berkeley was "realist and idealist alike" in that mental objects can be mind-independent and objects of shared experience.²⁴ Although Yeats sought the middle ground between realism and idealism he also recognized their conflicting claims. In this case, Yeats was not striving for synthesis but rather a unique philosophical perspective. Although irrealism was not yet a term in the philosophical literature, I believe that was the position he attempted to establish. Although he didn't offer an argument for this conclusion, I shall attempt to construct one on his behalf.

If "to be is to be perceived," and a perceptual object is any object that can be imagined, which is to say, a conceivability, then only conceptions (ideas, thoughts, and sensations) are conceivable. If this is the case, then conceptions are mind-dependent. The idealist maintains that she cannot conceive of anything that is mind-independent. If this follows, then there is no validity in positing the existence of mind-independent objects. An idealist supports the premise "All conceptions are conceivable" by saying that thought cannot reach out to the world

beyond the mind—that is, our thoughts provide direct access only to mental events. But another person who would have direct access to the same mental object, such as a missal, would be part of a world outside the mind. Thus, it may be concluded that even though all perceptions of objects are mental events, sharable experiences prove that "visions can exist outside the mind," yet remain, as Yeats concluded, the "same stuff as the table."²⁵ The shared experience of the missal entails that it exists in an actual world, not merely a possible world, because shared experiences only occur in an actual world. But since the missal *qua* subjective mental object is shareable, it is not strictly mind-dependent. Whereas, for a realist, the missal doesn't exist in an actual world because it is merely a mind-dependent conception.

An idealist would claim that the missal is mind-dependent. A realist would agree and add that the missal doesn't exist in the world. After all, it could very well be a hallucination. In regard to the missal, the two perspectives offer consistent claims. However, Yeats posited that an actual world exists in which the missal is outside the mind. This view is inconsistent with both idealism and realism. However, as Yeats claimed, we cannot deny that the perceivers had a shared experience of an object in the world. Rather than deny that the missal is only a mental object, Yeats claimed that it was a conception that is also mind-independent. In making this claim, Yeats rejected the notion that the object is strictly mind-dependent. For him, shared experience supports knowledge claims in an actual version of the world, just not the world versions that idealism and realism describe.

This does not deny the truth-value of their claims inasmuch as it provides evidence for worldmaking and the notion that mental objects are physical and in an actual world. The statement "The missal is mind-dependent" (M) is true for both an idealist and a realist. Yeats would claim that the statement is true in an actual version of the world that the idealist and realist share in common. But the statement "The missal

is mind-independent” (not-M) is also true in a world version that the two perceivers share. As we know, M and not-M cannot both be true at the same time. But the law of non-contradiction doesn’t apply in this case, because M and not-M are not truly opposed to each other. That’s because the world of realists and idealists differs from the world version of Yeats and his friend. The above statements pertain to different world versions; that is, the statements are true respective to each version. Thus, Yeats and his friend share a world version in which the missal is a mental object outside the mind.

If we grant that the above statements (M and not-M) are both true, a contradiction would result when each statement is true of one and the same world. If they are relativized to different world versions, then they are truths about distinct worlds.²⁶ Both state a truth about a world, but not the same world. This result may seem fanciful, inconsistent, or counterintuitive, but the account of truth-relativity to world versions is consistent as long as we stipulate that both statements are not true at the same time in our world. In any case, Yeats asserted that the mental object (a missal) is mind-independent. Since idealism maintains that objects are mind-dependent, we can again infer that Yeats was not an idealist.

In regard to the viability of visions as mind-independent objects, Yeats turned to Russell’s *ABC of Relativity*, and he remarked:

I am deep in his [Russell’s] *ABC of Relativity* but incline to reverse the argument and see light as stationary—the divine mind is one of its aspects—and all visible things revolving within at so many hundred thousand miles a second. It is almost the argument of [Berkeley’s] *Siris*. They revolve and yet are also stationary—Time in its double nature and in one of those absolutes.

From this passage, we have reason to inquire into Yeats’s motivation for studying Russell. Naturally, Russell’s discussion of Einstein’s special

theory of relativity included the metaphysics of perception, which was a recurrent topic of interest for Yeats. Since space and time are relative to observers, our comprehension of objective facts becomes influenced by subjective experience. Yeats studied Russell’s explication of Einstein as a systematic theory of worldmaking.²⁷ Thereby, the construction of a world is not irrational, mystical, or occult. As such, worldmaking is hardly trivial or nonsensical. Rather, it is more akin to a revolutionary paradigm shift in knowledge, a new way of conceiving a world beyond ordinary modes of sense perception.

Moreover, the constraints on worldmaking are strict and rigorous. A virtue of worldmaking is simplicity: we cannot create random objects, such as a missal, in a world version. The predicates we use to refer to objects must be in our language and there must be continuity with other world versions. Simplicity prevents us from creating new objects, and our beliefs must be coherent. For example, Rudolf Carnap’s *Aufbau (The Logical Structure of the World)* describes the making of a world version, and many scientific theories also posit world versions.²⁸ The heliocentric and geocentric worldviews are world versions, and Einstein’s theory of special relativity can be considered a world version as well.

However, world versions do not have to be constructed in formal languages or by scientific means. This aspect of irrealism appealed to Yeats because he did not merely create (or “discover” as it may be) metaphors for poetry; he developed a symbol system common in the arts to make worlds. By studying Russell’s explication of Einstein’s theories, he attempted to make an epistemically significant world from words and images. As Yeats knew, the construction of a world version is difficult—it’s premised on simplicity and coherence. For example, he struggled to make his views simple and coherent in publishing *A Vision*.

It’s difficult to interpret the above passage in which Yeats said that he would “incline to reverse the argument and see light as stationary—the

divine mind is one of its aspects.” At stake is whether he had a settled view on objects (including the materiality of light) as mind-dependent. One way to interpret Yeats’s statement is to characterize it as consistent with Berkeley’s early view that our ideas come from or participate in the mind of God. However, the “mind” Yeats refers to was not necessarily God’s but rather a sublime faculty of the human imagination which can change its picture, and its understanding, of light’s properties. A reversal of the argument that makes light stationary is a version of Pythagoras’s view that light is emitted from an object as it travels in a straight line. Since the passage is very compressed, it’s hard to discern Yeats’s overall meaning. But it’s clear that he’s referring to light in terms of particles and waves. As we know, light has “dual” properties of both waves and particles. I believe that Yeats’s point concerned the dual aspect of light as stationary (particulates or photons) and in motion (as waves), and, in particular, was commenting on the speed of light.

Yeats learned that Einstein’s special theory of relativity demonstrates that space can contract and then time will slow down (dilate). Light traveling through space can be thought of as being diverted into motion through time. Time has a “double nature,” as Yeats says, since the dimensions of space and time affect each other, and both space and time are relative concepts. Light is “stationary” in the sense that the speed of light is the bedrock on which a world (or universe) is made. Einstein’s idea overturned the long-held perceptual notion of simultaneity—the idea that events that appear to happen at the same time for one person should appear to happen at the same time for everyone in the world; rather, he discovered that it was impossible to say in an absolute way whether two events occurred at the same time if those events were separated in space.

Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity explains that a moving object measures shorter in its direction of motion as its speed increases and approaches the speed of light. It also explains that traveling clocks run more slowly as their speed increases until they

reach the speed of light, in which case they stop running at all. Furthermore, it explains that the mass of a traveling object increases as its speed approaches the speed of light, in which case it can become infinite. The upswing is that one person’s measure of space is not the same as another person’s, and time flows at different rates for different observers travelling at different speeds. Thus, space and time should be conceived as a space-time continuum, which implies that time is not absolute.

Since time is not absolute, then a traveling object occupies space at different times. This implies that space and time are not *a priori* objective features in the world, but are subjective perceptions made possible by the cognitive faculties of the mind. In other words, space-time is largely mind-dependent.²⁹ It wasn’t a stretch for Yeats to conclude that light is mind-independent—a stationary and permanent feature in a world version of visible objects that are constantly in flux, rotating and changing.

Yeats believed that Berkeley’s mature view on perception was contained the *Siris*, which discusses *unobservable* minute corpuscles to explain the medicinal effects of tar-water. In addition, the *Siris* mentions the transmission and refraction of light through “real eyes rather than ideas or perceptions of such events.”³⁰ In this way, Berkeley argued that the mind gives form to matter, and ideas are apprehended by the “eye of the imagination.” He referred to a World Soul that is a fiery substance, a pure ethereal fire, speculating about its role in the functioning of the cosmos—from the properties of tar-water to the properties of mechanical causes to cosmic operations (the world soul) to minds to the divine mind to the Trinity. He treated the “pure ethereal fire” (i.e., light) as a function of human vision. The details get complicated, but Berkeley seemed to think that the particles that compose bodies don’t have any causal mechanism. God causes all motion, change, and action. The appearance of light is

an imminence from God. In a nutshell, Berkeley argued that vision, quite literally, is a form of communication between the divine mind and the minds of creatures.

This view is known as occasionalism—i.e., ideas are caused by one true cause, namely God—and it is a key component in Berkeley’s idealism. We might be tempted to assume that Yeats endorsed occasionalism, but in fact he rejected it. This distanced him further from idealism; instead he endorsed Einstein’s language of worldmaking. As Russell explains:

What is demanded is a change in our imaginative picture of the world—a picture which has been handed down from remote, perhaps pre-human, ancestors, and has been learned by each one of us in early childhood. A change in imagination is always difficult, especially when we are no longer young. The same sort of change was demanded by Copernicus, when he taught that the earth is not stationary and the heavens do not revolve about it once a day. To us now there is no difficulty in this idea, because we learned it before our mental habits had become fixed.³¹

In other words, “our imaginative picture of the world” is a world version. Copernicus had a version and Einstein had another one. Yeats recognized the conceptual scope of physical hypotheses (world versions), and some of his favorite recurring themes include: folklore and mythology (the imaginative arts), the imaginative education of future generations, mortality and growing old, and the need to change with evolving intellectual attitudes. Specifically, Yeats agreed with Russell on fixed mental habits which are formed by cognitive biases and false beliefs. On this point, Yeats again quoted Russell:

Moreover it is touch that gives us our sense of reality. Some things cannot be touched: rainbows, reflections in looking-glasses,

and so on. These things puzzle children, whose metaphysical speculations are arrested by the information that what is in the looking-glass is not “real.” Macbeth’s dagger was unreal because it was not “sensible to feeling as to sight.” Not only our geometry and physics, but our whole conception of what exists outside us, is based upon the sense of touch. . . . It turned out that much of what we learned from the sense of touch was unscientific prejudice, which must be rejected if we are to have a true picture of the world.³²

According to Russell, our common-sense beliefs and intuitions (known as naïve realism) can be false. The empirical methods of science are a proper corrective to common sense. But for Yeats, shared experience is sufficient to overcome doubts about sense perception. However, he worried about the problem of illusion and hallucinations. Is Macbeth’s dagger real or a mere hallucination?

Yeats believed Macbeth’s dagger is unreal not because “seeing” didn’t match “feeling,” but rather because Macbeth’s dagger could not be seen by others; it is a private experience which is a hallucination. That is, Macbeth could not possibly distinguish a phantom dagger from a real one; in his circumstances a bloody dagger is conceivable, and as such it could possibly exist. However, the dagger didn’t exist in actual reality due to a lack of shared confirmation by perceivers.

Russell was concerned with the reliability of sense perceptions. In support of his attack against common sense—on how we perceive the world by means of touch—Russell posited an interesting thought experiment. He asked us to imagine a drugged balloonist who wakes up from being unconscious and has no memory or capacity to reason. While unconscious, the balloonist had been carried away in a balloon, and now wakes up sailing in the wind on a dark night. The wind carries the balloon to the United States, and the date is July 4th, Independence

Day. Because of the darkness, he cannot see the ground but the sky, however, is lit up with exploding fireworks. Then Russell asked: what picture of the world would the balloonist form? He cannot touch flashes of light but can only see them. The balloonist's understanding of geometry, physics, and metaphysics differs from ordinary mortals. In fact, the speech of ordinary people is unintelligible to him. But if Einstein were in the balloon with him, then he'd have better chances of being understood, because Einstein would be free of preconceptions that prevent most people from understanding his view of the world.

Russell doubted the accuracy of our common-sense preconceptions which often seem to be true. Russell pointed out three misconceptions. (1) Objects persist and are stationary from a terrestrial perspective. That is, objects seem to occupy a specific location, a definite "place," when in fact "place" is not logically necessary and precise. Rather, as Russell says, "all objects are tiny points of matter perpetually whizzing around each other in a rapid ballet-dance." (2) All motion is relative. Rather, it's merely conventional to say that any object is at rest. (3) Newton's idea of force is based on gravity. Newton's law states that an object remains at rest or moves at a constant velocity, unless acted upon by an external force. But an object will not stay in motion at a constant velocity, despite not being acted upon by an external force. These three misconceptions demonstrate that sight is less misleading than touch as a source of our notions about matter.

Russell cited additional preconceptions that philosophers have worried about, specifically Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Although philosophers (e.g., Berkeley) have challenged this distinction, most physicists have assumed that secondary qualities (color, taste, and smell) are subjective, whereas primary qualities (shape, position, and size) are objective. Not until scientists began tracking comets, which change shape and position, did they infer that Locke's distinction is false. In addition, the discovery

of radioactivity and cosmic rays, particle accelerator machines, and subatomic particles confirmed that many theoretical preconceptions were false, and those who challenged Locke and Newton were right.

Naturally, Yeats was encouraged by findings which supported his anti-materialist bent. Based on the philosophical and scientific undermining of Locke's primary and secondary qualities distinction, Russell concluded, "We have to draw a different line from that which is customary in distinguishing between what belongs to the observer and what belongs to the occurrence which he is observing." This statement concedes ground to perspectivism which maintains that objectivity is impossible due to the subjectivity of observation. Without going into further detail, Russell's representational realism adequately accounts for the vagaries of individual perspectives. Yeats reported that the envisioned missal was consistent with Russell's conclusion: our customary inferences regarding sensory perception, the line demarcating subjective from objective experience, requires reconsideration. Furthermore, Russell offered another example. Here is the scenario:

If a man is wearing blue spectacles he knows that the blue look of everything is due to his spectacles, and does not belong to what he is observing. But if he observes two flashes of lighting [as the drugged balloonist does], and notes the interval of time between his observations; if he knows where the flashes took place, and allows, in each case, for the time the light took to reach him—in that case, if his chronometer is accurate, he naturally thinks he has discovered the actual interval of time between the two flashes, and not something merely personal to himself. He is confirmed in this view by the fact that all other careful observers to whom he has access agree with his estimates.

From this, Yeats concluded that his friend's dream missal is real because it is confirmed by those Russell referred to as "careful observers." Further on, Russell says:

If there were no reality in the physical world, but only a number of dreams dreamed by different people, we should not find any laws connecting the dreams of one man with the dreams of another. It is the close connection between the perceptions of one man and the (roughly) simultaneous perceptions of another that makes us believe in a common external origin of the different related perceptions. Physics accounts both for the likenesses and for the differences between different people's perceptions of what we call the "same" occurrence.....neither space nor time separately can be taken as strictly objective. What is objective is a kind of mixture of the two called "space-time."³³

While Russell opposed perspectival claims on the unreliability of sensory perception as a basis for objective knowledge, he didn't deny the subjective nature of experience. When he says that reality could be "only a number of dreams dreamed by different people" and we wouldn't "find any law connecting the dreams of one man with another," this statement meshed with Yeats's view on the dream missal, because even though no law connects "the dreams of one man with another" that didn't imply that a connection is impossible or inconceivable. Although Yeats's missal report didn't attempt to discover a law connecting the dreams of one person with the dreams of another, and his intent was not to offer a demonstration that the missal exists outside the mind, as being an external cause of direct sensations, he did believe that Russell's statement substantiated his own view on subjectivity. That is, epistemological claims cannot dismiss subjective experience and, as a result, they cannot be entirely objective. With this, Yeats affirmed that realism is false, and Berkeley's "realism

and idealism alike" is more on the mark. Since Berkeley didn't hold these two claims in balance, and both cannot be held concurrently in one and the same world, then an alternative position can be found in irrealism.

Moreover, when Yeats said that he was inclined to "reverse the argument and see light as stationary—the divine mind is one of its aspects—and all visible things revolving within at so many hundred thousand miles a second.... They revolve and yet are also stationary—Time in its double nature and in one of those absolutes," he was not so much "reversing an argument" as creating his own thought experiment. In fact, he was alluding to William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence," which dovetails with Russell's point that sensations of touch are less reliable than vision.³⁴ The drugged balloonist cannot touch the flashes of lightning: he can only see them, and based on visual experience he draws conclusions about the nature of the world. But what he sees is shrouded by the darkness of night, and because he has no memories and cannot reason for himself, his "soul slept in beams of light," implying that the scope of his knowledge is thus confined to his immediate subjective experience.

For Blake, as Yeats knew, light is a Platonic metaphor for knowledge, the divine *logos*, and only a God dwelling within the human breast can repel ignorance based on unreliable sensory perception. But evidence of the divine cannot come from sensory perception. That is, most ordinary mortals will never witness the face of God; therefore, they must find evidence of the divine within themselves, in the contingencies of shape-shifting human form. Yeats's "reversal" granted Russell's points concerning the relativity of spatiotemporal reality, and the sensory perception of particular objects at a specific time and place. It was also consistent with Blake's notion that the Absolute—the Monadic Primordial Cause, the Sacred, the Form of the Good—however "Being" is conceived, contrasts with finite things, which are contingent beings.

Although Yeats's reasoning was not explicit on these points, we can reconstruct his overall intent. Since Russell's main point concerned the

limits of sensory perception, the larger issue was the limits of human reason. Because this was the case, we can infer that the Absolute, the Sacred, is a mystery. And if we appeal to Nicholas Cusa's *coincidentia oppositorum*—the coincidence of all opposites—then the inconceivable Absolute (the “flashes of lightning”) can be expressed only by contradictory and paradoxical metaphors. The *coincidentia oppositorum* serves to approximate the experience of the divine that doesn't lend itself to human conceivability; the conjunction of opposites preserves the ineffable mystery of subjective experience. For Yeats, the divine was not the Judeo-Christian God, inasmuch as the divine was equivalent to power, and in his analysis, to reality. The divine is “Being” and power is reality. Humans experience the divine in relative terms, as an expression of a fundamental opposition between the real and unreal.

In addition to *ABC of Relativity*, Yeats believed that Chapter Four entitled “Idealism” in Russell's *Problems of Philosophy* also gave “proof that my friend's dream missal really exists.” Yeats cited two specific paragraphs in the chapter where Russell opposed Berkeley's use of the word “idea,” and charged Berkeley with equivocation. For example, when we say that we have an idea in mind we could mean one of the following. (1) The thing of which we are aware, say, the color of an object. (2) The “act of apprehending” the object. Russell says that (2) isn't a viable option because the object apprehended cannot be mental. Certainly, we would think that the color of an object is not merely in the mind. Russell proceeded to say the following:

Berkeley's view, that obviously the color *must* be in the mind, seems to depend for its plausibility upon confusing the thing apprehended with the act of apprehension. Either of these might be called an “idea”; probably either would have been called an idea by Berkeley. The act is undoubtedly in the mind; hence, when we are thinking of the act, we readily assent to the view

that ideas must be in the mind. Then, forgetting that this was only true when ideas were taken as acts of apprehension, we transfer the proposition that “ideas are in the mind” to ideas in the other sense, i.e. to the things apprehended by our acts of apprehension. Thus, by an unconscious equivocation, we arrive at the conclusion that whatever we can apprehend must be in our minds. This seems to be the true analysis of Berkeley's argument, and the ultimate fallacy upon which it rests.

Here, Russell pointed out the equivocation of the word “idea,” such that percepts are called ideas. The confusion occurs when we claim that color (an idea) must be in the mind; presumably there must be a difference between “redness” and “seeing red.” But Russell claimed that Berkeley didn't make this distinction: “redness” simply amounts to “seeing red.” However, Yeats objected to this line of reasoning, saying that “If an act of apprehension, a sensation (say) of color or of weight, could be proved to exist without an object it would obviously refute Russell's argument.”³⁵ Yeats reported “proof” when he described “a seer who lifts a dream stone from the ground with obvious sense of its weight.” He didn't mention how he came into contact with the seer, but only says that the “stone too exists.” Basically, Yeats dismissed Russell's criticism of Berkeley's “idea” as being an immediate sensation or what he calls “sense data” on the basis of his own “special experience” of shared communication. Certainly, Yeats believed that an object in the external world need not actually serve as the basis for an individual's idea of it. Indeed, for him the conceivability of an object entails its possibility, and the shared experience of the same object confirms its actual existence. In an attempt to prove this conclusion, Yeats challenged both realism and idealism with his own thought experiment, which I shall call Ruskin's Cat Problem.

PART III

Ruskin's Cat Problem

Yeats offered a story which he read in a biography of the famous art critic John Ruskin. In the presence of Frank Harris, Ruskin seemed to have picked up a cat and thrown it out the window. Apparently, Ruskin admitted to Harris that the object was not a cat but a tempting demon in the form of a cat. However, if the house cat had wandered into the room at the same time, then Ruskin wouldn't have been able to distinguish one cat from another.

As it turned out, Yeats believed this story was true, because he once saw a phantom picture sitting next to a real picture and he couldn't tell the difference between them. Incidentally, this scenario resembles Descartes's Evil Genius Hypothesis, which challenges our certainty about the external world. An evil genius can deceive us into believing that the external world exists when in fact it is a complete illusion. Even the existence of other people must be questioned. For Yeats, the fact that the two cats—the house cat and the demon cat—were indistinguishable proved that the realist is wrong in his belief that a cat exists in reality. In spite of our common-sense intuitions, a perceived object can be unreal and our belief is false. A direct realist cannot prove otherwise.

If we reconstruct an argument based on Ruskin's Cat Problem, then it could look like this:

1. If the house cat and demon cat are indistinguishable to us, then there's no way to distinguish veridical from non-veridical experience.
2. If there's no way to distinguish veridical from non-veridical experience, then there's no way to distinguish objects perceived from the act of perceiving objects.
3. If there's no way to distinguish objects perceived from the act of perceiving objects, then we don't know whether an object perceived is illusory.
4. If we don't know whether an object perceived is illusory, then we don't know whether an object is mind-independent (in the world).
5. Thus, if the house cat and demon cat are indistinguishable to us, then we don't know whether an object is mind-independent (in the world).

Yeats held that the realist cannot overcome the conclusion stated in (5). Accordingly, it's consistently possible for us to perceive objects that don't exist (e.g., illusions, hallucinations). Even so, an object can seem real whether it's an object in the mind or an object perceived (say, a hallucination). This seemed to confirm the idealist's premise that objects are mind-dependent, but an insurmountable problem arises for the idealist in that he cannot prove that a perceived object actually exists. In this way, Yeats opposed both realism and idealism, because neither view can adequately solve Ruskin's Cat Problem. And Yeats firmly stood his ground on this conclusion in spite of Sturge Moore's objections.

The only solution that was sufficient and therefore acceptable for Yeats was the conclusion he offered in regard to the dream missal. That is, if at least two people share an experience of an object, then it is real. His overall conclusion was: objects are real to the extent to

which they are capable of being shared with others. This is consistent with the irrealist's view that an external world is conceivable, which is to say, sensory experience supports the existence of an actual object in a version of the world.

Yeats agreed with Berkeley that sensations are in the mind. However, Yeats disagreed with Berkeley in holding that direct sensations provide immediate knowledge. Ruskin's Cat Problem demonstrates that immediate knowledge is unwarranted, because the demon cat and the house cat are both sensations, and they are indistinguishable and seem to be real. Thus, any epistemic claim in this case would be dubious. Since Ruskin's demon cat and house cat are both sensations in the mind, Berkeley would say that the sensations provide immediate knowledge. But this is not the case. Ruskin's cat cannot be verified objectively by means of sense perception.

In correspondence with Sturge Moore, Yeats attempted to clarify his views by citing a *Times Literary Supplement* article on the realism and idealism debate, an article which asserts theses on the external world. Yeats quoted the following:

1. Everything we perceive of the external world is real. (This would include illusions and both cats—both the house cat and the demon cat are real).
2. Nothing exists that is not in the mind (Neither the demon cat or [*sic*] the house cat is real).
3. The external world is independent of our minds—it is “real” to the extent that we know it through sense data or representations.

Yeats believed that Russell and Moore held theses 1 and 3. On the other hand, Yeats rejected theses 1 and 3, and accepted 2; Yeats added

that 2 “liberates us from abstractions and creates a joyous artistic life.” Thesis 2 states, “No S is not P,” which implies that “Some S is P.” We must observe that thesis 2 does not imply the contrary that “All things exist in the mind,” nor that all mental objects must exist. As we recall, idealism asserts that “All things exist in the mind” and Yeats asserted that “some things are in the mind.” If Yeats had maintained the former option, then he could not have validly argued that mental objects are real or that any object can exist outside the mind. In such a case, it would be impossible for objects to be mind-independent.

Thus, by accepting thesis 2 Yeats did not commit himself to idealism’s “To be is to be perceived,” because he remarked that the mind is limited by possibilities, not conceivability; an unlimited mind that grants the possibility of all conceivable ideas could unduly admit “Platonic ideas, and so a pre-natal division of the ‘unconscious’ into two forms of mind.” Yeats opposed Platonic abstractions, preferring instead to “include in my definition of water a little duckweed or a few fish,” which is to say actual objects with physical qualities.

Yeats’s rejection of Berkeley’s idealism rested in part on his agreement with Russell and Moore on the problem of perception. Yeats’s question was: to what image does objective reality correspond? If objective reality is supposed to correspond to an idea, then the idea of an object can be a phantasm (such as Ruskin’s demon cat), which is merely a sensation in the mind. The issue is whether it’s possible to distinguish the idea of an object from phantasmal sensations. Yeats had serious doubts about the isolation of objects of perception. The phantasmal image of a demon cat can be properly isolated as a mental object. In that case, then, a question arises: is an isolated bead (like an isolated mental object) less real than a bead upon a string? This question seems to anticipate Yeats’s famous rhetorical question at the end of “Among School Children”: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” In other words, a mental object cannot be distinguished

from a phantasm. As such, mental objects can be false. The only way to get past skepticism is by means of shared experience of an object in a version of the world.

Although Berkeley’s “To be is to be perceived” appealed to Yeats, he understood the motto to mean that “being perceived” is God’s perception. Yeats believed God’s existence to be metaphorical—that is, only to the extent that we can conceive of God as Blake’s God acting through or in “existing beings or men.” In other words, Yeats’s God or divine power was not Berkeley’s. The divine resides in a man’s breast as a symbol of the Eternal One, not as an embodied being external to faculties of the mind.

Yeats believed that he had definitively tossed a wrench into the gears of Berkeley’s idealism with Ruskin’s Cat Problem. However, his rejection of these positions didn’t amount to a positive argument in favor of irrealism. But he offered a leading suggestion. The way that Yeats could have made a positive claim for irrealism is by referring to the making of a world, which he called “The Matrix.”

In a concise but revealing section of Yeats’s correspondence with Sturge Moore, Yeats advanced a statement of his own belief. He said: “Personally I believe there is a Matrix but that Matrix seems to me living and active, not a mere logical possibility.”³⁶ Yeats made this statement in the same letter that admitted exasperation with Bertrand Russell’s politics and reported that he had been reading Plato and Plotinus. The importance of Platonism for Yeats cannot be underestimated. Within the same month he recommended that Sturge Moore read Plato’s *Timaeus* and Stephen MacKenna’s new translation of Plotinus’s *The Enneads*.³⁷ These sources are relevant because the term “The Matrix” could have only originated in Plato and Plotinus.

Without offering a detailed exegesis of this concept in Plato, I shall attempt to briefly discuss its importance for Yeats. Plato’s *Timaeus* is a complex, multifarious philosophical document that addresses many

topics. The most significant notwithstanding is cosmology—the origins and creation of the world.

In other words, it's a document of Platonic worldmaking. Accordingly, a Demiurge or First Craftsman fashioned a world from primitive chaos by using an eternal model or "Matrix" to impose mathematical harmony onto an ordered cosmos.³⁸ The Demiurge's intellect manifests itself in the organization of the cosmos by mathematical beauty, and that intellect is a model for emulation by rational human souls. The *Timaeus* offers a mythopoeic philosophy of physics that contains explicit religious and ethical overtones; again, topics range from cosmology, astrology, and the metaphysics of space and time, to vision, perception, and the ideal state.

According to Plato, the model or "the Matrix" is a living thing and is a form or constellation of forms that resemble the Zodiac Circle. It is the "Model" cosmos—what "real" astronomers are supposed to study in Plato's ideal state (see *Republic* 527d–531d, esp. 530a3). The Demiurge does not merely copy the Matrix to make a world; rather, the objective is to craft an "image" or "symbol" according to the constraints of simplicity. The symbol-copy must be visible, tangible, and three-dimensional according to the laws and axioms of Euclid. The symbol-copy or cosmos subsists in a three-dimensional field, like a house sits on a plot of land, and that field is called "a receptacle," which is often interpreted to be space. The Demiurge is an inspired artisan that builds an "imitation" based on the matrix schematics—an undefined form that doesn't have a specific content. As it turns out, the mythical city of Atlantis with its vast empire, unrivaled architecture, constitution, and ideal laws is an earthly replica of the Matrix.

Undoubtedly, the details in Plato are obscure (as he even admits) but what Yeats had in mind with the Matrix was a simulated world akin to the contents of a magic crystal. It's a kind of large fishbowl world with its own teleology. Since Yeats held that such a world is not

merely logically possible but can be shared with others, we have reason to believe that he posited the coherence of worldmaking, whereby a mind-independent external world is based on the idea that "an external world can be experimentally created" like the contents of a magic crystal. A hypnotist or mad scientist could create such a world by suggestion, and "once created it runs its course for a certain amount of time before the eyes—occasionally of several people." But he didn't need a mad scientist for a worldmaking job that more aptly required a metaphysical poet.

In reference to worldmaking, he mentioned building materials: Moore's sense data, which can be "applied to that experimentally created world." Thus, Yeats concluded: "[Moore] seems to have entirely ignored all evidence derived from that experimentally created world and all inference to be drawn from allied psychical evidence of every kind." With this, Yeats approached the worldmaking tenets of irrealism.

Yeats's irrealism was based on the notion that sense data is a permanent possibility of an object, and since material objects do not have secondary qualities (colors, odor, weight) adhering in them, matter is indeterminate. If anything, matter is created by the intellect from mental images; the mind imposes upon images an abstract conception of the external. Ultimately, Moore's and Russell's realism failed because it posited that sense data is the permanent possibility of physical objects, rather than a conceivable image of the mind. Here it's worth quoting Yeats at length:

In the seventeenth century people said [that] our senses are responsible for color, scent and sound, and that color, scent and sound are "appearances" but that mass and movement really exist. In the eighteenth century one or two men pointed out that mass and movement are just as much "appearances," because the invention of our senses, as color, scent and sound. Then a little

later it was discovered that the organs themselves—the organs as observed as objects of science—are part of the “appearances”: we see the eye through the eye.

Yeats’s point was similar to Russell’s: we need to interrogate the preconceptions of our understanding and interrogate our epistemic beliefs. If we did this, Yeats says, then we would discover that “images of the mind and images of the sense must have a common root... and that whatever their cause or substratum that substratum is not fixed at one spot in space.”

Interestingly enough, Yeats borrowed premises from Russell in order to undermine Russell. In this case, Russell’s realism was dubious because it didn’t take into account “the partial manufacture of the mechanism of the eye” which is “itself a ‘sense datum’ and so in need of explanation and not itself an explanation.

For Yeats, the problem with realism was that in spite of its use in science it cannot eliminate “the now obsolete sense-corked bottle of personality.” That is, when we stop to think about “all the images, sense-images, dream-images, mind-images, as forming a single existence one is forced to concede an equal reality to the conceptual ideas...the ancient pair Intellect and Imagination stand face to face.” Thus, as Yeats said, “the barrier between images of sense and of the mind does not exist.” The realm of sensory perception is bound only by an individual’s cognitive capacity to conceive of indeterminate material objects in a possible world. Epistemic claims must take into full account the nature of subjectivity, the perceptual apparatus of mental processing, which cannot disarm fundamental personality. It was this personality that Yeats kept alive by creating images of dream worlds—the worlds that were for him most real.

Notes

1. Katherine Ebury labels many of Yeats’s ideas as “irrational” (Cf., *Modernism and Cosmology: Absurd Lights*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 30). Harold Bloom famously labels many of Yeats’s ideas as “nonsense” in *Yeats*. Oxford UP, 1970, p. iv. Also, in reference to Yeats’s incoherent metaphysics, W. H. Auden famously remarked that Yeats was “silly like us,” and his “gift” was not advancing serious ideas but crafting poetry that “Mad Ireland hurt you into” writing. T. S. Eliot and Marianne Moore held similar views. Incidentally, many professional philosophers approach “irrational” paranormal research seriously. For example, a branch of the famous Vienna Circle, known for its views on scientific monism and logicism, regularly conducted paranormal research. A contemporary defense of paranormal research on mind and consciousness can be found in Beloff, J. “Dualism: A parapsychological perspective.” *The Case for Dualism*. Edited by J. R. Smythies and J. Beloff, University Press of Virginia, 1989, and Crabtree, A. *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*. Yale University Press, 1993.

2. Jameson, Fredric. “A Note on *A Vision*.” *The Modernist Papers*. Verson Press, 2004.

3. Yeats’s highly unorthodox “private philosophy” is contained in *A Vision*.

4. Matthew Gibson, Katherine Ebury, and Daniel Albright have attempted what I call “ideological bracketing,” which examines Yeats’s non-occult, non-paranormal philosophical beliefs. Most of these scholars maintain that Yeats was an idealist influenced by George Berkeley. An early discussion of Berkeley’s influence on Yeats is found in Ellmann, Richard. “The Art of Yeats.” *The Identity of Yeats*, Macmillan, 1964, pp. 225–227.

5. Schricker, Gale. *A New Species of Man: The Poetic Persona of W.B. Yeats*, p. 38; Denis Donoghue makes a similar comment in *We Irish: Essays on Irish Literature and Society*, p. 174. The most strenuous contemporary defense of idealism can be found in John Foster’s *The Case for Idealism* (Routledge, 1982), and *A World for Us: The Case for Phenomenalistic Idealism* (Oxford UP, 2008). A good survey of modern idealism can be found in Jeremy Dunham and Iain Hamilton Grant, *Idealism: The History of a Philosophy* (McGill-Queen’s UP, 2011).

6. There are several standard views on the metaphysical nature of reality: realism, anti-realism, quasi-realism, and idealism. The late Harvard philosopher Nelson Goodman coined the term “irrealism” in a discussion of Ernest Cassirer’s “multiplicity of worlds” interpretation of culture and mythology; see Goodman’s *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hackett Publishing Company, 1978). Another philosopher who may be attributed this label is Ludwig Wittgenstein; Simon Blackburn makes this case in his essay entitled “Wittgenstein’s Irrealism.” Bernard Williams discusses this possibility in his “Wittgenstein and Idealism,” reprinted in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge UP, 1982). A good overview of irrealism can be found in Peter J. McCormack’s *Starmaking: Realism, Anti-Realism, and Irrealism*. (MIT Press, 1997), as well as Crispin Wright’s essay “Realism, Anti-Realism, Irrealism, Quasi-Realism,” in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 12, Blackwell, 1987.

7. Ellman, Richard. “Assertion Without Doctrine.” *The Identity of Yeats*, Macmillan, 1964.

8. Ebury, Katherine. *Modernism & Cosmology*, p. 32. Ebury cites other critics in the “heir of Berkeley” camp, including Ronan McDonald, Gregory Castle, and Barton Friedman. The leading proponent of this view seems to be Donald T. Torchiana, cf., “God-Appointed Berkeley” in *W. B. Yeats & Georgian Ireland*, p. 222–265. Also, Matthew Gibson makes a similar argument in his “Yeats and Idealism: The Philosophy of Light” in *Yeats and the Nineties*, *Yeats Annual* no. 14, edited by Warwick Gould.

9. Yeats was primarily interested in Berkeley’s status as an important thinker. For instance, Yeats suggested that the Irish educational system base its curriculum on “movements of thought that originated with Berkeley” since he had “proved the world was a vision” (“Child and State,” p. 195). Yeats frequently addressed the enduring contributions of Irish thinkers in the history of ideas. In particular, Yeats fondly remarked that Berkeley’s idealism could not be refuted or dismissed (namely, by leading British philosophers such as G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell). Given the preponderance of scholarship that continues to address “Berkeley’s Puzzle” it turns out that Yeats was right, although Berkeley’s idealism is not merely a problem for British philosophers.

10. This is reiterated in correspondence with Sturge Moore, p. 103.

11. There are different versions of panpsychism. Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz, George Berkeley, Arthur Schopenhauer, Josiah Royce, William James, Alfred North Whitehead, and Charles Hartshorne among others were panpsychists. In fact, classic Cartesian dualism is consistent with panpsychism. Contemporary defenses of this view can be found in the work of Thomas Nagel, Galen Strawson, and Crispin Wright. In relevance to Yeats, Berkeley held a form of idealist panpsychism. By default, idealists are panpsychists because they maintain that nothing exists other than mental attributes. Berkeley argued that existence depends on conscious experience. Another point

of divergence is Yeats's rejection of Berkeley's "doctrine of ideas," the proposition that direct perception is restricted to our own states of consciousness. However, Yeats agreed with Berkeley that material objects are possible conscious perceptions. Also, Yeats agreed with Berkeley's rejection of realism, the claim that reality (and matter) is mind-independent.

12. An astute discussion of this can be found in John Campbell's *Berkeley's Puzzle* (Oxford UP, 2014). A brief summary of the problem is as follows: sensory experience (sensations of objects) seems to be the basis of knowledge of mind-independent objects in the external world. The problem is grappling with this intuition: if percepts of objects (tables, chairs, and trees) are mind-independent, then how does sense perception permit us to maintain that they are mind-independent? Berkeley famously argued that sensory experience can provide us only with ideas of mind-dependent objects, which do not exist when they are not being perceived. Yeats recognized that Berkeley's position is not only valid but unavoidable. As Yeats pointed out, G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, the most renowned philosophers of the modern era, were unable to solve the puzzle or refute Berkeley's claims.

13. The philosophical turn occurred on December 8, 1925. See *W. B. Yeats and Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence 1901–1937*, pp. 58–59. Hereafter, I will abbreviate this title as YSM.

14. Ruskin's cat is first mentioned in the letters on January 16, 1926; see *YSM*, p. 63.

15. Yeats labeled Locke and Newton as "mechanical" philosophers and he often quoted Berkeley, who said of Locke and Newton that "Irishmen thought otherwise." Yeats wrote in "Pages from a Diary" in *Explorations* that Descartes, Locke, and Newton took away from the world and gave us excrement instead, but Berkeley restored the world. In the essay "My Friend's Book," Yeats says that Locke maintained the formula, "nothing in the mind that has not come from

sense—sense as the seventeenth century understood it—and Leibniz commented, "Nothing except mind" (*Essays and Introductions*). Also, Yeats's poem "Fragments" clearly states his aversion to Locke's and Newton's materialism. For more on Yeats's opposition to materialism, see Richard Ellman's "Combating the Materialists" in *Yeats: the Man and the Masks* (New York: Norton, 1948).

16. Idealism is the opposite view of realism. However, idealism is not a version of "anti-realism." The latter was coined by Michael Dummett in denying objective reality—that is, he denied that verification statements are veridical, true or false.

17. See Yeats's remarks in the essay "Magic" on the imagination "seeking to remake the world according to the impulses and the patterns of the Great Mind," and his three doctrines of the mind, in *Essays and Introductions*, pp. 28–52. Speculation on "many worlds" or "possible worlds" have a storied philosophical and scientific history. Philosophers Hilary Putnam, Saul Kripke, and David Lewis first addressed "possible worlds" thought experiments in support of semantic externalism. A "many worlds" or "multiverse" interpretation of quantum mechanics was first proposed by Hugh Everett in 1957.

18. *Essays and Introductions (E & I, hereafter)*, 401.

19. Goodman's "irrealism" shares similar features with David Lewis's possible world semantics. See David Lewis's *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Blackwell, 1987). But we should not confuse possible worlds with world versions, because a world version is an actual world (not a possible world stipulated by modal logic).

20. Goodman discusses irrealism's "many worlds" at length in the opening pages of *Ways of Worldmaking*.

21. In fact, numerous contemporary theoretical physicists posit a similar "multiverse" model, which originated with Erwin Schrödinger. Physicists who research "possible worlds" and "multiverses" include Stephen Hawking, Brian Greene, Max Tegmark, Alan Guth, Andrei Linde,

Michio Kaku, David Deutsch, Leonard Susskind, Alexander Vilenkin, Neil deGrasse Tyson, and Sean Carroll.

22. See E&I, p. 401.

23. Originally published in *Mind*, vol.12, 1903, pp. 433–53.

24. See Yeats's essay "Bishop Berkeley," p. 405.

25. Correspondence, p. 59.

26. Goodman offers a similar solution in *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 8.

27. It's doubtful that Einstein would have labeled his theories of relativity as "worldmaking"; however, subsequent physicists have employed Einstein's premises to formulate a "many worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics. They maintain that reality consists of a "multiverse" in which all possibilities are realized. For example, David Deutsch argues that in terms of a "multiverse" the distinction between fact and fiction is illusory. See his *Beginning of Infinity: Explanations that Transform the World* (Penguin, 2012). Interestingly, several physicists appeal to "multiverse" explanations as rationale for the connection between quantum mechanics and immortality.

28. This is often discussed in terms of contrast, such as primitive magic rituals and mythic customs versus rational scientific methods.

29. A little-known fact is the extent that Yeats studied the metaphysics of time. In particular, he was fascinated with J. E. McTaggart's notions on the unreality of time in *The Nature of Existence*. Yeats cites McTaggart in the essay "Bishop Berkeley" in E & I, pp. 402 and 406. Also, Yeats opposed J.W. Dunne's exposition of Einstein's notions of simultaneity and multi-dimensions on the grounds that dream states have no obvious temporal location in the past and future. In fact, dreams can be simultaneously relevant to past and future events. Perhaps the best evidence of Yeats's rejection of idealism is when he remarked in a footnote that "the terms idealist and realist may be about to lose their meaning" (E & I, 406). He concluded this based on

evidence that mental images (mental states) can be photographed. In this way, Yeats went on to reject Berkeley's notion that human thoughts originate in the mind of God.

30. This is quoted in J. O. Urmson's "Berkeley's Philosophy of Science in the *Siris*," *History of European Ideas*, vol. 7, no. 6., 1986, pp. 563–566. An excellent paper on this topic is James Hill's "The Synthesis of Empiricism and Innatism in Berkeley's Doctrine of Notions," *Berkeley Studies*, 21, 2010.

31. Russell, *ABC of Relativity*, p. 9.

32. *Ibid*, p. 10.

33. *Ibid*, p. 23.

34. The poem concludes with the following lines:

We are led to believe a lie
 When we see not through the eye
 Which was born in a night to perish in a night,
 When the soul slept in beams of light.
 God appears, and God is light
 To those poor souls who dwell in night,
 But does a human form display
 To those who dwell in realms of day.

35. Correspondence, p. 65.

36. *Ibid*, p. 83. A letter dated March 14, 1926.

37. Yeats constantly recommended philosophy books for Sturge Moore to read in spite of the fact that Moore's brother was a famous philosopher at Cambridge University and could be relied upon for book lists. Yeats's recommendations are fascinating and little discussed in scholarship. Most notably, he strongly recommended Plato's *Timaeus*, A. E. Taylor's *Commentary on the Timaeus*, and Stephen MacKenna's translation of *Plotinus's Enneads*. Other figures included Alfred North Whitehead, Arthur Eddington, J. M. E. McTaggart, Wyndham Lewis, and Oswald Spengler.

38. An excellent explication of “the Matrix” in Plato’s *Timaeus* is found in John Sallis’s *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato’s Timeaus* (Indiana University Press, 1999).

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